

Mr. Chairman, Board of Trustees, Faculty, Staff, and Students of Western Theological Seminary, I am incredibly grateful for your confidence and trust in me to serve as the 12th President of the institution. It is truly a humbling honor and a prime privilege. Thank you.

I want to also take this moment to thank my parents, my father and my mother, who have sacrificed so much to ensure a strong education for their sons and a preferred future for us. For your love and for your wisdom and guidance over the years, Dad, Mom, thank you.

Finally, I want to thank you two children, Isaiah and Nora, for your positive and adventurous spirit as we go on this journey together. And I want to especially thank my wife, Esther. Esther, you are the most wonderful partner I can have. You have walked with me over the years, gone ahead of me when I needed to be shown the way, and supported me from behind when I needed encouragement. Thank you, and I love you.

The story of Western Theological Seminary began in 1866 when Dr. Albertus C. Van Raalte and Dr. Philip Phelps encouraged seven students to petition the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to take necessary steps to begin theological instruction in Holland, Michigan. In its early years, the theological school was beset by low enrollment, and inadequate financial support, to the point that instruction was briefly suspended. Now, 153 years later, Western Theological Seminary has faithfully graduated students to serve congregations not only in the Reformed Church in America, but also throughout the world.

Yesterday, in recognition of the wonderful work being done in the area of disability and ministry, we established the Center for Disability and Ministry and named Dr. Ben Conner as the inaugural director of the Center to help us and the church think intentionally and purposefully about including individuals who are differently-abled for full participation and inclusion in the life of the church.

On March 1, 2020, we will be celebrating with the Anglican Church of Uganda as they install their new Archbishop, Rev. Dr. Stephen Kaziimba, a two-time graduate of Western Theological Seminary. What began as a desire to provide theological education in the Midwest has now grown to influence the church everywhere.

And now, as we stand poised to enter the 3rd decade of the 21st century, what does it mean for Western Theological Seminary to live lives worthy of the calling that we have received?

After all, we find ourselves at a time of great transition, in theological education, in our country, and in our world. The landscape of theological education is changing, marked by declining enrollment and significant changes in student demographics. 50 years ago, seminary students were predominantly young men of European heritage, who attended school residentially, full time, and completed their degrees in 3-4 years. Today, students tend to be older, reflect the changing demographics of our nation, are male and female, more likely to be part time, and more likely to complete their program from a distance.

The religious landscape of the United States is also changing. Just two weeks ago, the Pew Research Center released another report detailing the decline of Christianity by another 12% in the last decade. The decline would have been much steeper were it not for migration, which brings an infusion of many faiths into the United States, mostly Christianity, but also other

religions. Evidence is growing that we live in a secularizing and religiously pluralistic cultural moment, as well as an increasingly fractured and polarized society.

Around the world we are also living at a time in history where we can speak meaningfully about World Christianity. The rise of Christianity in the Southern hemisphere means that there is no longer one center of Christianity in Geneva or Rome, but a polycentric faith that includes Sao Paulo, Nairobi, Jakarta, and even Holland, Michigan.

Given this changing landscape, what does it mean for Western Theological Seminary to be an institution that is worthy of our calling? I want to address 3 areas in particular today.

First, let us continue to be an institution that exhibits a winsome, irenic, and generous Christianity. Let it flow from our actions, our words, and our very being. In a society that is increasingly fractured and polarized, where disagreements seemingly devolve quickly into shouting matches, derisions, and one-liners hurled to and fro, Paul's exhortations in Ephesians 4 seem incredibly relevant. He urges us to be completely humble and gentle, to be patient, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

I hope that Western Theological Seminary will continue to be such a place. I pray that, when it comes to people with whom we disagree, we will be a place that demonstrate genuine curiosity and sincere humility; that we would engage with heartfelt empathy and an authentic desire to understand; that we would be a place that engages not only perspectives we agree with but also, and perhaps especially, perspectives that we disagree with; and that we would always strive to represent the "other" fairly.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Jesus used the imagery of walking the extra mile with one's enemy. Walking the extra mile is not simply an act of burdensome obligation; but rather, walking together creates the environment that enables mutual understanding. Let us be a place that exhibits a winsome, irenic, and generous Christianity, and let it be shown in our actions, our words, and our very being.

