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Baccalaureate Address

Dr. Brent A. R. Hege

Friday, May 10th, 2013

Butler University

I would like to add my welcome to the students, faculty, staff, administrators, and especially to the graduates and their family and friends. This is the beginning of what I trust will be a memorable weekend filled with a host of emotions - joy, nostalgia, sadness, maybe a little anxiety, but most of all pride. You have so much to be proud of this weekend, and I am honored to have been selected to deliver this year's faculty baccalaureate address to help you mark this milestone in your life. I promise I will keep this short - you've spent several years listening to faculty lectures, and you're almost done!

The theme of this year's baccalaureate is "Looking Bacc to Move Forward." What an appropriate theme for a commencement weekend! Isn't this what we do at all of the important milestones of our lives? A milestone was originally a marker set along a road to mark the distance between two places. They were permanent fixtures that gave structure and definition to the paths that we take to get where we want to go. No matter who happened to walk by that milestone, they would know how far they had come and how far they still had to go. For some, that milestone was a welcome indication that the journey was almost over. For others, it was a reminder that there was still a long way left to go. I think this is one of the reasons we use the term "Commencement" rather than "Graduation" for this particular milestone. Yes, you all have come a long way. I suspect many of you would get a little dizzy if you stopped to think carefully about just how much you've grown in your time at Butler. And it's good and right that you should take this opportunity to pause and reflect on your many experiences - the challenges, setbacks, accomplishments, and victories - that have led you here today. But the word "Commencement" signals a beginning, not just an ending. This is the beginning of the next chapter of your life, when you give thanks for the chapter that is closing and look forward to what comes next. And this particular milestone reminds each of you that there is still a long way left to go.

When I first learned of the theme of this year's baccalaureate, I immediately thought of time. Time is a very peculiar thing. In one way it's as regular as clockwork, literally. Time moves forward tick by tock, whether we want it to or not. One day you're a nervous first year student coming to campus for orientation, trying to find your way in an unfamiliar place, wondering what this new experience will hold in store for you, barely able to fathom the moment that is now at hand. And then - just like that - here we are. I have the privilege of teaching in the First Year Seminar program, and every year I tell my students (including several of you here now) that this time will go by so fast, faster than you could ever imagine. I doubt many of you took it seriously when someone told you that in your first year, but I know from conversations with many of you that it rings true. Just like that, it's all over. And yet think about how much has happened in that time! You have forged friendships that will last the rest of your life, learned more than you thought possible about yourself, the world, and your place in it, had experiences that you will cherish until your dying day, and perhaps you might even remember some of what you heard in class! But all the while, time was steadily ticking away, pushing you forward.

The ancient Greeks had two words for time. One was *chronos*, which is where we get words like “chronology,” “chronic,” and “chronicle.” This is the view of time as constant, inevitable linear progress into the future, the never-ending flux that the philosopher Heraclitus had in mind when he said that we can never step into the same river twice, because it’s not the same river and because we’re not the same people. This is the time we mark with milestones and rites of passage such as Commencement.

But the ancient Greeks also had another word for time, which is *kairos*. While *chronos* is used to describe the steady ticking of a clock, *kairos* is used for those moments when the normal laws of time seem to stop working. *Kairos* time is pregnant time, time full of possibilities, time that demands a decision, a wager, a leap, like a fork in the road or an unexpected knock on the door in the middle of the night. This is the word that the New Testament uses in phrases like “the fullness of time” or “the appointed time,” when eternal possibilities interrupt the normal patterns of our day-to-day lives. This surprising, untameable time knocks us off our feet; it is the time that erupts in the moments that grip us and shake us, not the time that we can count or measure.

The ancient Greeks liked to personify important concepts to better express the meaning of their sacred ideas, and they did this with *kairos*. There was a famous statue of *Kairos* created by a sculptor named Lysippos. He installed this statue in public and engraved a short dialogue on its pedestal to explain the significance and the mystery of *kairos*. Here is the story:

Who are you? *I am Kairos, who subdues all things.*
Why do you stand on tiptoe? *Because I am always running.*
And why do you have a pair of wings on your feet? *Because I fly with the wind.*
And why do you hold a razor in your right hand? *As a sign to all people that I am sharper than any sharp edge.*
And why does your hair hang down over your forehead? *For anyone who meets me to grab me by the hair.*
And why is the back of your head bald? *Because no one who chases me can ever grab me, no matter how hard they try.*
And why did the artist make you? *For your sake, stranger - to teach you a lesson.*

