

“Same Spirit, (Not the) Same Boat: A Confirmation Commencement Address”
 Pentecost (May 31, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 12)**
 Scripture: Psalm 104:24-30; Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

One thing our college and high school seniors will miss this spring is in-person graduation ceremonies. No one could have predicted a few months ago that their senior years would end like this. Today’s graduating confirmation class will miss the blessing of seeing an entire congregation rise up in person as one and commit to welcoming them, embracing them, praying for them, being “angels” to them in times of distress, and being a support to them as they continue on their journeys of faith. Today they are being confirmed on Zoom. I think it’s pretty safe to say that none of our ancient Christian forebears who talked about confirmation or “catechesis” imagined that taking confirmands or “catechumens” into church membership would happen on Zoom. We will write a new page in Christian history today.

Thinking about graduation day got me thinking about commencement addresses. College and university commencement addresses seem to follow a set form. Some famous person is invited to speak to a graduating class. The speaker gets to wear a cap and gown, and when they step to the podium, they begin by thanking everyone and saying how honored they are to be speaking. They make some funny comments, tell several stories, and they share pieces of advice and tidbits of wisdom with the graduating class. Pieces of advice like: *this is not the end of your education; it’s only the beginning; a diploma isn’t enough to solve the world’s problems, you need courage, hard work, the strength of your convictions*, etc. etc. This sort of advice. Commencement addresses seem to follow a set form.

Back in 2016, actor Matt Damon delivered the commencement address at MIT that followed this set form to the letter.¹ He began his address by thanking MIT’s president and distinguished guests, and he thanked the graduating class for inviting him to speak. He said it was an honor to be there. He then told stories and shared pieces of advice. But what made Matt Damon’s speech a bit different was when he said he didn’t deserve to be speaking that day. “It’s an honor to be here,” he said, but “let’s be honest, it’s an honor I didn’t earn. ... I’ve seen the list of previous commencement speakers [at MIT, he said]: Nobel Prize winners, the UN Secretary General, the President of the World Bank, the President of the United States. And who did you get? The guy who did the voice for a cartoon horse [in the film] ... ‘Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron.’” “I don’t even have a college degree,” said Damon. “As you might have heard, I went to Harvard. I just didn’t graduate from Harvard. I got pretty close, but I started to get movie roles and didn’t finish all my courses. I put on a cap and gown and walked with my class; my Mom and Dad were there and everything; I just never got an actual degree.” “[And, besides all this, he said,] I couldn’t have [even] gotten [into MIT].” “I mean, Harvard, yes. Or a safety school - like Yale, [but not here.]” Damon went on to share a piece of advice with MIT’s graduating seniors that I think is relevant for all of us as we celebrate with today’s graduating confirmation class. I’ll get to that piece of advice in just a moment.

¹ <http://news.mit.edu/2016/matt-damon-commencement-address-0603>

In today's reading from the book of Acts, the apostle Peter delivers a speech with a greeting, a little humor, a story, and a piece of advice. It's not quite a commencement address, but it's similar. And for some in the audience on that first Pentecost, it *was* graduation day. They'd been following Jesus for months and possibly years, but now *they* would be venturing out to change the world. They graduated from being learners to being leaders. Today is Pentecost Sunday - what we sometimes call "the birthday of the church." The day we commemorate that first graduation day - the day those first disciples graduated from being followers of Jesus to being founders of the church, taking the message about Jesus - the gospel - beyond their homeland of Judea into, what the book of Acts calls, "the ends of the earth," transforming the Jesus movement from something provincial to something global.

Such a dramatic shift in focus required a dramatic event to spur them on. And so it happened, writes Luke the author of Acts, that the disciples were huddled in a room when suddenly the spirit of God rushed in like a gale-force wind and like tongues of fire, blowing through them and kindling within them a passionate fire to go out and change the world. Luke plays with the Greek word translated as "tongues." The "tongues" of fire - the flames that can lick up and consume dry wood - the "tongues" of fire enabled the disciples to speak in other "tongues." Later in the story, Luke calls these "tongues" "dialects." Other languages. Burning with the spirit, these disciples began speaking in the dialects of, says Luke, the "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia," and a host of others. Crossing the boundary of language was the first step toward embracing all the nations of the earth, and proclaiming in all the languages of the world that first gospel that Jesus himself proclaimed in his first public sermon. Jesus announced: good news for the poor; release to the prisoners; sight to the blind; liberation for the oppressed. A Jubilee-message. The word "Pentecost" means "fiftieth." Every fiftieth year, says the biblical book of Leviticus, is the year of Jubilee when all debts are to be forgiven and everyone in bondage is to be released. The gospel that Jesus lived and that those first disciples announced in the languages of the world, was a Jubilee-gospel.

