

Matriculation Address given at Episcopal Divinity School

on Monday, September 8, 2014,

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Bishop-elect of the Diocese of Massachusetts

What a delight to be here today. What an honor to speak with you on this, the 30th anniversary of my own matriculation at EDS. Naturally such a milestone evokes a few memories, so let me share three: one from the chapel, one from the classroom, and one from the quadrangle.

A story from the EDS chapel:

On a cold, wintry day in 1986 we were gathered to celebrate the eucharist here in St. John's Chapel. The celebrant and homilist that day was Suzanne Hiatt, beloved by all for her combination of keen mind, warm heart, and complete lack of ostentation. As Sue preached, we were distracted and frustrated by the chapel's noisy radiators. When the steam came up, the expanding metal made a racket, sounding for all the world as though someone were whacking the radiator with a sledgehammer. It was a brash intrusion into our worshipful reflection upon Sue's message.

Finally the Great Thanksgiving was offered, and we came forward to gather in that great circle around the altar. Sue Hiatt was never too concerned about liturgical vestments. It was a wet and slushy day outside, and Sue had donned a pair of great rubber galoshes. Fastened only half way up, they hung open at the top, buckles flopping below her alb.

Sue began to administer the sacrament. With each step she took her galoshes let out a great squishing sound. Unwittingly, surely, she began to move around the circle in rhythm with the loud clang of the radiator. "The Body of Christ, the Bread of heaven"; *squish, squish*; CLANG! ... "The Body of Christ, the Bread of heaven"; *squish, squish*; CLANG! ... We avoided all eye contact with one another, lest we convulse with laughter. But the sacrament that day was given sincerely, accepted gratefully, and remembered fondly. "The Body of Christ, the Bread of heaven"; *squish, squish*; CLANG!

Those of you who matriculate here today join a long heritage of worship in St. John's Chapel which will be as challenging and as nourishing as you allow it to be. Infused with the *squish, squish* reality of the world around you; disrupted by the harsh CLANG of prophetic word or contrary conviction; this chapel is not always a setting for warmth or comfort. But if you come here with discipline, faithfulness, and charity, with the altar at the center of your prayers and the center of your lives, you will be both nourished and challenged for faithful service.

A story from the EDS classroom:

In my second semester here I took a course on Systematic Theology with professor John Skinner. I found it a challenge. With no background in theology or philosophy, I struggled to track with the abstract nature of the texts and lectures. I couldn't wait to return to what seemed to me the more vocationally pertinent courses on pre-marital counseling and the liturgical practicum.

That summer I was engaged in Clinical Pastoral Education at the old Deaconess Hospital. Deaconess was a tertiary care facility. Nobody was there for anything routine or simple. The patients I called upon had life-threatening heart disease and limb-losing diabetes complications. Deaconess was an early center for AIDS treatment. In 1985, AIDS was an automatic death sentence, and the AIDS patients whom I came to know faced hostility, judgment, shunning and isolation.

Meanwhile, that summer, Tricia and I were weighing the decision to start a family. I had friends engaged in their own CPE down the street at Children's Hospital. Childhood disease and death were a steady narrative – the hearing of which did not make simple the decision to have a child. As a context for ministry, the Deaconess and Children's Hospitals were a challenge to my faith just as the Systematic Theology class had been a challenge to my intellect.

Yet by God's grace the two came together, each illuminating the significance of the other. Along the way that summer I recollected Tillich describing faith as the conscious "acceptance of being

accepted,” and this in turn as “the source of the most paradoxical manifestation of the courage to be.” [Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 177] We had read the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, who described the primordial nature of the universe as “unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality.” Unexpectedly, these words came back to me in the halls of Deaconess Hospital.

John Skinner said that it was all about living within the tensions of life, including what he called the tension between Facticity and Possibility – the gulf we experience between the reality of What Is and the hope of What Could Be. It is, said John, the vocation of the Christian to affirm Possibility in the face of Facticity; to live in that tension with a faith which affirms the primordial nature of God as a nature which pulls towards unrealized possibilities, and to participate in that pull.

In the summer of 1985, for me, theological education ceased to be an abstraction. Those of you who matriculate this day are here offered such tools – tools to deepen your knowledge, and to place that knowledge in dialogue with your own experience and that of different others. EDS will challenge you to find those gifted people who want to engage in that deepening and dialogue with you.

Finally, *a story from the EDS Quadrangle*: Outside of Wright Hall is a large landscaping planter. It appears now to have relatively permanent plantings, but in our day an endowment fund provided for the flowers to be swapped out as the seasons changed – the bright colors of spring giving way to more subdued hues in the summer. In the fall, multitudinous mums appeared in autumnal gold and terracotta. One day in late November the mums were gone, and the bare ground which remained had been covered with clipped branches of evergreen, strewn thickly across the triangular bed.

I stood gazing at the new winter décor, trying to identify what sort of greenery it might be – pine, perhaps, or spruce. Another student came by, and I asked her: “Do you know what these are?” “Oh, well,” she replied. “*This* is EDS and *that* is a non-hierarchical Christmas tree.”

It was a great moment – a light moment, though with an underlying, serious question: At what point is an evolved or reformed thing no longer itself? (Such as a non-hierarchical Christmas tree.) It is a question worth considering at a school which has long held non-hierarchical structure as a core value, yet proclaims itself part of a church which takes its very name from a characteristic of its hierarchy. (I pose this question as one who is five days away from being consecrated a bishop!)

I have no intention of answering the question, which is for this community to wrestle with, as it has for long decades. What I want to say is that the story of my encounter in the quadrangle reminds us to remain humble in our proclamations. The line between ultimate meaning and ultimate absurdity is thin. Our core values are core, but our humanity is frail, and our wisdom is never more than penultimate. We laugh together at our non-hierarchical Christmas trees – as we should – recognizing our common frailties and shared absurdities. But woe to us when we become incapable of such laughter. And woe to us if we laugh at one another, instead of with one another. And woe to us when we deride, rather than confide. And woe to us when charity fails; and blessed are we when love prevails.

Those of you who matriculate today become a part of the EDS community life, which has a venerable history of deep conversation and risky conviction, accompanied inevitably by the hazard of hubris. Take your place in this conversation. And in your conversation, balance your every conviction with love.

To this place I welcome you, on behalf of those who have gone before. To the communion of its chapel, welcome. To the contemplation of its classroom, welcome. To the common life of its quadrangle and beyond, welcome. May you be blessed here, even as we are blessed by your presence.