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UA94/7/2 Baccalaureate Service Delivered at WKU

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OPENING PRAYER

Father of Life, our souls are like a budding plant in the dark. We seek light—the light of thy truth, thy spirit, thy love. In the quietness of this evening hour may our thoughts grope their way to Thee. There are vistas of living before us that we have seen but dimly; we have walked aloof unaware of the needs of our world—so intent have we been on our own desires and needs. We have blundered into thoughtless ways of thinking, ignoring the beautiful, the enduring truth, and the redeeming power of thy spirit. Forgive our plodding contentment with darkness and touch the eyes of our spirits that we may see Thee. Amen

"FAITH FOR LIFE"

President Thompson, Dean Grise, members of the faculty, graduates, friends—

Ours is a tremendous age of achievements. Our armies and those of our allies have conquered the greatest military array which history has ever thrown against any group of forces friendly to us—we have even lived long enough to see the changing of spots on the mighty Russian bear—we have harnessed the power of the atom, not only for war, but for the yet unlimited vistas of peaceful and healing processes of human life. We have created monsters of technology that more accurately and powerfully than an army of highly skilled mortals can carve out the instruments of our machine age; we have surpassed even sound in our speed of travel—our technological advances in agriculture have made it possible for 12% of our productive population to produce sufficient feed for our nation at the highest level of abundance—and beyond, with enough food in reserve to have fed the entire population of the thirteen American colonies at the time of the Revolution. We have lengthened life, given it comfort and material security, power and potential—
these and a mass of other advances seem to make ours a day of blissful achievement. And it is—no reasoning person would detract from the full measure of these achievements—they are here—we are all involved in them—benefiting from them and strengthened by them.

The point of our difficulty—the focus of the problems of our day cannot be maintained as existing only in this limited material area of existence. Like a giant eclipse we find our lives revolving around two foci, the material and the non-material. Only the naive will reject the non-material and claim reality to only the material, measurable dimensions of life. Our debate with the scientific world—where one exists—is that the material scientist is off base when he claims that other areas, other foci are non-existent and immaterial.

A few years ago a native of India, doing graduate work in a Philadelphia hospital, found the tables reversed—he the pupil became the teacher—as of all the professional staff of this great medical institution, there was none able to diagnose what to him was an experience of simple every-day practice in his native country. A case of leprosy had gone undiagnosed for several days because of the limited knowledge of the physicians. Now we hear from the west coast that small pox—a familiar disease of a generation ago, has recurred; its diagnosis and treatment are often delayed because the experience of the younger members of the medical profession has not included dealing with this dangerous disease. Its recurrence on an epidemic basis is even possible in some areas of advanced prosperity, because we are a generation insensitive to the dangers and potential destructive force of this disease.

We will readily accept this as a part of our "progress." However, this is a simple example of the naive attitudes of our day. For a host of people technological advance has no insurmountable problems and our society has no
problems which are not insurmountable to technological advances. Thus in one
great sweep we ignore the impact of the revolution of our time on social,
cultural, and spiritual life—no the need for serious consideration of the role
of the individual in society, the relevance of individual and personality needs
to real and lasting advancement, the whole realm of philosophic thought and religion
in the interpretation of life, the underlying values of life, the power of
personality and potential for rich and meaningful existence which is entirely
eliminated if these factors are omitted from our rational thinking and living.

We are reminded of an experience of John Gates. He was used to having the
Sunday afternoon of the family include the reading of the chapter from which
the text of the morning sermon had come, and a discussion of the text in the
family circle. One Sunday his mother was indisposed and asked that John be
responsible for bringing home the information as to the minister's sermon text.
John's report that afternoon was a bit confusing. He insisted that the minister's
text was, "Don't worry you'll get the old quilt." His mother spent her spare
time the entire week trying to recall some possible chapter of scripture from
which such a text could have been taken, with no success. The following Sunday
after the service, she asked the minister to tell her the text of the previous
Sunday. "0," he said, "my text was, 'Fear not, for I shall send the Holy
Comforter unto you.'"

To insist that religious experience and heritage of the ages should be
relegated to the museum of Moscow, is Communism. To insist that it has no
relevance for your personal life and mine today is to twist the text, confess
to our own shallow thinking, admit to a lack of attention to the basic issues
of life.

To be a critic of religion is a long way from having a religious
experience. To be skeptical of religion can be to religious experience what
a hypothesis is to the scientists. To refuse to expose one's self to the process
of earnest examination of religious experience, culture, and forms while maintaining skepticism as a privilege and measurable attainment is to deny the rational processes which are so essential to the scientific age in which we live. The realm of religious faith has dimensions and media unknown to the laboratory—but those who have earnestly exposed themselves to their irresistible rays do know their meaningfulness and power.

