

Marquand Chapel  
YDS Commencement Communion Service  
May 22, 2006

**Carolyn J. Sharp**  
Isa 45:9-13, 18-19, John 15:9-17

*Gracious God, be with us as we listen for Your Word this morning and make us know Your presence throughout this wonderful day. Challenge us, strengthen us, and equip us for Your service. You have spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!' Stir up our hearts indeed to turn to You, mighty God of grace, that we may offer our lives for the proclamation of Your redeeming love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Welcome with me this joyous day of celebration! We have so many reasons to rejoice today. We rejoice because it is good to be together here, with beloved friends and family from near and far. We rejoice to sing God's praises, to gather around the Lord's Table and celebrate the goodness of our God. We rejoice because a long and arduous process of preparation has come to its fulfillment today for our graduating seniors. We rejoice because on this day of commencement, of new beginnings, God has called forth new servants for the creative work of redemption in this fragile world brimming with challenges and hopes.

It is fitting that we celebrate with the family and friends who have supported our graduating students. Those of you who have traveled here to celebrate, family members and friends, must know that your loved ones who have worked so hard, struggled and rejoiced and gotten no sleep for these two or three or more years, have reached this point in their journey in no small part because of your love. You have stood by them and invited them to become more deeply who God has called them to be, and we are thankful.

We celebrate also with those who now love from another shore, who rejoice in the radiant presence of our God. This day of happiness is bittersweet for some of us. I know someone here this morning who has lost her beloved grandmother. I know someone here this morning who has lost his dear grandfather. I know someone here this morning who has lost her cherished husband. There has been loss among us, and change, and unexpected twists and turns along the way. Please know that the presence of all of your loved ones is with you in this place, dear graduates, and their love goes forward with you into your ministries and new endeavors, just as their relationship with you has helped shaped you into the servant of God that you are.

Our Gospel lesson this morning reminds us of two crucial things: that as disciples of God we are to go and bear fruit, and that we are to love one another. These two things are intimately connected. We cannot have one without the other: there is no fruitful ministry without love, and no love without fruitful ministry. What does that mean for us as disciples in community? Dietrich Bonhoeffer says something wonderful about that. He says that the truth of God is only known relationally, and since the origin of the relation is the Word, that is, the living presence of

God, our task then as disciples in relationship is to “enable people to become alive to this Word at their center.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I have a question for our graduating seniors. Do you trust your Creator to have formed you aright for the ministry to which you will be sent? Are you equipped to enable people to become alive to the Word of God?

Now, I realize you probably feel quite ready to graduate. That’s a different question, of course. I suspect that you are delighted to be done with writing theology papers on an assigned topic -- just guessing, now. And you might be ready to be done with mandatory hard thinking about a particular series of events in ecclesial history when your imagination might be captured by something else entirely in the wonderful history of the Church. Hard as it is for me to believe, you might even be happy to be through performing exegeses of the Old Testament according to the arbitrary deadlines set by your Bible faculty, who apparently keep forgetting to copy in the Holy Spirit about the deadline so that inspiration might strike in a timely fashion. I know that you are ready to graduate. But my question is, do you trust your Creator to have formed and equipped you for ministry?

Let me be clear. I am not asking whether you think you have all the answers you need. I’m not asking whether you have all the information you plan to acquire about the Bible, about theology and liturgy and ethics. I’m not even asking whether you are confident in your future, because it’s fair, at this moment of transition, to have some doubts.

Even the most confident among us sometimes worry, sometimes falter, even talk back to God a little bit. “Called me to the parish, have you, Lord? Have You thought that through? because I really am not comfortable yet ministering with sick people.” “Have You really called me to doctoral studies in theology, when other students have a much better grasp of historical theology than I do?” And so on. Everyone feels underequipped sometimes, and the intensely competitive atmosphere at this particular ivy-covered institution can sometimes make our insecurities a little worse. You know, speaking of over-achievers, I wonder how Cyrus of Persia would have done here at Yale. Cyrus is the ruler celebrated in our Isaiah lesson this morning, the one whom God raised up to set the Israelites free from their captivity in Babylon, the foreigner so unexpectedly called God’s servant, “anointed,” *mashiach*, God’s messiah.

Picture it. Cyrus of Persia: warrior-king who crushed the Babylonian juggernaut in the mid-sixth century B.C., conqueror of huge swaths of territory in the east: picture this Cyrus as . . . a YDS student. Would he have to be reminded repeatedly to leave his sword at the door when going into Church History? What would his Credo for Systematics have looked like, and would he have turned it in on time? I can just see Cyrus decreeing that all YDS students could go home in the middle of the semester, to the annoyance of our Academic Dean. And most important, would Cyrus really have done *all* of the reading for the O.T. Interpretation course? (I don’t think so.)

Who was this Cyrus to redeem Israel from captivity? As Isaiah makes clear, this “servant” of God didn’t even know the God of Israel Whose plan he fulfilled. And indeed, we have to ask,

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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care* (Fortress, 1985), 27.

who are we as God's servants? We don't have all the answers. We don't even know all of the important questions yet.

But Isaiah's God knew Cyrus and knows us. Isaiah's God roars a rebuke at the idea that any might question the means by which He fulfills his purposes. "Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles?'" Isaiah's God thunders from the heavens, "Will you question Me about My children, or command Me concerning the work of My hands? I made the earth! . . . It was My hands that stretched out the heavens!" Isaiah reminds us that the underwhelming abilities and predictable weaknesses of God's servants prove to be no obstacle at all for the Creator of all things! It is my joy and privilege this morning to remind you that it is this same Creator of the universe Who called each one of you to this place two or three or more years ago, Who has been present with you here in every step of learning and struggle and growth, and Who calls you forth now into a world desperate for the light of the Gospel.

Today, graduating seniors, I want something from you. I want you to welcome this day of celebration in the sure knowledge that the Creator who formed the heavens and the earth has also formed each one of you to carry out Her work of redemption: healing, teaching, fighting for justice, loving one another, and preaching the Gospel.

I want you to know that you are equipped as God's servants. Think back over your time here. What moments of prayer and relationship and unexpected insight have funded your creativity as a servant of God? I know that you have learned something about grace, about courage. I know that you have learned something about creating worship that invites people into the presence of the Sacred. I know that you have learned something about building up in love a community that wants to know God.

I know these things, and my faculty and staff colleagues know these things, because you have taught us. You have taught us about grace and courage in your daring to grapple with new ideas about God and new ways of practicing your faith. You have taught us about the presence of the Sacred through your willingness to be vulnerable in our marvelous, unpredictable, Spirit-filled Chapel services. You have taught us about community-building because you have given so generously of your passion and your tears, your faith and your skepticism, your prayers and your dedication and your wisdom, to the up-building of this community.

You are equipped. Rejoice! Enable people to become alive to the Word! My friends, love God and love one another. For the sake of the One who offered Himself for each one of us and for the life of the whole world, Jesus Christ, to Whom be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.