

Northern Michigan Christian School
Commencement Address
June 2, 2017
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Teachers and staff of Northern Michigan Christian School, Board members, alumni, families and friends of this graduating class, and – of course – this graduating class, the Class of 2017 ----

It is my privilege and an honor to speak on this important occasion, your commencement. You have prevailed, you have survived, you have achieved. You have cake to eat!

And you have a lot on your minds right now—particularly how to balance those bizarre flat caps on your heads while you cross the stage later. So let me keep this straightforward.

I want to tell you about a pair of tensions, tensions that are real and present in our human experiences.

The first tension is expressed in a fine alliterative phrase used by the Christian theologian N T Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope*. Wright calls us to recognize that we live in a "wonderful and wounded world." Do you hear those two ideas scraping against each other, making meaning, naming a tension? "Wonderful and wounded." A "wonderful and wounded world."

You already know this, though you may not have described the world in exactly this way before. And you will surely learn more and more about this tension as you live.

The world is, indeed, wounded. We know why. And we can list some evidence of how we see this woundedness: Addictions, abuse, despair and depression, displaced persons and refugees, famine and hunger, global warming, loneliness, poverty and homelessness, racism and prejudices and bigotry. This short list is far from complete. And you are aware of these and other wounds, I am sure. The world is wounded.

Yet it is also wonderful. Consider deserts and oceans, gigantic mountain peaks and brilliant beaches, constellations and galaxies and Northern Lights. Think about the astonishing relationship between Fibonacci numbers and flower petals. Consider, too, that there are over 300,000 varieties of flowering plants in the world, including arachnis orchids and apple orchards. Think about manatees and mangrove trees. Museums and galleries are filled with remarkable paintings by Vermeer and Van Gogh, and other artists like them. You can stare with astonishment and awe at the overall impression of the work as well as study the intricate details of the brushstrokes. Consider the sunlight casting its loose change on a quiet lake—or the moonlight doing the same. Think of what one poet has called the "blue true dream of sky." Or what another poet said about the creativity and providence of God: "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

And how about these? A friend's smile or laugh. Your knowing that when you dressed like a super-hero for Spirit Week, your best friends thought the costume was redundant. Of course you are super! How about family gatherings, with stories and hugs and dish after dish of delicious food? A team trophy and a personal best record. Sour kangaroos and cats in hats. Kindness to another. Kindness from another. Encouragement, accomplishment, achievement.

This list is also just a start. You could surely add to a list of the wonderful in the world, just as you could have added to the list of the wounded.

Many of you mentioned these to me as wonderful: high school retreats, chapels, the Christian staff at our school, your Christian friends. And you frequently mentioned your trip to the Dominican Republic, a mission that surely exposed you to the wounded aspects of the world as well as to the wonderful. Remember Chi Chi mixing mud for bricklaying? Or Franklin at the learning center? Can you see in your mind's eye and almost taste the ripe and delicious fruit? Can you also picture people scavenging for food at the local dump? Can you remember the joyful abandon of children at play with you? How about the frail children crouching in the trash and rubble, or arguing over cheap necklaces and bubble-gum? Do you recall the beauty of your own sacrifice for others—including sacrifice and grace for each other? Did you witness the grace of God amid the gritty and the grotesque?

Here is the second tension to consider, similar to the first. Christian writer Frederick Buechner says this: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen." We can easily connect Buechner's idea to N T Wright's idea about the "wonderful and wounded world." Indeed, "beautiful and terrible things will happen."

But Buechner says more. There is another sentence that belongs with that first part of the quotation. His fuller meaning requires this sentence: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."

If the world is so wounded, if terrible things will happen, won't these outweigh and overwhelm the wonderful and beautiful? What are we to do? And should we not be afraid? Who wouldn't be?

We won't be!

Here is your class verse, Deuteronomy 31:8:

"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged."

After all, God has called us to acknowledge that because Jesus is Lord, we have a task to do. The world—this beautiful, wonderful, terrible, wounded world--is to be repaired and restored and redeemed, not left wrecked and ruined and rotting.

Let me say again: the world is to be repaired and restored and redeemed, not left wrecked and ruined and rotting. There is plenty in the Creation that has been, to use the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' words, bleared and seared and smeared by human neglect or human intention.

How can you help to restore it, to repair it, to redeem it? How can you become an even better steward of the plants and animals and minerals of the world, of the water and air? How can you protect and restore the resources of this incredible created world?

And how does this same radical calling apply to us as human beings living among other human beings,

all of us made in God's image,
all of us/made in God's image,
all of us made/in God's image?

Pope Francis, in his book *The Name of God is Mercy*, tells us about this calling with these words:

We are called to serve Christ the Crucified through every marginalized person. We touch the flesh of Christ in [those who are] outcast, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, unemployed, persecuted, in search of refuge. That is where we find our God, that is where we touch the Lord. Jesus himself told us, explaining the protocol for which we will all be judged, 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.'

God created the world, and is redeeming and re-creating the world, calling us to assist, to build not our own little kingdoms but to build FOR His kingdom. It's the best assignment you will ever be given, and you have your entire life to work at it.

Let me end with these words, also from N T Wright:

What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.

So be grateful for the grace of the wonderful and beautiful. Be fearless in confronting the wounded and terrible. And take holy action for the wonderful and beautiful and eternal Kingdom of God. In His New Heaven and New Earth, the terrible and the wounded will no longer be. Have courage, Class of 2017. Do not be afraid. May God bless you in all you do for Him.

Thank you.