President's Remarks Festival of Lessons and Carols December 8, 2013



David L. Parkyn, President

The end of the semester and beginning of Advent are ushered in side-by-side each year. This is an ideal moment at North Park to pause—to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ-child, to celebrate learning, and to recognize the special value you bring to North Park. Thank you for your faithful partnership with us, for walking alongside us in the mission that is North Park.

In October of 1964 I was 12 years old when I returned from 7th grade in boarding school to spend two months of vacation at home. We lived in a small town in northwestern Guatemala. With my brothers and sister I looked forward to a couple of months out of school and time with mom and dad.

After dinner on the first night at home dad "announced" he had a summer job for me, to start the next morning. I knew dad was serious about this. He cared for what we learned in school, but dad was dedicated to making sure I also knew the trades. I had already mastered an array of carpentry skills, and I was on my way to becoming a pretty good mason. Dad had a construction project underway and I wondered what my job would entail.

He was building a school that year. Dad had only finished high school yet he recognized the value of education—not just for his children, but for all the children in our town and in the surrounding villages. So dad was building a school—a primary school with six classrooms, three on each side of a large common space.

Along the exterior walls were large windows to let in plenty of sunlight which was to be the primary source of light in each classroom. The openings were 5' by 8', and it was to be my job to form the window frames. Dad had gotten hold of long spans of steel 2 inches wide, formed at a 90-degree angle. He also had confiscated an arc welder. I was to form a large 5x8 frame, and subdivide each frame into 40 12-inch square panels for smaller pieces of glass. Cut the steel to size, don the protective helmet and eye shield, clamp the electrode, and weld—that was my summer job.

I learned a lot that October and November. Measuring accurately counts. Welding cleanly is mandatory. And if the final window frame isn't square nothing else matters.

How did we do—Dad and me? Well, the building lasted until just a couple of years ago when it was torn down to be replaced by a larger, grander building. Collegio Utatlan, the school dad started, will be 50 years old next year and with nine campuses it now enrolls

over 5000 residential and commuting students, offering what is arguably the best education available anywhere in that country outside the capital city.

So, can you guess what I wonder about this year? With the Johnson Center rising, and with the window frames recently installed, where will this magnificent building take us? If six classrooms with natural light can be transformed over five decades into a system of schools for 5000 students, where might a \$45 million project lead? Are you dreaming with me?

Forty-nine years later, in October of this year, I went "home" again to visit dad this time at his hospital bedside. I was with Ruth, dad's wife of 29 years, and together we invited a priest from the local church they attended to lead us in a service from the Book of Common Prayer, "Ministration at the Time of Death." And so this pastor came to offer the comfort found in the promise of life everlasting.

As the service progressed at this bedside the priest anointed dad's forehead with oil. He invited Ruth to anoint dad's hands. And he invited me to anoint dad's feet. And with this anointing the saints welcomed dad in peace. Gathered at that bedside we marked this day as sacred, this night holy.

Feet. When I anointed them dad's feet were old, torn, mangled, withered, crusty. Beautiful. I recognized them that day for what they truly were—feet of the incarnation, the feet of Jesus.

There's a mystery in the Christmas story—John identifies it this way in an early sentence in his gospel: "And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." We know the story of that holy night: the announcement of a pregnancy, the journey to a distant town, the birth of a child, the amazement of shepherds, the adoration of others from further away, the musings of a mother, the journey into a foreign land. We can transform this story into beautiful music as we have done this night, but we can't remove the mystery, the mystery of the word made flesh centuries ago.

Yet there is an even greater mystery—it is the mystery of the word made flesh today. Christ was present, we believe, in the manger birth, in the life of teaching, in the sacrifice of death, in the incomprehensibility of the resurrection. Christ was present.

Yet, "was" matters very little in this case if it doesn't take us to "is." Dare we say: The word <u>is</u> made flesh and <u>lives</u> in us, and we <u>see</u> [now] his glory"?

What I learned from dad years ago was his understanding that Christ is present today in us, through us. Dad walked among people who were hungry, so he taught them how to raise new crops, and they saw Jesus. He walked among people who were sick, so he opened clinics in the villages and set up a dental office next to our kitchen, and they

saw Jesus. He walked among people who had no place to learn, so he started a school, and they saw Jesus.

Those two feet—old, torn, mangled, withered, crusty—the very feet of Jesus dwelling among us. Dad saw the hungry, the ill, those who wanted to learn. Dad walked along their side and met their need; he marked the day sacred, the night holy; and they saw the glory of Jesus.

But will this word be made flesh tomorrow, and in every tomorrow thereafter? Will our children see the glory of Jesus tomorrow?

Well, the answer to these questions rests with us. Will we take up the challenge posed by Moses even centuries before Christ: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words and teach them diligently to your children and talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Moses' instruction is so simple: teach and talk. With each generation, mark the day sacred, the night holy.

There is profound mystery in the incarnation, but there is very little puzzle in understanding scripture's depiction of Jesus' childhood—Luke wrote, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." How did this happen? Well, a young mother and a carpenter father were responsible—they followed the mandate to teach and to talk, they were present, they walked alongside, they marked the day sacred, the night holy.

With the Johnson Center rising, with the window frames complete and fully installed, we are called to the same task. To teach and to talk. To walk alongside, to prepare students to live with significance and in service. To transform our feet into the feet of Jesus—old, torn, mangled, withered, crusty—oh, so beautiful. To mark the day sacred, the night holy.

Thanks be to God.