

“Completion By Degrees”

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Philippians 1:1-11*

It's graduation day, and everybody's going to receive their degree, but Jeffrey. At the commencement, the entire senior class stands up and shouts, "Let Jeffrey graduate, let Jeffrey graduate!"

The president agrees to give Jeffrey one last chance. "Jeffrey, if I have five apples in my right hand and five apples in my left hand, how many apples do I have?" he asked. Jeffrey thought long and hard, and then said, "Ten." And the entire class stood up and shouted, "Give Jeffrey another chance! Give Jeffrey another chance!"

Certainly not an institution of higher learning from our Valley!

This is the time of graduations, from kindergarten through Doctoral degrees. Seniors have studied, attended lectures, worked in the labs, taken exams, student taught, and have made the grades necessary. They have completed their particular degrees. It hasn't been easy. It has taken work, commitment, help, and drive!

Thousands of commencement addresses will once again be given. Some will be heard, but most will congratulate and challenge the students to take this completed degree and go forward – to new challenges and possibilities.

According to "Gradspot" webpage, among the top 10 all-time best graduation speeches are:

Winston Churchill, 1941, where he declared; (Keep in mind 1941 England), "Never give in. Never give in. Never. Never. Never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

Good choice! Inspiring!

John F. Kennedy is also included.

But... also among the top ten –

- Sacha Baron Cohen (Ali G), Conan O'Brien, Jon Stewart, and Will Ferrell. So much for quality on the internet.

Some of you may have heard that President Obama spoke at Notre Dame last weekend. As those students completed their degrees he shared; "You are about to enter the next phase of your life at a time of great uncertainty... In this world of competing claims about what is right and what is true, have confidence in the values with which you have been raised and educated. Hold firm to your faith and allow it to guide you on your journey... But remember too that the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt. It is the belief in things not seen. It is beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God has

planned for us or what he asks of us, and those of us who believe must trust that His wisdom is greater than our own.”

Amid the controversy – President Obama was articulating the givenness of a value system deeply embedded into the national psyche – albeit, too often ignored, neglected or denied. These seniors have completed their degree – but much more is in store for them. Life is a journey toward completion.

Which brings me to Paul and his joyous letter to his beloved Philippians. Philippians is considered the happiest, most joyful of Paul’s correspondence. Joy flows throughout this letter, to friends. Paul is sharing from his understanding of God and reality (God’s creation), which is Jewish, on the way toward Christianity – Jesus Christ – fulfillment for non-Jews. Paul is thrilled, excited, almost beside himself about this wondrous event – Jesus Christ. He (thank God) cannot contain himself – he must share this gospel – good news! Paul, was an educated man, of this there is no doubt – even among his historic detractors. He knew his stuff!

In Galatians, Paul notes his ancestry, and includes, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” (Gal. 1:14). Paul has his degrees. He knew whereof he spoke. For him the past, tradition was pivotal for the future. And here in Philippians Paul articulates, proclaims a faith truth, not new, but old and transformed to his beloved friends - “I am sure (confident) that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” 1:6

Did you hear that? Paul is confident, knowing his tradition, and believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ – that God will finish what God has started! To each of the Philippian Christians Paul is assuring them that – God through Christ has begun a good work in them – (God has a purpose for all his children), and God will faithfully work and guide each of them, through their degrees of life (whether earned or metaphorical) to the completion into the future.

My friends – The God of Jesus Christ – has a plan for you, it’s already begun – you have work to do – but be assured - God is faithful – and God will bring to completion the plans for you and your future.

What Paul is declaring is – you are not alone in your life’s journey – as you accomplish one degree – one lesson of life, after another and another and another - at no time will God step out of the picture – through thick and thin –

- be sure (confident) that just as God has begun a good work in you, in your life (and he has!), God will keep with you to your completion!

Believe this, and your life will radically change!

- Come what may!
- You can and will weather any storm!

God will finish what he has started!

God will finish what he has started, in you!

Congratulations to all our graduates! And congratulations to all of you – as you journey toward God’s completion of your life!

Amen.