

The Next Chapter

Youth and Graduation Sunday

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2010

Rev. Tom Ott and
Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269·965·1225
www.fccb.org

Sunday, June 13, 2010
Youth and Graduation Sunday

Tom's Reflections on Grace and Cole's Testimonials

The ancient prophet, Jeremiah, once said, "Thus says the LORD: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:15)

Before moving too quickly into the new opportunities that await you as graduates, it is good to look back at where you've come from and gather up the beliefs, values, insights and wisdom that you want to carry with you as you move beyond this crossroad and continue your life's journey.

Grace and Cole, you have both identified some essential convictions shaped by your experiences here in this faith community that will serve you well as you travel the road before you.

The world you are inheriting is smaller than any other world before yours. A tiny hole drilled a mile beneath the ocean floor can cause catastrophic consequences for hundreds of thousands of people. Today everything we do has consequences for others, and everything that everyone else does has consequences for us. The value of independence that was so important to your ancestors must now be balanced with the value of cooperation and mutual concern for each other's well being.

Grace, you lifted up the lesson of diversity that you learned to embrace here at this church. That is one of the values that will serve you well as you find your way in this global village.

Today there are worlds of different perspectives just a few keystrokes away on your laptop or smart phone. New communication technologies put you in instant contact with people all over the world. Some will find this new global consciousness threatening, and they will insist that we shut ourselves off from others in order to preserve our own unique identity. They will try to close our borders, censor our knowledge, and segregate our communities.

But as you stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths - where the good way lies - remember our faith tradition's emphasis on embracing diversity. Remember the ancient prophet, Jeremiah, telling his own people to seek the welfare of the cities to which they had been sent: cities of their captors, cities of foreigners, cities of people with different beliefs, different values, different lifestyles. Remember our own denomination's willingness to embrace diversity when we ordained Lemuel Hanes as the first African American pastor in 1785, seventy-eight years before President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Remember, we ordained Antoinette Brown as the first woman ordained as pastor in 1853, sixty-two years before the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote. Remember, we ordained William Johnson as the first openly gay pastor in 1972, thirty-seven years before our own local congregation

became the first congregation in Calhoun County to declare itself Open and Affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered.

As you move forward into this global community, hold tightly to the value of diversity that you have learned to embrace here in this faith community.

Cole, you lifted up the importance of asking big questions and taking big risks. The German writer and philosopher, Goethe, once said, "Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move the hearts of men." Big dreams are born of big questions and can only be sustained by the courage to take big risks.

Today our world is plagued by the reckless behavior of individuals and corporate entities. Some are motivated by greed, some by desperation, and some by ideology. They are willing to take terrible risks in order to serve their own purposes: Somalian pirates are boarding ocean freighters and holding their crews and cargo hostage for ransom; suicide bombers are detonating themselves in crowded marketplaces to advance the cause of fundamentalist Islam; investment bankers and commodities traders are willing to risk the financial ruin of the global economy for the sake of personal financial gain.

Some people ignore the reckless behavior of others by becoming obsessed with trivial questions like, "How much money do you want to earn, who do you want to be seen with, how do you want to be perceived by others?" Many of those questions will seem important at the time, but they are not.

So as you move forward on the road ahead, remember the big questions that Jesus asked. Remember his question to the rich fool: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his life?" Remember how he responded to the question, "Which of us is the greatest?" by saying, "Whoever would be greatest of all must become servant of all." Remember his question to Peter after Peter had denied and abandoned him at the cross: "Peter, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

While others are living recklessly to advance their own causes, remember our sacred calling to risk all things for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Take great risks for the sake of building up the peaceable kingdom; take great risks for the sake of creating a more just and equitable society; take great risks for the sake of being good and faithful stewards of the world that God has entrusted to our care and keeping.

As you stand at the crossroads and look and ask for the ancient paths where the good way lies, remember that you are the spiritual descendents of the Mayflower people; remember that your ancestors left behind everything that was comfortable and familiar to them and crossed an ocean of storms in a quest to create a more perfect world; remember to let your dreams be worthy of inspiring the courage to take great risks for Christ's sake. Amen.

Pastor Emily Joye's reflections –

I've got to start out by saying two things...

Congratulations on graduation. For all the moments of hard work and mere survival, for the growth and grit you acquired in your education, congratulations. And I'd like to extend that congrats to your families, extended families and those in here who helped you get through and get over or under or whatever you had to do to make it to the promised land. Amen?!

Secondly...

I wish I knew you better.

It is no secret that I'm the new kid on the block around here and so it is with a bit of hesitation that I stand and say anything to you today. I am however grateful to the youth advisors Kathy, Val, Jane, Jim, Roger, and Russ and Pastor Leah for all they've done to get to minister to you over the years. My prayer is that the relationships that have formed you in this place continue to live on in your mind and heart as you go forth. Please know you've always got a church home here with us.

As we've been planning this service we've been asking the questions: "Where have you come from and where are you going?" over and over. For a month now, we've been asking you to think about your past and your future. But we asked you to think about your past and future as it relates, specifically, to faith. Grace and Cole shared memories with us as they relate to faith and Sallie and Micheal/Trevor reflected on how the wisdom they've gained in here, through faith, might impact their future.

But here's the deal. In all truth: there's absolutely no way to know your future. There's no wisdom in the world, no religion in the world, no magic in the world that can turn anybody into a fortune teller. All of you are on the verge of something entirely mysterious. So the answer to the second half of this "Where have you come from and where are you going" is a bit tricky. Where are you going? Do you know?

You may be going to Michigan State to do music or moving to Hollywood for Christian volunteer service or working in your field full time for the first time, but beyond the stuff of place, what do you *really* know? You don't know who you're going to meet. You don't know the books you'll read or parties you'll be invited to attend. You don't know what's going to surprise you or devastate you. You don't know the connections you'll make or the detachments that lie ahead.

When we are in transition we have ideas of where we're going, but other than that, the stuff of future can only be gained by walking the road of second to second, minute to minute, day to day life. And walking into an uncertain future is the stuff of faith. Taking the first step out of your house, or moving onto a new campus, or gripping a stranger's outstretched hand—that's the stuff of faith.

There is no book more inspiring about issues of faith in the bible than the book of Hebrews. The author says, "God takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back." And he implores his people, this author of Hebrews, "to live the life of faith with boldness."

There will be commencement speeches and valedictorians talking to you in the next couple of weeks.

They will tell you that your confidence should be in securing a degree, entering the work force and doing what it takes to support a family. All that is important. But I say unto you, your confidence should be in the fact that a God created you to be who you are, and that God takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back. Your future is a total mystery and yet God calls you to live faithfully into that future with boldness.

So take all of who you are, and all you've learned here, and when that first step feels impossible, keep the faith and walk...