

President's Address at Dimensions

August 29, 2019

9:30, Tucker Student Center

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Neal, for the kind introduction.

Thanks for letting me join you...this is a large and impressive group. I'm glad to see you all. I hope you're doing well and that the semester is off to a fast start. I also hope that you're ready for some football...tonight, Charlotte, Richardson Stadium, 7:30, be there and be loud. If we have any members of the football team here this morning, please stand and let us show our appreciation. Our thoughts and prayers will be with all of our players and coaches as they represent us in competition tonight.

But, first, and more importantly, Dimensions. You know that like many of you, I'm new here...so this is my first exposure to Dimensions at Gardner-Webb.

Since I'm leading the program, I did what perhaps some of you also did and I looked online for some information to better understand how we can best use this time together.

According to the description on our website, the purpose of Dimensions is "to nurture students spiritually, intellectually, and culturally from the perspective of a Christian worldview and to promote a sense of community." We can do that!

Some of you are here this morning because you are eager...you are hungry for this kind of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural growth. And I appreciate that appetite. But I'm smart enough to know that others of you are here because of the R word...it's *Required*.

Whatever the reason that got you up and out of bed and here this morning, I am grateful for the chance to share some thoughts with you as we begin the new academic year. You're not in class. You're not at practice. So, even though it might be required, it's not a bad place to be.

In the time that I am going to spend with you today, I want to do a few things:

- First, I want to put myself in your seat and anticipate some of the questions that I'd want to ask the new president of a faith-based, Christian university.
- Second, I want to share with you some words of scripture and some recollections that I have of the time of life that you are experiencing right now. I hate sounding like the old man reminiscing, but it is reminiscing with a message. My message to you today has three quick parts: responsibility, belief, wisdom.

Before I do either of those things, let me issue some disclaimers. I'm a teacher, not a preacher. I'm a political scientist, not a pastor.

But I am a lifelong Christian. I grew up in the Church. I met the girl who would become my wife in the same church in which I was baptized. The church has been there at every step in my journey through life.

Like most people I know, my journey has had its share of peaks and valleys. My faith has been tested. My resilience has been challenged. I am guilty of looking upward for help far more frequently than I have fallen to my knees and offered praise and thanks.

But I am here with you this morning to say how very grateful I am that God has led me to Gardner-Webb. And I'll be honest, I do feel called to be here. I do feel that we are ALL here in this special place at this particular time for a reason.

Now, if I'm 18 or 19 or 20 years old and I'm sitting where you are, I might roll my eyes with a little skepticism if I heard somebody say that to me. And, that's OK. But I firmly believe that we all have a calling. I really do. I think that our calling is divinely inspired...and the great question of our lives is whether we answer the call in time to make a difference. Let me repeat that: I believe the great question of each of our lives is whether we answer God's call in time to make a meaningful difference in this world.

And if I'm you (and after I rolled my eyes), sitting here at this particular time and in this special place, I'd want to ask the new president of GWU at least three questions:

1. What does it mean to me (Bill Downs) to be a Christian?

I'm not going to get theological on you. I'm not going to talk about doctrine or about worship styles. We can do that at another time and in another place. But, to me, being a Christian is about finding purpose in life. It's about faith in something larger than yourself. It's a recognition that in this life we are all works in progress...we are all imperfect...but we all have the hope of being saved. We all have the hope of making a meaningful difference in this life, and we all have the hope of something that is lasting, something that is eternal, after this life.

To me, Christianity is about forgiveness. It's about goodness. It's about grace, and it's about relationships. To me, Christianity is about unselfishness.

The late Billy Graham (one of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century, who was born right down the road from us in Charlotte) was fond of saying, "God has given us two hands - one to receive with and the other to give with." Those are important words—we can't just be passive recipients of love and kindness, we have to actively distribute love and kindness to those around us.

That, to me, is what it means to be a Christian.

2. What does it mean for us to be a Christian university?

Gardner-Webb is a university, not a church. But we have a 114-year history of commitment to higher education that integrates learning with Christian life. We have strong Baptist roots, but our student body is a rich and diverse mosaic of denominations. And we are fiercely proud of our diversity and how we welcome everyone into conversation about faith.

Our university has an official mission statement, just like every other university. And our mission statement was crafted by people who came here long before me and who worked on this language at great length: "By embracing faith and intellectual freedom, balancing conviction with compassion, and inspiring a love of learning, service and leadership, Gardner-Webb prepares its graduates to make significant contributions for God and humanity in an ever-changing global community."

