

Nathan Scoggins Speech
JP Catholic Graduation 2013

Honored guests, beloved family, revered faculty, nefarious students:

It's a beautiful day. You are about to go where the streets have no name. And though there will be days when you still haven't found what you're looking for, and there will be days of vertigo, walk on students, walk on. Yes, even though you may be stuck in a moment you can't get out of, let the unforgettable fire burn within you, because the city of blinding lights is still ahead...

I'll stop with the U2 references, but I think my point is made. (I can already hear Dr. Connelly murmuring, "We should have cleared his speech first.")

When Lidy Connolly told me, perhaps somewhat disbelievingly, that I had been asked to speak to you today, I did what any good commencement speaker should: I YouTube'd "commencement speeches." There are a lot of them. Lot of good ones, a few downers. That one from two years ago about how "you're nothing special" was particularly...depressing.

As I watched these speeches, I realized that speeches on a day like today are somewhat futile. Your family and friends are here, they've seen your films, heard about your business plans, listened to what you believe. Today you feel like you can take on the world, because there is a room full of people who believe you can.

But someday the glory and glitter of this day will fade, and you will remain. So I don't want to give you a speech today. I want to give you a speech for six months from now. A year from now. Five years from now. Because that's when you'll need it. So I want to share four things, and leave you with a final thought.

The first thing I'd like to share is this:

1. God is Not Who You Think He Is. God is Who God is. And your life will be about the space between.

Eternal and mysterious, God remains the object of every search and the end of every quest. He frustrates easy answers; He evades half truths. He does this not to frustrate us, but to draw us deeper in. Like Peter in the boat, Jesus calls to us, "Come out onto the water." The Scriptures say that the hidden things belong to the Lord, but the revealed things are for us and our children forever. Embrace what you know and have learned as signposts for the Truth, but do not only stay by those signposts. Like Lucy in Narnia, we must go deeper in. It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but is the glory of man to search a matter out. Test all things, says Saint Paul -- hold to that which is good and true.

My first terrible script was about a fallen angel seeking redemption, and I gave him a line that was probably truer for me than it was for him: "my problem isn't questioning God's existence. My challenge is coping with his reality." God is real, but He is often not Who we wish He were. And the road of faith and life is littered with women and men who, when God did not do what they wanted when and how they wanted it, gave up on their faith, rather than realizing that perhaps it was not God's dreams they were trying to fulfill, but merely their own. Too many

Christians follow a God of false hope. If we're honest, a lot of times we just want God to rubber-stamp our dreams, rather than dare to follow Him in His. But, like the lead singer of a little-known Irish rock band once said, "Do not ask God to bless what you're doing. Go find what God is doing – it's already blessed." We live in a state of constant revelation. Like His mercies, God is new every morning – and our life's journey is discovering the fullness of who He is. God's call to us is simple – come and see. Come further out on the water. Go deeper. Step away from your expectations of me, and embrace Who I am.

The second thing I want to share with you today is this:

2. Unless it is dark, you cannot see the stars.

I cannot tell you now the disappointments you will face, but they will come. There will be times where you will doubt every decision you have ever made. Where you wonder if it was worth it. And then things will get darker. You may find yourself in the cancer ward with your four-year-old, not sure if he'll make it. You may find yourself in the NICU, praying for your baby struggling for life. You may get a call from your wife, saying your unborn baby is not where he is supposed to be. I do not know what pain you will face, but I can tell you with sad certainty that there will be times of incredible light, and unimaginable darkness. But do not curse the darkness – because the darkness forces us to look to the stars. You will be disappointed. You will be hurt. But never forget that there is still something for you in the darkness. Peer into it. Find the light.

In the olden times, before iPhones, stargazers not only looked to the stars for their beauty, but also for their direction. The stars guided their path. They provided the ability to set a course, and to adjust that course. So do not curse the darkness. Instead, look to the light of God that is still found in that darkness, and let it guide you home.

The third thing I want to leave you with is this:

3. Pursue significance, not success.

Success, if it comes, will come slowly. It will not come as quickly as you'd like it to. Many of you are graduating with degrees in screenwriting, and you will go to LA wondering, "Where do I go to find a screenwriting job?", and the answer will be, "nowhere." If you make success your only goal, you will find the answer to the question Jesus asked – "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and yet forfeit his soul?"

So do not pursue success for its own end. Pursue significance. Nowhere is significance found more than in the difference you make in the lives of others. When you counsel a man wrestling with sexual addictions – when you counsel a woman wrestling with the body image issues that corrode our culture – you are choosing significance. You make a difference. You impact the culture. When people know they are valued and cared for, they encounter God through you.

This brings me to the last thing I want to leave you with:

4. You are Loved.

Fiercely. Passionately. Sacrificially. You are loved unto death. Even beyond it. You are loved as Easter people whose song is the resurrection. The world does not understand this love, but they need to, because love ties the hands of cynicism, and cynicism is a thief whose hands must be tied every day. We live in a cynical world, and in a cynical world, love is a revolutionary act. This is fundamentally the good news of Jesus -- that God has loved us. That He has taken enemies and made them friends. That His love can soften the hardest heart. And He does this before you achieve anything. This is the message of Jesus' baptism: that before He had preached a message, before He had begun His ministry, before He had done anything, His Father in Heaven declared Him loved. This is true also for you, my students – your Father calls you loved.

So love, and be loved. Let love direct your steps. Let love lead you out onto the water. Let love be your calling card and your lasting mark. Let love be the thing you are remembered for. "He loved well." "She loved well." Love truthfully, from a place of authenticity. Love enough to have hard conversations. Love enough to leave room for grace. Love enough to challenge the prevailing winds of the times, whatever they may be. Love enough to be the entrepreneurs who do well by doing good. Love enough to be the artists and poets who reflect the world not just as it is but as it could be. Love enough to be the theologians who put feet on their faith.

And in all of this. Do not love in your own human strength. For it will fail you. You will come to the end of yourself very quickly. Your faith will run out. Your hope will fade. Your love will fail. But in those moments remember - you have a god who loves you. Who has faith in you. Who has hope for you. Who calls out to you from the waters and says, "I'm here. Come be with me. I love you. Come."

When I was a kid, my dad called me a cynic. I carried this around for a long time, until I was having lunch with my pastor a few years ago, and I was sharing about my frustrations and disappointments with my career as it stood then, and he said, "you're not a cynic, you're an optimist." I wanted to smack him (though I'm pretty sure that would be sacrilegious). But he went on to point out that cynics are never disappointed, because they have no expectations. "Life sucks and then you die," is their credo, and maybe there are those in the crowd today who believe it. Even when something goes well, they wait for the other shoe to drop. Optimists, by contrast, dare to imagine the world not as it is, but as it could be. And is there a better way to describe artists, entrepreneurs and theologians? There is nothing more optimistic than love, and we must not underestimate its power. We hear it in love songs – we see it everywhere. Love is what humanity cries out for. Every day we see stupid people doing stupid things because they do not know that they are loved. But imagine how the world would be changed if you went out not trying to pursue love, but confident in the Love you have been given, and creating out of that love. Imagine what could happen if you loved one person the way they had never been loved before but needed to – and imagine if that person was able to then love one other person the way they needed to – and that person loved one other person the way they needed to – and that person, and that person. Imagine the possibilities. Imagine what could happen.

Because Love can change the world.

God bless you, guys.