From the Chapel

Founders Day

This Chapel message was presented by Dr. Paul Lehninger on January 31, 2005, in observance of the 32nd anniversary of the WLC’s founding.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us, then, go to Jesus outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise— the fruit of lips that confess his name. Hebrews 13:13-15

It wasn’t until after I picked this text for the observance of WLC’s Founders Day that I realized the irony of the phrase, “let us go to Jesus outside the camp.” Lest anyone be confused, I had no intention of implying that the only way to get to Jesus was by going outside the Warrior camp. Rather, the beginning of the text is talking about bearing disgrace and rejection as Jesus did. As Israel wandered in the desert, anything or anyone “unclean” had to go outside the main encampment of the people so they wouldn’t be defiled. Similarly, when Jesus was crucified, he was crucified as one who was “unclean” — and indeed he was, since he was bearing the sins of the world — and so he was crucified outside the walls of the city.

In academic life, we sometimes have to bear a type of disgrace in the eyes of the majority of academicians. It’s no secret that professors who hold distinctly Christian views, who, in their teaching and scholarship, profess a perspective of the creative order that proclaims, Your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (Psalm 104:24), won’t always be taken seriously. What was supposed to be the refreshing breeze of rationalism and objectivity of the so-called Enlightenment became a chilling blast that stifled and stunted every attempt of people in academic life to lead their students into a world view that recognizes that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

As a result, the Christian church, in a sincere and appropriate desire to follow the warning of St. Paul, Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ (Col. 2:8), has at times taken an antagonistic posture against the academy. It’s important that we remember to Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith (1 Tim. 6:20). We are indeed outside the camp, outside the entrenched, high-walled, seemingly impregnable fortress of secular academia.

But that’s no reason to be pessimistic. We firmly believe God’s promise that we can... demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Our task is creative and vital, and full of wonder and promise.

So what does all this have to do with Founders Day? Well, our task isn’t anything new. On January 31, 1973, the Wisconsin Lutheran College federation of congregations met at Wisconsin Lutheran High School and elected its first board of regents, and the first president of Wisconsin Lutheran
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College, Rev. Robert Krause, father-in-law of Professor Sybilla Krause. Our founders laid a foundation which established the fundamental relationship between a Christ-centered perspective and academic pursuit, so that WLC could be a foundry—a workshop—of God in the Spirit. Their goal in founding a Lutheran Christian college with a liberal arts emphasis was not to set up an “opposition” worker training school for the WELS; we already had two worker training colleges. It also was not to supply a crying need for more colleges; the USA didn’t, and doesn’t, need any more colleges. And it wasn’t simply so there would be an outlet for preaching the gospel; the Church can preach the gospel without a college. For specific purposes of outreach, the millions of dollars spent on faculty, staff, and administration salaries, athletic fields, and beautiful buildings could be spent much more effectively doing other forms of outreach. The genius of these founders, as revealed by their mission statement, was that they established a college that would be outside the camp, one that would eagerly and confidently explore every nook and cranny of the cosmos, all the while taking every thought into captivity to Christ. A great blessing of being at WLC is experiencing a spirit that’s daring and optimistic, because we’re convinced that all truth is God’s truth. We’re willing to risk— in fact, we welcome— the exploration of all truth, because if it’s at odds with what God has revealed to us, it isn’t true. But academic life is filled with sinful human beings whose sinful reason misinterprets truth, and who reject God’s revealed truth as a touchstone. And so, we’re outside the camp; but we’re proud to bear the disgrace of Christ.

Anniversaries— and Founders Days— are times for reassessment and taking stock. So let’s look around us. The buildings are beautiful— and need constant maintenance. The technology is brand new— and next year is obsolete. Some faculty members arrive young and vigorous and eager— and each year grow a little slower, and a little grayer. We grow close to students and feel like one big family and then, heartlessly, they leave us after four (or more) short years. Ordinarily, this would be most depressing: here we do not have an enduring city. But day by day, at WLC we offer God a sacrifice of praise: in classrooms which disclose the organic connection between the wonders of the created world, culture, society and the Word of God; in opportunities for worship and Bible study; in edifying conversations; in using athletic, artistic, and academic talents to the best of our ability to glorify God; and in simple, unheralded tasks faithfully performed. This sacrifice of praise, offered through Jesus, is what we’ll be engaged in long after this city— WLC— no longer endures, because it will continue in the city that is to come, the new Jerusalem. And so, founders, we thank you, and we thank God for using you, to begin a work of enduring, in fact, eternal value. To him alone be glory. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CHARIS

is printed at the Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, Inc., Print Shop in Watertown, Wisconsin.

Special thanks are given to Mr. Randall Christian, Print Shop Director, and Dr. David Geske, President and CEO.

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is an independent 501(c)(3) corporation in the State of Wisconsin. It is located at Wisconsin Lutheran College and operates in cooperation with the College. A separate Board of Directors governs the operations of the Institute.

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