“GWU is committed to service, displayed in Christ-like moral action that respects the dignity and value of every person.”

Our university should provide an “environment that fosters intellectual and spiritual growth; encourages physical fitness, service, social and cultural enrichment; strengthens and develops moral character; and respects the value and individuality of every student.”

I’ve worked at many universities...but I’ve never worked anywhere that has been so intentional about developing good people, and not just good graduates. What we’re trying to do here, my friends, is special.

3. *President Downs, what is your favorite Bible verse?*

I Corinthians 16:13, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.” Life comes at you a million miles an hour. I anticipate moments in our future when we are going to have to have a little courage. We will get tested, and we will have to stay strong. A copy of that verse stays right there in my portfolio, and I can open that up and be reminded at any time: courage, strength and faith.

You now know a little about me as a Christian and about how Gardner-Webb approaches its mission.

Let me reflect next on some things going on in my world when I was an undergraduate, and some strong messages from the Bible that helped guide me through those times.

Part I. Responsibility.

I don’t know much about you, but I do know that you all have great ability. You wouldn’t be at Gardner-Webb unless you were high-ability students.

I know that you are gifted academically. Many of you are gifted athletically. I envy you all! I suspect that your achievements have gained you some much deserved praise.

My guess is that you’ve been told that you’re gifted...you were courted and wooed and recruited by schools that wanted you to join them. It’s all pretty heady stuff for a teenager...it can build you up, and sometimes it can freak you out.

If I travel back a bit in time to my college years... I’m sitting in a Sunday School class at my home church in Raleigh. The teacher leading that day looked us straight in the eye and challenged us: “Gifted people have great responsibility.” He hammered that message home, drawing from Luke:

Luke 12:48 “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

You’re young. You’re brilliant. You’re all rising stars. You have the future and the world at your fingertips.

Embrace and enjoy this great moment of potential.

Don't be burdened too much too soon by the weight of responsibility and expectation...but do keep in mind that your blessings of brilliance mean that people will soon begin to look to you to lead, to serve, to do the right thing, to set examples for others. Much will be demanded, much will be asked. Don't wilt or waver in the face of those expectations...rise to them and deliver your best.

College comes with a significant dose of stress, anxiety, and pressure. Let me just encourage you to take it as a compliment that somebody—a professor, a coach, a pastor, a friend—will look you in the eye and let you know that much is expected of you.

Gifted people have great responsibility.

Part II. Believing in what we cannot see.

John 20:24-31 *Story of the empty tomb after the crucifixion.* “Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’

But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.’

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’

Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’
Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed (that is the important part)

Like many of you, I grew up in the Christian church. Sunday School and the 11:00 service each week was what I knew. Baptism, confirmation, affirmations of faith. A firm and unwavering set of beliefs. A set of friends and peers who shared the same firm and unwavering set of beliefs. And then college...and the first thing I heard was that I was in college to become a critical thinker. Belief was not going to be good enough, what mattered was data, evidence, and empirical proof.

Do not underestimate that challenge. Do not underestimate how college can be a period of both doubt and discovery. That's OK.

When I was your age, I wasn't sure it was OK, but I learned to appreciate the spiritual journey. Enjoy the marriage of faith and critical thinking. Like most marriages, it can have its rocky moments...and sometimes you'll have to work at it...sometimes you'll have to say you're sorry...sometimes you'll have to ask forgiveness...but in the end, if you stick with it, you can live happily ever after.

Part III. Final quick message is about wisdom.

Proverbs 13:10: “Where there is strife, there is pride,
 but wisdom is found in those who take advice.”

Knowledge is a double-edged sword. Gaining more of it can tempt you into arrogance and pride. I deal with smart people every day, and I see excessive pride every day. No doubt, as I have traveled my academic journey, I have been guilty of it as well.

But I've also found knowledge to be quite humbling. The more you learn the more you realize just how little you actually know.

Wisdom comes in taking advice...allowing yourself to be mentored...recognizing that there is always, always some greater source of knowledge than yourself.

“Where there is strife, there is pride,
but wisdom is found in those who take advice.”

Make good use of your advisors. Make good use of your professors, your coaches, your counselors, your RAs, your peers.

These are some words and thoughts that have served me well over the years...I hope they can do the same for you.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for walking your path with us here at Gardner-Webb. Thank you for pressing pause on the drama of daily life to think about the meaning of life, to consider our place in this world, and to ponder how we each might make the world a better place.

I hope you have a great Thursday. Go make somebody smile.