And what is the lesson this statue has to teach us? I think this statue perfectly illustrates the theme of “Looking Back to Move Forward.” Each of you is standing before this statue and is confronted with this moment of *kairos*. This is time on the move - but toward us, not away from us. If you don’t recognize it for what it is and grab it with both hands, it will be gone before you know it and you’ll be clutching at air. This time is quick, and crafty, and elusive. It won’t wait around until you’re ready - you have to take the risk to reach out for it and grab it, *now*. Looking back is important and a good thing to do at a time like this. But if we spend all of our time looking back, we’ll miss the opportunities that are flying toward us on winged feet, daring us to grasp them and take us into the unknown. The unknown is scary and it’s often safer and easier to cling to the comfort of what we know. (There’s a reason many of you call this the “Butler Bubble”!) But every bubble has to burst eventually, and most of the time we discover that the world outside is so much bigger and stranger and more beautiful than we could ever imagine, if we’ll just dare to take the leap, to let that sharp edge slice a new path for us into the future.

Kairos has been an important term in Christian theology, especially in the 20th century, a century we know was full of peril and promise, of horror and progress. It was a century full of *kairos* moments, some that we grasped and some that we missed. Perhaps the greatest modern witness to the power of *kairos* was the theologian Paul Tillich, who survived the trenches of World War I and fled Germany for the United States when he was removed from his teaching position by the Nazis. Tillich defined *kairos* as

not the quantitative time of the watch, but the qualitative time of the occasion: the ‘right’ time. Kairos is the time which indicates that something has happened which makes an action possible or impossible. We all have in our lives moments in which we feel that now is the right time for something: now I am mature enough for this, now everything around me is prepared for this, now I can make the decision (Tillich, *The History of Christian Thought*).

Sometimes these decisions we make in the moment of *kairos* are the wrong ones. Our decisions can push us further down into the depths of fear, division, hatred, and violence. But sometimes our decisions can move us forward into a brighter future of compassion, dignity, and justice. For example, in 1985 a group of black South African pastors and theologians drafted a document condemning the evils of Apartheid and they called it, tellingly, the *Kairos Document*. In it they argued that the current situation of Apartheid in South Africa was a *kairos* moment, a moment that demanded a radical decision - a decision for continued oppression and violence or a decision for a new future in which each human being is valued and the wounds of the past can be healed.

Both of these *kairos* moments called for a decision, for a risk. They were moments of crisis, but they were also moments of profound opportunity, if only there were eyes to see and ears to hear. These moments were pregnant with possibility, but also with great danger. *Kairos* was knocking at the door and in it we can hear a word of judgment but also a word of hope. The Germans made the wrong choice in their moment, and we know the brutal price paid by so many for that tragic decision. However, it was not long after the publication of the *Kairos Document* that Apartheid ended and new hope emerged for the people of South Africa. They made the right decision in their moment of *kairos*, as uncertain and dangerous as it was.

We live in our own *kairos* moment, and *kairos* is knocking at the door for each of you. You are standing on the threshold of time, looking back to move forward. In each of your lives, *kairos* is knocking. How will you take what you’ve received here at Butler and use it to live a life of purpose, to make the world a better place? In your studies you’ve learned about the state of the world, its promise and possibility as well as its dangers and its failures. In each of your religious traditions you also have the resources for recognizing these moments and responding to them with compassion, courage, and conviction. To grasp this moment of *kairos* is to say yes to justice, and love, and hope, and to say no to selfishness, and violence, and fear. Each of your religious traditions has formed you and equipped you to go boldly into the future, to seize this opportunity to live out your faith for the sake of the world. And I hope your involvement in religious life at Butler has also taught you that we will be much better prepared to face these challenges if we face them together, learning from each other and deepening our common commitment to justice and peace by sharing the insights of our traditions in an earnest dialogue

of mutual openness and respect. Anyone who has studied religion or even follows the news knows that religion can be used to harm or to heal - it all depends on people, flawed and fragile as we are. How the world's religions will meet these challenges will be one of the great tests of your generation, and we put our trust in you to build a world of compassion, dignity, and justice for all.

This is also a *kairos* moment for each one of you individually. It asks, "What will you become?" You are staring into the unknown right now. Some of you might have a job lined up, others grad school, and others are still trying to figure out what comes next. But whether you wanted it or not, the time is here for you to take your next step out into the world. This is just one milestone on the path that you are following. None of us knows where that path will end. There will be detours, wrong turns, and dead ends on that path. But there will also be unexpected joys, beautiful scenery, and meetings with fellow travelers who will become friends. And every so often, *kairos* will meet you on the path and dare you to grasp it with both hands. You're ready for it. And once you grab it, never let it go.

Congratulations on reaching this important milestone in your life. You've done good work here, and we expect more good things from each one of you. We'll take this opportunity to look back, but we must never forget also to move forward. Now is the time. Go out into the world with passion and conviction, for the sake of all that is good.

Once again, congratulations to the class of 2013! Thank you.