

WGUMC August 26, 2018 “Letter to a Young Graduate”
Philippians 2:12-13; 4:4-9

I’ve always wished that I could have a long, unhurried conversation with each of our high school graduates before they go off to college or work or whatever. But they are so busy these days. I hardly get the chance to ask them what they are thinking of majoring in when what I really want to do is ask them what they are going to be believing in. Since they probably don’t want to have that conversation with me, I’ve decided to write them a letter, even if they never take the time to read it. Perhaps their parents will and possibly it will make them feel better about letting go. I know it will make me feel better. So, here it is:

Dear Graduate, I am so excited for you and what you are about to do. And that’s nothing compared with how thrilled I am for what you are about to be, who you are about to become. You must be both eager and anxious to leave home and at the same time sad about some of the things you’ll leave behind.

The Apostle Paul once said to the Philippians, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence....” I read those words and just smile. For I’m sure that you didn’t always obey your parents when they were present, and I’m not so foolish as to think that you will always obey them in their absence. And you know what? That’s okay. I have no doubt that you will make some poor choices along the way, but they will be YOUR choices. And your bad decisions will teach you more than your good ones. Don’t tell your parents I said that.

But your parents won’t be the only fixture in your life that will be suddenly absent as soon as you leave home. You are leaving your brothers and sisters and pets, your friends and all your familiar surroundings, too. On top of that, you are leaving your faith community, whether or not that means anything to you.

And you may very well be leaving God. I know that. You won’t be the first or the last graduate to go off to college and leave

behind your Sunday School faith, your youth group God. In fact, you might tell me that you don't even have a God to leave behind, for as far as you can tell, God has always been absent in your life. While you have heard us talk about God and you've joined with others when they were praying to God, you yourself may never have experienced this God that other people seem to think is real. In that case, I can't really blame you for thinking that up to this point your parents have been all too present in your life while God has been all too absent!

So, no, I won't be surprised if you are absent from church when you go off to college. I don't expect that after staying out way too late on a Saturday night you will drag yourself out of bed to go worship on a Sunday morning. Besides, you don't want to be spoon-fed someone else's faith anymore. You don't want the answers served to you cafeteria style, like the food in the dorms, masquerading as something edible. You certainly don't want my answers. You want to live your own questions, and I support you in

that. God supports you in that. I can't begin to know what great existential questions life is going to throw at you, but I know that no one can answer them but you.

As Paul says, you're going to have to work out your own salvation. But then he says a peculiar thing. He says that you have to do that "with fear and trembling." Somehow, that doesn't sound inviting, but what he means by "fear" is something more like "awe." Life is awesome, and if we ever want to know how to live it, we're going to have to let our minds get blown away by it. College will do that. And by "trembling," I think he means approaching each and every day with a "sitting-on-the-edge-of-your-seat" kind of energy because at any moment something huge could happen to you, something life-changing or world-transforming. In college, it often does.

I'm not going to worry if you tell me that you don't need God or that you have no use for salvation. Just tell me this: does the world need transformation? If it does, then let me remind you of

something you have heard from the very beginning. In every Sunday School class you went to, every Vacation Bible School or youth event you attended, and in every worship service you suffered through, you heard this: God is love. By now, that must sound pretty lame. But I have to ask, can you live without love?

Whatever you major in in college, you're going to read about and experience a lot of things that have nothing to do with love. You'll take a history class and learn things about this country that no high school teacher ever told you and that will make you angry. You're going to discover things about Christianity that are downright ugly. You're going to encounter people who call themselves Christian but bear no resemblance to Christ. In fact, you're going to meet Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and atheists who look more like Jesus than a lot of Christians do. Don't get me wrong. College is a lot of wonderful things, but it can also be a rude awakening. It's as if we send you off to college believing the sky's the limit and, "Yes,

we can,” and you end up thinking that the sky is falling and, “No, we can’t.”

Still I wouldn’t want to protect you from any of that disappointment even if I could. I tell you these things now to prepare you for a very necessary passage that you are about to go through. Leaving home and going to college will convince you in a way that no parent or pastor ever could that the world just can’t hold together without love.

I left Billings, Montana and went to college at Boston University, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. got his PhD in theology. When I was typing my senior thesis, I didn’t have my own word processor, so I used the one in the Religious Studies office, and I was told, in hushed tones, that it used to be a dorm room for seminary students and that Dr. King had lived there. In front of Marsh Chapel is a statue that I would walk by every day. And inscribed in that statue were King’s words, reminding me that, despite apartheid in South Africa and death squads in Central

America (this was the 80's), love is the most powerful force in the universe, and the only one that has ever changed the world.

I hope to see you at Christmastime. And I promise that I won't get defensive or try to make excuses for all the times that the Church has failed to love. After all, churches are full of people, and if we weren't all failures, we wouldn't need to be here. Nevertheless, I do hope that you won't let your inner cynic get the best of you in college. I pray that you'll remember that there are still people who believe in love, even if we don't know how to live it very well. And if you can't find enough people who believe in love on a university campus, I can assure you that you can find plenty of them in almost any church, along with free coffee and, if you're lucky, homemade cookies.

Keep looking for love and I promise that you will find God one day. Take it from Catherine Moore, who shared her thoughts on love at our Summer Share last week and gave me permission to share them with you. Catherine spent her senior year in high school in

Germany. It was a great experience, but she came home feeling kind of sad. You might say her soul was out of sorts.

Because she was having trouble finding God, she decided to go looking for love. On her last high school mission trip to Georgia and South Carolina, she found love in many ordinary moments with ordinary people. For some reason that made her remember something from seventh grade math: that $6 + 3$ is the same as $3 + 6$ and 2×5 is the same as 5×2 . The commutative law says that you can switch around the numbers and get the same answer. And she realized that Love and God are like that. Because God is Love, whenever you find Love, you get God. I couldn't have said it better: If God is love and love is real, then it's not crazy or lame or stupid—in fact, it's perfectly logical—to believe that God is real, too.

I hope you really love college. For if you love anything at all, then you know something of God, “because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” [1 John 4:7] Just look at me. I found God and received my call to ministry when I

was in college, specifically when I was in the women's bathroom on my way to an organic chemistry exam! And thirty-five years later, I'm still saying, "Look for love wherever you are and rejoice in the Lord always."

So, Graduate, I give you my blessing to question everything and to doubt a lot of things, if only you will stay on the path of love. And if you ever look behind you, notice that there are people in this church who are cheering for you. We did our best to give you the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the mind to question, and the heart to receive the love that will save the world. It's all yours. You don't have to remember to pack it; it will go with you. Oh, the places you'll go. And known or unknown, bidden or unbidden, the God of peace will be with you. With love, Pastor Rebecca