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Itchy Ears: Dordt College Graduation – May 6, 2016



by Tim Van Soelen

Graduates, President Hoekstra, Chairman Kielstra, Parents, Honored Guests, and all those whom we very fondly refer to as “Defender Nation”—not only in the athletic and competitive sense that many colleges and universities might use such a phrase but also in the academic sense, evident in this crowd of people who dearly love the graduating seniors, as well as in the front row of soon-to-be Masters of Education: You have invested in Dordt College in very significant ways, and today is a much anticipated return on this investment. At moments, I think about Defender Nation as analogous to a mutual fund. In fact, my first conceptual draft of this speech was titled “The Mutual Fund that is Dordt College.” I thought about the possibility of forming a publicly traded

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company, Defender Nation, bringing together this group of people who are investing their gifts and talents into all the different places God leads them. However, that would have been the end of my speech, as I really don’t know a lot about mutual funds. The finance majors on stage are laughing on the inside but also thinking, “maybe this guy could be my first client?” But thank you for being present today. Your presence is a physical gift in what I would imagine is a long line of gifts you have given to these graduates.

They are the reason you and I are here. Fun fact: I had the distinct privilege of welcoming ten of you graduating seniors to your first formal day of school as kindergarten students at Calvin Christian School in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Some of you came running and skipping, some of you crying (or that may have been your parents). Now I have the privilege of speaking to you on your last day of formal education. It will be interesting to see if you leave skipping or running or crying! But it certainly is a privilege for me to witness this day with you.

The most significant reason for my being here is that our oldest son will walk across the stage today to accept his diploma and a “well done” from President Hoekstra. At the end of this summer, he will pack up his ’01 Bonneville and move to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to begin his vocational calling as a middle school teacher. Older, wiser, more experienced folks told us many times that “it goes so fast,” but we did not believe them. Now, it seems unimaginable that 22 years have passed since we took him home from Redlands Community Hospital. When I go back to that moment in my mind, I can picture the nurse who escorted us out

of the hospital, hearing her polite laugh as we tried to assemble baby and car seat and seat belt. We handled our gift from God like an egg that would crack if we made the slightest error. That was before he rolled off the changing table a few times, fell down flights of steps, wiped out on his bike, and survived all those late night trips to high school events as a new driver. I assume I am not the only one with such memories today.

I also realize that very few people come to a graduation ceremony to hear the speaker. My own parents are in the audience, not to listen to their son share a few thoughts but to see their grandson graduate. So, I will take the good, unsolicited advice received via text from my college freshman roommate—“Keep it short, Dordt.”

Graduates, I won't pretend to be an expert in the world you are entering as you leave this place. Things have changed, considerably, since I walked across this stage. There was not a Kuyper Hall or a Rec Center or an Ice Rink. We used these big brown cabinets in the library, long drawers filled with notes (called card catalogs), organized by the Dewey Decimal System, needed to find a book or journal article. We had to drive to Sioux City or Sioux Falls to buy the latest “Journey” album or cassette or watch a movie. We had one phone at the end of the second floor hallway of North Hall to call Mom or Dad or that special someone.

Nowadays you text, tweet, snap, insta, maybe Yak? And, on that rare occasion, you hit Accept and actually take our phone call. Today, the world's largest taxi company, Uber, does not own one vehicle. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Christianmingle.com or some lesser app finds your date. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate. Something interesting is happening in this new world order.

So I offer you some thoughts, certainly not as an expert in all the changes happening in our world but in a couple of different contexts. First, I

offer these words as a parent, on behalf of the parents in the audience. Second, I offer these words as your professor, kind of a last lecture, on behalf of all those sages you've listened to over the past few years. Finally, I offer these words as a Dordt alum and a fellow kingdom worker, welcoming you into vocational callings that need you desperately to give generously of your gifts and talents to be part of God's plan for restoration and redemption of all things.

That was the public-speaking part of this speech.

