

June 5, 2016

TITLE: A Glimpse of the Future

They say that the past is the best predictor of the future. And I guess in many ways that is true. We can trace patterns of human behavior through history—in families and in nations. We can see that real estate bubbles lead to stock market crashes, that red skies at night mean blue skies the next day, and that full moons really do make us a little crazy.

But still, when I was in high school, I could never have predicted that the company that created the Apple II E computer, upon which my sisters and I had played “Where in the World is Carmen San Diego,” would one day create the phone I carry around with me everywhere. I never could have predicted that that same phone would allow me to take pictures and video at the Arts Festival on Friday, have a face-to-face conversation with my sister in Ireland on Saturday, post a message that could be seen by a community of friends across the world, and play “Family Feud” during commercials.

Frankly, as much as I hoped that the predictions in the movies of my teenage years might come true—at least the predictions that foretold of flying cars and hover boards that really lifted off the ground—as I approached graduation there was so much of the future that I never could have predicted: I never saw 9/11 coming; I never saw my parents’ divorce coming; I also never dreamed that I would have lived in India, that I would have once worked as an aerobic kickboxing instructor, and I certainly had no idea in the world that I would one day be a pastor.

As you wrap up another year of High School—for some, your first and others your last—I can’t help but wonder how you envision your futures. I wonder what hopes you bring, as well as what fears. I wonder which predictions you will work to bring to life, and which predictions you will diligently work against.

As I stand here today, I think that it is fair to say that the talents and insights and convictions that have been a part of your past will likely help to shape your futures. I surely don’t know what jobs you will have or where you will live—though, selfishly, I do hope that you pick Pittsburgh—the number 1 city of our nation, with the number 1 church! But as one of the people in this room that has known many of you for the better part of your lives I can see a glimpse of a bright future in each one of you.

When I look at our graduating seniors, I see:

- In Jazmier, an articulate poet, strength of character, a person of hope who sees the best in others
- In Darlaja, persistence and compassion, a gentle kindness that seeks to lend a hand.
- In Jason, a steadfast leader, always willing to step up, lend a hand, and solve a problem—wise beyond his years.
- In Joan, an articulate and fierce advocate for justice, a caring and intelligent presence invested in the needs of others—both friend and stranger.

- In Madison, a bright light, engaged in building community, always willing to help.
- In Webster, a wise curiosity, depth of insight, creativity.
- In Cori, a woman of intelligence, hard working, committed to making this community safer for all.
- In Barbara, an avid reader, an honest spirit, ready to help a friend in need.

See, for as much as the particulars of life might change—might even be unpredictable (and thankfully so!)—we each possess God-given qualities in our core that make us, us. We each possess the things inside that make us tick: the things in life that get us out of bed each morning and give us hope; the perspectives and beliefs that drive our actions—the way we make friends, the way we spend our time, the way we spend our money. We are each children of God, the image of God imprinted uniquely within each one of us, called for a purpose.

You've claimed this reality in the texts you've chosen for today: words that remind the church to identify and then offer their unique gifts for the glory of God and the well-being of the larger community. Paul and Peter affirm that each one of us has been gifted by God and sent forth to use those gifts to serve God and one another. And the offering of our gifts is a manifestation of love—love for God and love for others. Love directs us and guides us and motivates our service.

You know this to be true—every time you guide a younger child through a project at Vacation Church School, or light candles on the table, or bake Challah bread with our friends from Rodef Shalom. You know this to be true every time you allow your curiosity to generate exploration, every time you create a new idea or picture or poem, every time you encourage a friend or comfort someone who is grieving. You are using these gifts and glorifying God.

As you wrap up this school year and look ahead to your futures, I encourage you with this:

Be true to who you are. Get to know who you are in your heart of hearts and then put energy into offering the very best of yourself to the world. Be confident in who you are—but don't think more highly of yourself than you do of others. Respect yourself, but show others respect too. Try to avoid getting caught up in the drama. And trust me, there will be plenty of drama. Don't let others try to tell you who you should be. Don't let others try to tell you what you can't be. They can't predict your future either.

But even as you grow more certain of who you are, try not to get so stuck in who you've been that you find yourselves afraid of change or unable to grow. As Presbyterians we like to remember that we are reformed and always being reformed. That means that while God has made us, God is always working on us and through us. We are always works in progress—physically, emotionally, intellectually, academically, professionally, relationally and spiritually.

So be open to new ideas. Get to know people who are different from you, and be willing to be shaped from their points of view. Try food that you used to think looked gross. Go to a concert of music you've never heard. Learn about the issues facing people who live in a country you may never visit, and think about why their needs might matter so much to you.

And as you face your futures, don't let fear hold you back. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid to try something new. Don't be afraid to have your heart broken. Don't be afraid to stand up for what's right, even if it's the unpopular choice. Don't be afraid to be yourself. Don't be afraid to be judged. And remember that if people don't accept you, it is usually because they are afraid of being themselves.

If the past—or present—were to help us to glimpse the future, I would say with confidence that your futures—and ours—look awfully bright.

The gifts you bring here and now already deeply enrich this community in deep and meaningful ways. You are also, already, powerful agents of positive change in the world at large—calling out injustice, speaking up for what's right, working to advocate for the oppressed and care for our planet. You ARE making a difference! I expect that the qualities that have shaped your past and present will likewise shape your futures as you find new ways to express your gifts and give voice to your beliefs.

My prayer is that even as you continue to learn and grow, the rest of us will continue to learn and grow too—and frankly, my hope is that we grow because of what we learn from you. You offer so much to this world—humor and wisdom and hope. I am grateful for each of you and your many gifts. I'm humbled by all you do to make this a better world. And I look forward to seeing, by God's grace, what your futures hold in store.

And so it is with great joy that I invite the seniors who are present here today to come up and say a few words that we might celebrate their gifts and then seek God's blessing upon them as they step out into this next chapter of their futures.