Second, let us continue to be an institution that is resolutely committed to the good news of salvation in Christ, as well as the ethics of the Kingdom of God for our daily lives. Ephesians 4:4-6 reminds us that the unity that we seek is a unity that is centered around the Triune God, affirming one God, the Father of all, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, who enables us to live as one body. It affirms one faith and one baptism, and one hope, to which we have been called. It is a doctrinal unity. Paul makes these statements in a context where the emperor was seen as the representation of deity and in a world proliferated by lesser deities of various sizes and capabilities. Affirming faith in the one and only Triune God was a defiant, counter cultural act of speaking truth to power. Friends, this is so, even today. To affirm this faith along with Paul requires courage and resolute commitment.

But our affirmation of our faith must also be accompanied with an equally resolute commitment to live out the ethics of the kingdom of God in our daily lives. For we believe that all of creation was created in Christ, that there is nothing under heaven that does not belong to Christ and where Christ is not Lord. We believe that the totality of our lives is lived *Coram Deo*, before the face of God, in the presence of God. In other words, there is nothing on this earth, be it our

study or our worship, medicine or law, business or politics, immigration or health care, climate change or poverty, beginning of life or end of life, inequality or racialized division that is outside the bounds of the Kingdom of God. All these things must be brought into obedience to Christ and into alignment with the ethics of the Kingdom of God.

I pray that Western Theological Seminary will continue to be known as a place that graduates Christian leaders who are firm in their faith without being belligerent in their beliefs. That our graduates may be happy recipients and messengers of a historic Christian faith passed down from generation to generation, holding firm to the inspired and infallible Word of God, while recognizing full well that we see through the glass darkly and therefore maintain a posture of epistemic humility in our daily engagement.

Finally, let us continue to be an institution that participates responsibly with the movement of God's Spirit around the world. Whereas in 1900, 83% of the world's Christians lived in North America and Europe, by 2010, 60% live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There is a literal physical darkening of Christianity taking place. This is good news, because it demonstrates to us that the good news of the Gospel, no, not just good news, but the true news of the Gospel is not simply a Western religion or a product of colonialization but true news for all people, in all places, at all times. Let us not receive theological reflections from the majority world simply, as Per Frostin has described, as "raw, exotic intellectual materials" that when processed can serve as side dishes in our theological dinner table but instead as significant contributions from the global church without which our diet will be incomplete. Let us make every effort not only to educate students from what we perceive to be impoverished places from around the world but instead hold firm to the realization that when there is an absence of people that reflect the demographics of our city, our country and the global church, we are the ones who are impoverished. Let us continue to participate responsibly with the movement of God's Spirit around the world.

These things need not be in contradiction with one another but rather in tension with one another for it is through the tension of journeying through the wilderness while the land has been given, of waiting in exile while the Messiah has been promised, of suffering in the present while future glory is assured, of experiencing the already inaugurated but not yet fulfilled Kingdom of God, that we are reminded of the creative and miraculous work of God who continues to be at work within us and in this world that he has created, and our absolute and total dependence on him, in whom we breathe, and move, and have our being.

As we enter into the third decade of the 21st century, let us continue to be a seminary that is standing boldly on Christ alone, trusting Scripture alone, proclaiming a salvation that is through faith alone and by grace alone, and living according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God, an ethic that point this world toward its' Creator and remind the people of this world that they are loved, deeply loved, so loved that our God would sacrifice his one and Only Son so that we may be reconciled with God.

Join us as we boldly and courageous live lives that are worthy of our calling, out of obedience and faithfulness to God, for the sake of His Church and for the sake of His Creation. Amen.