But I don't fancy myself as a gifted public speaker; I believe that God called me to be an educator, a profession that requires experience. One of my favorite subjects to teach will always be mathematics. There is a sequential understanding of math, certainly in the elementary and middle school years, that first requires a concrete experience, followed by a pictorial representation, before

an abstract understanding can occur. Please indulge me in that experience for a moment. I would ask that you close your eyes, do your best to clear your mind, and wait for something to occur.

Picture this in your mind's eye—an eleven-year-old boy who has just spent two hours on a Sunday afternoon (after 4:00 pm since that was the official time when we could go outside to play) playing tackle football with the neighborhood gang on a 90-degree, 90%-humidity day in early August in Northwest Iowa. (Those who have moved a couch to the third floor of Covenant or North Hall during Week of Welcome can validate these numbers.) Picture a boy who was still sweating from that last touchdown run, a bit ripe, and sound asleep in night church,... only to be jolted awake by a pastor with these words (and Pastor was old school—a hell-fire-and-brimstone-first kind of pastor before he would comfort you with words of grace and mercy) and being absolutely certain he was staring down at me, his eyes piercing into my soul as he said these words: “He who has ears, let him hear!” I hope you can picture this moment and understand

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why any time I hear passages of Scripture, like the ones I share with you today, passages that refer to listening or hearing, I am suddenly brought back to the third pew on the left side of Bethel Christian Reformed Church.

Here are two short reflections on a couple of familiar passages for your ears this morning, passages that concretely help us understand what should make our ears itch. The first is from Luke 8:

5. “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he (Jesus) said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

If you don't hear, you can't produce. This is Dr. Luke's retelling of Jesus' familiar “Parable of the Sower.” Jesus' darkly humorous point is that most of the people listening to him, even in this particular moment, won't get it—because the crowd he's addressing is composed of mostly hard, rocky, thorny ears (ones that simply listen), not itchy, good-soil types (ones that hear). There is nothing wrong with Jesus' message, but there is plenty wrong with our ears. There are lots of moments where I listen but I don't hear, and I certainly fail to produce.

I think Jesus is reminding us that there is a difference between listening and hearing. We often miss this difference—as spouses, as friends, as parents, as colleagues, and as Christians. We listen but somehow do not hear. This omission can be explained away by cultural or gender or ethnic differences, as demonstrated in one of my favorite movies from the early 1990s, *White Men Can't Jump*. The film is about two basketball hustlers, played by Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson, who join forces to double their chances at winning big money on the street courts in Southern California. There is a scene where Woody and Wesley are cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway in a '67 Oldsmobile Cutlass convertible, celebrating a tournament victory while Woody's girlfriend, played by

Rosie Perez, is counting their loot. Woody pops in a Jimi Hendrix cassette tape. Wesley, who is riding in the back seat, says “Hey, what is this?”

Woody responds “It's Jimi Hendrix”

I know who it is but why are **you** playing Jimi?”

“Because I like to listen to him,” says Woody.

“That is the problem, y'all listen. There is a difference between **listening** to Jimi and **hearing** Jimi.”

Wesley is simply repeating the words Jesus wants us to hear: “Y'all listen, but you don't hear”—the difference between listening and hearing, the difference between the seed falling on thorny ground and falling on good soil, the difference between simply itchy ears and itchy ears that hear the good news of the Gospel and go to work, fully participating in God's work of restoration and redemption.

Jesus' clear point here is, “whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” I don't want to “hear” with my opinions, or my own theology, or my biases, of which I am unaware and by which I am blinded. I want to simply hear with my ears and let Jesus' truth sink in. That's how to be the good soil that Jesus needs me to be, to then grow and produce the seeds necessary for others to hear.

The last passage is from Matthew 7:24, probably one you heard in Sunday school or grade school:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”

With this passage, after about thirty minutes of the most challenging words ever spoken by a human being, Jesus concludes his Sermon. After he tells us to be “poor in spirit,” to “turn the other cheek,” to “not worry about your life, but seek first the Kingdom,” to “love your enemies,” and to “not judge” but “take the speck out of your own eye,” Jesus gives us this promise.

