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To The Hilt



by Carl Zylstra

It probably was on a day something like this. Parents and graduates were gathered together to celebrate the blessing of a Dordt College education in the lives of their children. One father pulled me aside. “You want to know why my kids came here from California to Iowa for college?” he asked. “It’s not that they couldn’t get a quality academic experience someplace else,” he went on. “It’s not that they couldn’t find a college that respected Jesus Christ and still stayed closer to home,” he continued. “It goes back,” he related, “to when I was boy of about 10 years old living on a farm near Orange City, Iowa.”

He went on to tell me that in the early 1950s his dad had gotten fascinated with the idea of starting a Christian college here in the area. Periodically

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he would head off for meetings in the area, mass meetings where hundreds of people would gather to talk about the need to start such a college, a college described in those days as “a Christian college, not just in the sense that devotional activities are appended to the ordinary work of a college but a Christian college in which all of the course work and all of the student’s social, intellectual, and imaginative activities will be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.”

This father went on to describe how one day as a ten-year-old boy he was out fixing fences with his dad after apparently a rather memorable meeting in Rock Valley. This ten-year-old kid wasn’t quite sure exactly what a college even was or why they would need a Christian college, but, he related to me, “My dad was so excited. He pounded away on the fence and told me how Reverend B. J. Haan, who later became the first president of the college and for whom this auditorium is named, had given an inspirational address in which he held out the vision of starting a college here on the prairies, and once they began they wouldn’t quit but rather would go all the way, as he recalled it, “To the Hilt?”

Now this father didn’t quite remember exactly what Bible text Reverend Haan had used—probably the verse from the Old Testament where a Jewish hero name Ehud had slipped a dagger into the presence of a particularly loathsome king name Eglon. And, in typically graphic Old-Testament fashion, the Bible recounts that Eglon was also an especially corpulent fellow and that when Ehud came close to Eglon as if to tell him a secret, he grabbed hold of Eglon’s beard with his right hand, and being left-handed, he unexpectedly drew the dagger with his left and thrust it into chubby king

Eglon and didn't stop until he had it all the way in "to the hilt." In fact, as the Bible says, Eglon's fat closed up over the dagger so that he couldn't even pull it out.

I hope you haven't been grossed out and are still following the story, because the point that this granddad was relating to me was that those Christian folks who began this college in the 1950s were inspired to begin a project against seemingly insurmountable odds. As they did so, they were not going to be timid or tentative but would press forward with all their energy, money, and prayers until they slew every obstacle in their path and with all their heart had pressed ahead "to the hilt." This now grown man recalled that even as a preteen lad he never forgot his father swinging the hammer on those fence posts and shouting "to the hilt," "to the hilt." "That's why," he went on, "now that I have my own family, even though California is a long ways away, I need to do my part of this project—the project of maintaining and celebrating in the lives of my children this continuing educational challenge of delivering an educational experience that is thoroughly permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity—and doing it 'to the hilt.'"

Graduates, you and I are the beneficiaries of those who went before us and who, with minimal resources and bumbling strategies, nonetheless built this community of faculty and staff together with facilities to support their efforts so that you could have the blessing of a Dordt College education. All it takes is a look in front of you at the faculty who are assembled here to wish you well—and a glance around you as you entered the auditorium by processing across the green and through the clock tower as the carillon chimed the Alma Mater—to know they really did it "to the hilt." They spared no effort and no ounce of energy—and contributed a prodigious amount of financial resources—so that you could leave here today, having experienced an environment where all of your course work and all of your social, intellectual, and imaginative activities could have been permeated with the Word and Spirit of the Lord of all, Jesus Christ.

Which leaves you the obligation now. When you leave here, having been nurtured for the past years in 24/7 comprehensive discipleship of Jesus

Christ, your responsibility is to continue living a life of comprehensive discipleship 24/7 in whatever square inch of his world God places you and in every cubic centimeter of human life and culture in which you participate now and for the rest of your days.

You've heard that before. You've heard it from me, and you've heard it from your professors. You've heard it from the staff with whom you work. The only thing left is to encourage and commission you now: "Go for it. Whatever God calls you to do, do it with all your might, and whatever you do, do it to the hilt." Those who went before you went to the hilt to establish this college. Your task now is to go to the hilt in carrying out the life callings you were inspired to see and prepared to fulfill as indeed you found your place in God's world.

Your task now is to go to the hilt in carrying out the life callings you were inspired to see and prepared to fulfill as indeed you found your place in God's world.