Robert Browning some years ago, in Bishop Blougram’s Apology, pointed out the "towering prodigious credulity" of the critic himself. The intellectual difficulties in the way of consistent skepticism are ultimately more serious and unsurmountable than those of the way of faith. "Just as we are safest," cries Browning, — just when unbelief has successfully thrown off the clinging trammels of the spiritual interpretation of life, and eliminated to its own satisfaction every trace of a divine purpose for the universe, and secured its position by a confident impregnable dialectic— "Just when we are safest, there’s a sunset touch, A fancy from a flower-bell, some one’s death, A Chorus ending from Euripides, And that’s enough for fifty hopes and fears; As old and new at once as Nature’s self, To rap and knock and enter in our soul."

That intelligence requires that honest doubts in all realms of life be faced is true. "That the only answer to honest doubts of disbelief is to make a lie of the rhapsody of a summer day, the essence of friendship, the depths of true patriotism which have led committed men to build here a land of freedom and a way of liberty and justice; of the bonds of the basic unit of society—the family—, of the whole destiny and purpose of God in man. Man is never a godless creature! He who does not worship the eternal, worships material possessions, the father-land, the economic system, the transient social forms, and customs of a particular culture. We find ourselves in a land strangely comparable to the Athenian Acropolis wherein Paul exclaimed to the
assembled people, "I see that in every way you are very religious. For I have perceived as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription 'To an unknown God!' Those who reject the God of our Lord and Saviour Christ—those must establish the realm of the God they create!

Not only is the burden of proof on the skeptic—but our world has no cancerous malignancy so destructive to all that is good than the work of the blind, the deliberately evil, the dishonest, and self-contained psychopath. These not only live empty lives but destroy, absorb, undermine that which is good in our heritage. As parasites they take food from working living organisms without visible rootage and creative processes within themselves.

Our day demands an experience of faith—individual life that is meaningful, for constructive continuity to all to which we give ourselves in our vocation, our homes, our nation, our world. What are to be the elements of this faith for life?

It seems to me that such a faith as is acceptable to any earnest and determined person will give perspective and a directive which leads to dedicated living. Perspectives for life must start with an understanding of the basic unit of life—for the sociologist, the historian, and for those of us of religious faith—the basic unit of our social existence is man himself. For the cold materialist man may be an accident of the evolutionary processes; for the crafty, dictatorial, military genius, man is an instrument of warfare, gun-fodder; for the selfish industrialist, man is a tool in his agricultural or manufacturing pursuits; for the sensualist, man or woman is the tool for satisfaction of lust. For those of Christian faith—man is the object of God's continuing concern, redemptive love, and sacrificial service. The question "What is man?" is not new to human existence. The ancient psalmist however gave us an answer in terms which have a classic place in our Christian-Hebrew traditions. It is God's majesty, God's will, God's desire which determined the true nature of man—
"Thou has made him little less than God, And hast crowned him with glory and honor, Thou has given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet."

As we approach the 50th Anniversary celebrations of Western Kentucky State College it is well to recall the forceful purposes of its early founders in statements of purpose for Western and its predecessor Southern Normal. In these statements Dr. Henry Hardin Cherry expressed an ideal of purpose matched by few institutions of higher education. To those of us who knew him there was something dynamic about a president of a college who went out to "ring the rising bell in the human soul," to instill in the minds of the students the great truth that every person is created to do something, to be a producer, "to teach students the power of earnestness and to warn them against all show and pretense," "to not only teach the textbook but to touch the indifferent, discouraged, dead, deluded man and arouse the latent and hidden forces of his own being and permit the giant on the inside to step from his hiding place." To those who came here timid, immature, poor, and half-committed to life's purposes, Dr. Cherry and a dedicated faculty gave convictions, encouragement, contact with great personalities of the cultural and intellectual world, and an inescapable impression of the depth and breadth of life. Dr. Cherry often did this task himself. Persuasively, pictorially he painted for us the need to be a part of the community of good will, and cooperative good work; team-work, devotion to a call of duty, respect for our heritage of freedom and faith. In these he believed and these he preached to our conviction.

What he did not do himself he used others to do. When Dr. Lorado Taft, the sculptor of Dr. Cherry's monument, came to deliver a graduation address in the early thirties he gave dimensions to our thinking and life. One of his unforgettable illustrations was of a beautiful lakeshore summer vacation place in Michigan which Dr. Taft loved dearly. Here he discovered indescribable beauty in the sunsets each day. When he spoke of this beauty to a native farmer of the
region, the fellow seemed stunned. A few days later he said to Dr. Taft, "You know, I've lived here all my life and didn't see that sunset in its beauty until after you talked to me yesterday."