The “Everyone” means that what he's about to say is for each of us. “Who hears these words and puts them into practice” means that today, tomorrow, and every next day is our chance to put “these words” of Jesus into practice. It is not as if you haven't been doing that for the past four years—

you have staffed 55th Ave. on a Friday night, built a bridge in Liberia, worked at the Special Olympics track meet, led the campus in praise and worship, and served your fellow students by getting up early to clear snow off sidewalks on below-zero winter mornings. Or, maybe you put these words into practice when you asked great questions in class or after class, the kinds of questions that Jeremy Vreekan challenged you to continue thinking about in his reflection published in the last *Dordt Diamond*. The bottom line is that your time at Dordt College has not simply been preparation for life: it has been life itself. You have been building your house on the rock. And you certainly know by now that when you follow Jesus, life gets much more difficult and stormy—not easier and calmer. Our heads and hearts and bodies are subjected to wind, rain and lightning—some of it because we are doing Jesus’ hard things. But our feet are on “rock.” That’s the deal.

And this is where we have to be so careful with what we hear, what makes our ears itch. John Calvin, in Book I of the *Institutes*, provided us with a powerful analogy that involves one of our other senses:

For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, thought they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness and shows us the true God clearly.

Scripture provides these lenses, by which we can see the world around us more clearly. Scripture also provides the hearing aid we need to be able to filter all the different voices attempting to make our ears itch. And there are certainly lots of these voices. Calvin also offers this wisdom in his commentary on this verse: “As it is often difficult to distinguish the true professors of the Gospel from the false,

Scripture provides these lenses, by which we can see the world around us more clearly. Scripture also provides the hearing aid we need to be able to filter all the different voices attempting to make our ears itch.

Christ shows, by a beautiful comparison, where the main difference lies. He represents two houses, one of which was built without a foundation, while the other was well-founded. Both have the same external appearance.” This statement struck me as I studied it. I realized a misconception I have had for a long time—probably due to that little ditty many of us might have sung early in life: *The wise man built his house upon the rock*. So I pictured the wise man’s house on a mountain, like one in a place like Boulder, Colorado. The foolish man built his house upon the sand. I imagined this house on a cliff in Malibu, the one they show sinking down into the ocean when the mudslides hit. After reflecting on this verse, I see these two houses side by side, in the same housing development and community, dealing with

the same storms. Both have the same external appearance, but when the wind and storms blow and the floods dash against them, the latter will immediately fall, while the former will be sustained by its strength against every assault. Christ compares a vain and empty profession of the Gospel to a beautiful, but not solid, building, which, however elevated, is exposed every moment to downfall because it wants a foundation. Accordingly, Paul also instructs us to be thoroughly founded on Christ and to have deep roots (Colossians 2:7), “that we may not be tossed and driven about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14), that we may not give way at every attack.

The general meaning of the passage, according to Calvin, in his *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, is that “true piety is not fully distinguished from its counterfeit, till it comes to the trial. For the temptations, by which we are tried, are like billows and storms, which easily overwhelm unsteady minds whose lightness is not perceived during the season of prosperity.”

When Jesus says, “Therefore everyone who hears these words,” the relative “these” denotes not one class of sayings but the whole body of doctrine. He means that the Gospel, if it be not deeply rooted

in the mind, is like a wall that has been raised to a great height but does not rest on any foundation. Instead, “That faith (he says) is true, which has its roots deep in the heart, and rests on an earnest and steady affection as its foundation, that it may not give way to temptations.” For such is the vanity of the human mind, that all build upon the sand who do not dig so deep as to deny themselves.

It is time. You have been equipped with spectacles and hearing aids. You have heard, not simply listened to, God’s Word and have put it into practice. You have solidified your house on it. Please allow me to conclude with this wish from 2 Timothy 1:6-10. Hear these words—this is from Paul to Timothy, from professor to student, from father or mother to son or daughter, from one fellow kingdom worker to another, and most importantly hear these words from your heavenly Father to you, His adopted child:

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the

gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

We who have ears, let us hear.

Thank you for this privilege. May God give you itchy ears that hear the truth of His Word. May His Word be the solid rock, the unshakable foundation upon which you leave this place, confident in who you are but most importantly in Whose you are.