Earlier today at the senior breakfast, I referred to the economic disaster that befell our world during your years here at college. You now face a world devastated by economic travail and struggling toward sustainable recovery in the years ahead. That task is just beginning. But this much I know: just an hour from now, more than 300 new recruits will march out of this auditorium ready and prepared to meet the challenge—and to do so to the hilt.

Some of you will go out and enter the healing professions where damaged lives can be tended and restored. Some of you will go out and start businesses and provide employment that will feed dozens of employees and their families. Some of you will go out and teach the next generation to see God's world more clearly and prepare for life in his world more fully. Others will design and engineer the products and services that will make pos-

sible life together for seven billion people in God's world. You know your own individual calling. But the common Word I want to leave you today is simply, be sure you go with energy, enthusiasm, and with no holds barred. For God's kingdom is too important and the mandate he has laid on us too significant to do anything less.

Oh sure, there are challenges. From the mundane like, "Uh, that's all fine but do you have good job leads for me?" to the more expansive, "Have you been paying attention to the news lately? It doesn't seem like the world is all that eager for Christians to step forward and reclaim this world in the name of Jesus Christ."

And that's true. Been there. Done that. During the first twelve years of our marriage, I was unemployed for just about six of them. And especially during the past sixteen years, I've been able to get involved in national public policy issues, discussing them face to face with senators and congressmen, and pounding on the doors of those faceless policy writers who often seem not even to know we exist or that the message of justice in the name of God would make any difference. But that's not any reason to back down. In fact, the greater the challenge, the greater our calling to move forward with resolve and dedication, forbearing any thought of retreat and not resting until we've struck the blow against the gates of hell in the name of the Lord of heaven and done it to the hilt.

Many people are familiar with the quotation from Abraham Kuyper, who is memorialized in the Kuyper Apartments on our campus, the one where he says, "There is not one square inch in all of human activity over which Christ who is Lord of all does not say, "This is mine.""

What we sometimes forget is that this early 20th-century European preacher, newspaper publisher, and statesman also saw clearly that if Christ is Lord of every square inch of life, then we can never be content when any square inch of human culture is controlled by those who will not recognize his rule. That's why one of our United States senators has on his office wall another quote from Abraham Kuyper, where he says, "**When the principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then the battle is your calling, and peace has become sin. You must at**

the price of dearest peace lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy with all the fire of your faith." Or as Reverend Haan would have said, "To the Hilt."

Well, friends, it's time to begin. We'll take a few minutes first to recognize that you have been prepared for that battle that will not be complete until every square inch exalts Jesus Christ as Lord. We'll call your names one by one, and you will be acknowledged and certified as battle-ready troops to serve in the name of the Lord of all. But then you'll be ready to process out of here and get to it.

One request. This year Gloria and I are leaving with you. Like you, we don't know exactly where we're going and what the next steps of the challenge of service will be. But if you will allow us to lead you out of here today, it will be a great honor for us because then we'll know that you are going with us, your energy and enthusiasm will sustain us as it has for the past sixteen years, and we are particularly thrilled because we also will know that, by God's grace, you'll be carrying on this task long after our strength will fail.

When each of us picks up the challenge and pursues it to the hilt, there will always be those who will follow after and be even more dedicated than were we. That father who pounded on the fence post and related Reverend Haan's challenge to his young son has gone on to the glory that awaits the saints of God. The boy who grew to be a father and send his kids off to the college of which his father only dreamed is now beaming with pride as one of those kids has been appointed a professor of education who will begin his tenure in this college this coming summer and continue to metaphorically swing his grandfather's hammer and, in whatever challenge he faces, do it to the hilt.

So let's go folks. Faculty, I'm going to ask you to reverse protocol this year and let Gloria and me follow the mace, accompanied by the platform party; then the graduates; and, finally, the faculty, bringing up the rear. That way we can burst from this auditorium as the newest battalion in the Lord's army of service, ready to live that life of service and, whatever challenges come our way, live it to the hilt. And we will be doing so, not because these grads are so great but because God is so great, and not because finally they deserve the

honor for having completed their course of study. Rather, in the applause with which we send them on their way, we once again will acknowledge that we know what really is the truth, not just because it's on our college seal but because it's the deepest

reality—that, when we serve, when we do live lives of service and live them to the hilt, in the end it will be evident to all the world now and always, *Soli Deo Gloria*. To God alone belongs all the glory.