The crowd on that first Pentecost was bewildered by the rushing wind and the tongues of fire and sound of their own dialects, and some of them dismissed the whole event as a case of people who had had too much to drink. And so Peter approaches the podium to explain what's happened - to deliver his commencement-like speech with a greeting, a little humor, a story, and a piece of advice. Peter begins by greeting the crowd - "People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, distinguished guests from Parthia and Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. It's an honor to be here today" (he didn't actually say that - I'm using a little creative license). Peter then weaves in a bit of humor. "We're not drunk," he says to the crowd, "it's only 9am!" I can imagine some in the crowd chuckling at this. Peter's address continues beyond the portion that we read for today, and in that section he tells a story - the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. And then Peter concludes with some advice: "repent and be baptized. Change direction and join this movement as we seek to transform the world." It's a commencement-like speech with a greeting, a little humor, a story, and a piece of advice. It marked a pivot - from a tiny band of Jesus followers huddled in a room to a global movement in all the languages of the world; the followers became leaders; the learners became teachers. It was graduation day.

In Matt Damon's commencement address at MIT, he shared a piece of advice that I think is relevant for all of us as we celebrate today's graduating confirmation class. President Bill Clinton once told Damon to "turn toward the problems you see." Turn toward the problems you see, said Damon to the graduating seniors - the problems half-a-world away and also the problems right here: in our country, in our town, in our neighborhoods, in our schools. Turn toward the problems you see, and try to fix them. There are many problems in the world, said Damon: "Economic inequality," "the refugee crisis, massive global insecurity ... climate change and pandemics ... , institutional racism ... , a pull to nativism, fear-driven brains working overtime ... , an American political system that's [malfunctioning,] ... a media that thrives on scandal [and the 24-hour news cycle]." Matt Damon was speaking in 2016. How many more problems could we identify four years later? How many African American human beings like George Floyd have died at the hands of police or at the hands of armed vigilantes since 2016? How many victims of mass-shootings have there been since 2016? How much right-wing white nationalist propaganda have we been exposed to since then? How many atrocious tweets from those in the highest offices in our land have made news since? How many have had to flood the streets to protest oppressive systems since then? How much more carbon have we released into the atmosphere since then? There are problems out there.

Which is why we need the progressive Christian church - its moral clarity and its fearless, prophetic voice; its commitment to justice and its passionate love of all people. And we need young people in the church, like today's graduating confirmands. You're young, graduating confirmands, but you see the problems. You're young but the fire of God's spirit burns within you. You know the difference between right and wrong - and you still have that sharp moral clarity that years of life have worn smooth for many of us who are older. We need younger voices in the church to help us who are older turn *toward* the problems that we all see, and then help us to work for solutions in the spirit of Pentecost as we live *into* a message, a gospel, that can change our world - the very gospel that Jesus lived and proclaimed: good news for the poor, release to the prisoners, sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed, and renewal for our hurting planet.

After the death of George Floyd on Monday, actor Will Smith said during an interview with Stephen Colbert that "racism is not getting worse [in our country], it's getting filmed."² And on Wednesday, *Now This News* posted a video on Twitter of an African American man looking directly into a camera and pleading with viewers to see him as a human being. He said: "Before you call the cops [on me], I just want you to know: the first thing I did when I woke up this morning was yell at my alarm clock. My parents were raised in the South. I have to roll tide or they'll disown me. They raised me in Las Vegas. That city still has my heart. I hate spiders. I'm a vegetarian. ... I've done goat yoga. ... I can tell you every single word off the NWA 'Straight Outta Compton' album. I can also sing you every single word from 'Oklahoma.' Bananas are disgusting. I am a Christian. I spend almost every Sunday morning teaching kids in Sunday School. I am often asked if I am Muslim. I'm ok with that. I'm pretty much convinced if you met my mother, you'd automatically become a better person. My father is a veteran. He taught me how to say 'Yes, sir' and 'Yes, ma'am' to everyone that I meet. ... I love basketball, and also hockey. ... I've never been to jail. I've never owned a gun. I hate that anyone at all might possibly be afraid of me. I'd go around the world and back again if I knew that single act might make your day better. I'm a proud

² <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/will-smith-colbert-race-relations-obama-politics-sings-summertime-916816>

man. I'm a proud Black man. ... I just wanted you to get to know me better before you call the cops.”

Members and friends of First Congregational Church of Ithaca, let's join hands with this graduating Confirmation Class of 2020. Let's work with them to make this world a better, fairer, more loving, more peaceful, and a more just place for all people. A place where no one ever again needs to post a video on social media to convince viewers that they are a human being with a story. A world where racism is a healed scar not a festering wound. A world where the planet no longer groans under the weight of climate change, but thrives. A world where every single person - “all flesh,” as Peter says in his Pentecost commencement address - every single person is treated with dignity as a child of the mothering God who birthed them. Let's join hands with this graduating class of 2020. Let's join them in announcing and living the Jubilee gospel: good news for the poor; release to the prisoners; sight to the blind; liberation for the oppressed; renewal for the planet. Pentecost reminds us that we don't do this gospel work alone. God's hurricane spirit, God's fiery spirit, God's empowering spirit, is with us every time we turn toward the problems we see and then work to fix them. Amen.