Faith for life gives us a sense of the beauty, purpose, perspectives of the human soul. A twentieth century rabbi has put it this way, "Every one of us is a priceless piece of mosaic in the design of God's universe."

If I believe this about myself—then my life becomes a kind of trust which I have no right to mar by sin or self-contempt or to destroy. The world has a right to the best that's in us!

If I believe it about myself—I must believe it about my neighbor:

Charles A. Lindbergh, in an address before the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences, in 1954, stated that the basic question—"the fourth dimension of our survival"—is "What will this modern environment create in the future character of man?" "Here," he says, "rather than in the atom, is the power which will establish our wisdom and decide our fate....I believe the solution lies in each individual through the standards he holds...in human values....in greater simplicity of life...we must see the producer as more important than his product, and find it no sacrifice to renounce material standards of success until we realize in our bones as well as in our brains that the character of man still forms the essential core of a lasting civilization."

When we have determined our perspectives, then we must determine the direction of our lives, lest we, like Don Quixote, ride off in all directions at once, or as our current heroes at home, the kids and Peter Pan seek a meaningless, purposeless existence in a "never-never-land." It is just this denial of the relevance of faith for life that has made religion called "an opiate of the common people."

I believe there is no higher direction that we can seek for life than that common good which expresses God's purposes for all men. As never before, we live in a world which is vitally affected by the economic, social, and political implications of our community and group and individual actions.
You may become a teacher, scientist, physician, lawyer, tradesman, laborer, homemaker, industrialist, minister, political leader—all worthy and noble callings—in each and every one of them you find yourself a part of a community, a citizen of a state, a nation, a member of a family! You will experience the "Common Ventures of life: birth, death, marriage, work."

You will be a part of a dynamic, changing world. Old forms will pass away, established paths will be destroyed, new trails will be blazed. The question is—What will be your purpose in these experiences—What will be your calling?

It seems to me that Jesus gave directive which was worthy—in fact, Biblical scholars tell us that the whole of the Biblical record is tied together with this directive from God himself—"to establish the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven." "To express the fatherhood of God in the brotherhood of men," to say with Paul—"It is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me," to pray with Christ "not my will but Thine be done," "to become saints of the living God."

Here I like the definition of saints given by the small boy who entered into the family discussion of the meaning of sainthood at the dinner table. It seems the boy attended a church which had a number of beautiful stained-glass windows. His definition of saints was—"those are the people that the light shines through."

It is well said that education isn't what we are exposed to, it's how much we caught! Directives for life are gained for those of faith by being caught up with a great dream, a great ideal, a great cause—to be saints for God, instruments of His, students of His will.

"Who, me?" you say: Why not—a farmer named Amos became a prophet of social righteousness; a courtier, urban man, statesman and diplomat named Isaiah became the voice of hope to people who lost their lands, their government and directions; a learned student named Jeremiah became a voice of hope to exiled people; a prince named Moses led a people out of slavery through the
wilderness of their own passions to disciplined and organized people in forty years; a shepherd lad became a king, a poet, a voice of God; a carpenter became the Christ!

Now comes the hitch, "How can this be achieved—this faith for life?"

Robert Lewis Stevenson wrote, "savage surrounded...who should have blamed him had he been...a being merely barbarous?" Yet in the ugliest of circumstances he saw men and women "still clinging to some rag of honor, the poor jewel of their souls. They (men) are condemned to some nobility!"

Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Prize winner for peace, distinguished musician, philosopher, theologian, founder of a mission hospital to which he has given his life for 50 years says, "The demand that Jesus makes upon men is not emotional response, nor of rationalistic assent—but rather the allegiance of will—an absolute ethic of love—a refiners fire seizing all that comes in contact with it."

In this day when we have everything to live on—we must find something worth living for! All we hold dear is never more than one generation away from destruction!

Then these are those things for which we can live: Truth, Justice, Righteousness, Gentleness, Love, Home, Country, "Life more Life," life of depth, of beauty, of joy, of honor, to meet our own date with destiny!

It seems to me significant that we meet here on an occasion when you are measuring your own achievements—worthy—wonderful—significant of the discipline of your own hearts and minds, your own habits and thoughts.

This is a foretaste—a promise of those things which are to come.

Forms will change...the "Eternal Revolutions" of life will continue. Let us remember it is not the forms which make faith for life......

"THE SPIRIT MAKES THE MASTER!"