

The University of the South Convocation Address
Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson
Friday, October 2023

In honor of this Indigenous Peoples' Weekend, let us begin by remembering and honoring the Indigenous people of the world, especially the Cherokee Nation, one of a number of tribes who called the land we sit on today home. May we learn from our past sins and be instruments of justice and peace for all of God's children.

Good afternoon and thank you to the chancellor and vice-chancellor, to the trustees and regents for this great honor, and to the faculty and students who worked so hard to make it happen. Greetings to parents and families present today, and congratulations to my fellow degree recipients and to those receiving their gowns. To you students, let me say that you are the reason I'm here. This address is for you, but with your permission, we'll let everyone else listen in.

What an honor and delight to be here and to receive this acknowledgment of my life and ministry. Whatever contributions I've made to the church and to the world, they were made possible in large part by my time here at Sewanee in the last half of the 1960s. But as in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, for me, Sewanee was the best of times and the worst of times. Two years before my arrival here, President Kennedy had been assassinated. While I was here, Dr. King would also be assassinated, and two months later, Robert Kennedy would be gunned down. Movie theaters were showing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and 2001 seemed impossibly in the future.

The Vietnam War was cranking up, and America was taking undue advantage of its young men of color and poor men of every color by sending them to the front lines, while we were protected by a college deferment. Until in my senior year here, that unearned racial and class privilege ended with a national lottery for who would be drafted.

This chapel is where I was confirmed and became an Episcopalian. On many a night, I would walk through the dense Sewanee fog, you know that fog, out of which this chapel would magically appear, and I would get on my knees at that altar rail. God knew I had a secret, and God and I would fight about whether or not someone like me was worthy of seminary and ordination. My answer was no, and God's answer was yes, and God won.

I was here at Sewanee because of the generosity of the Georgia Wilkins Scholarship. How else would a son of tobacco sharecroppers from Kentucky, who had grown up without running water or indoor plumbing, find himself at an institution founded for the benefit of the sons of slave-owning plantation owners? Little did anyone know that this country boy was also a gay boy, fiercely closeted and scared to

death, afraid to come to terms with what I feared was my own sexual truth, and fearful that discovery would have dire consequences.

You see, when I was here, young men discovered to be gay were literally made to simply vanish in the middle of the night without a word of explanation to anyone, but everyone knew. Four years on this mountain, and along with all that was good, every minute of every day, I was terrified. So I confided in no one. I participated in the testosterone-fueled party weekends, dated women, and prayed I could look and act and, hopefully, be straight.

I will be forever grateful to Lambda Chi Alpha for taking me in, giving me a community of brothers who loved me, and providing me a home in which I could flourish, all the while keeping my secret to myself. I would've died without it. That community of young men seemed to have kindness in its DNA, and all kinds of misfits like me found a home there. Sewanee, I suspect, would've been a kinder place with female students, but that wouldn't finally happen until the fall after I graduated.

Three weeks after my graduation, the Stonewall riots happened in New York, launching the modern gay rights movement. Had I even known about it at the time, I'm sure the Gene Robinson of 1969 would have pleaded with God that it had nothing whatsoever to do with me. I was ordained a priest 50 years ago and then 20 years ago in 2003, I was elected by my diocese to be their bishop, and the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion pretty much exploded. I got my first death threat before I even got home the afternoon of my election. Death threats would continue almost daily for two-and-a-half years. And while mostly wishing just to be a good bishop, I was labeled by the media and became in the world's eyes, the gay bishop. I decided that if the world was going to reduce me to being the gay bishop, that I'd be the best damned gay bishop ever. And that I would use every opportunity afforded to me by that designation to advocate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people everywhere.

And to use what I had learned from my experience as an outcast to fight discrimination and advocate for justice for people of color, women, the poor, for disabled people, immigrants and asylum seekers, and of course, my beloved LGBTQ siblings. All these years later, and given the very few minutes allotted for this address, let me cut to the chase and challenge you and maybe even exhort you with seven things I have learned in the 54 years since I graduated.

- Number one, there is nothing you can ever do to cause God to stop loving you, nothing. And with the assurance and confidence which comes from that, there is almost nothing you can't do.
- Number two, in my tradition, Jesus is famous for walking on water, but then you might expect that of Jesus. The real surprise in that story is that Peter also walked on water until he lost the faith to do so. Jesus taught that we are all meant to walk on water, all of us. But here's the hitch, you can't walk on water unless you step out of the boat you're comfortable in. Uncertainty, risk, and sometimes danger are required in making any real contributions to humankind. So if you plan to make a difference in the world, buckle up.

- Number three, your generation's work and mine too is to secure democracy in this country. People of faith and people of goodwill believe in democracy because more than any other form of government, it seeks the most good for the most people. At its finest, democracy is a government of do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But white Christian nationalism is snake oil and it's poisoning this democracy and undermining it at every turn. The question is, are you paying attention and are you going to help?
- Number four, paraphrasing 19th-century abolitionist Theodore Parker, Dr. King famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." But that progression toward justice is neither linear nor inevitable. So I would caution, in the quest for justice, there are no innocent observers. You're either working for justice or, by intent or apathy, you are working against it. It is one or the other. You must choose. Please be benders of the arc.
- Number five, if you want to know God, work with the poor and the dispossessed, the despised and discriminated against, the weak, and those who never benefited from a Sewanee-type education. You can meet God there. When I was here, Sewanee bragged, maybe they still do, that graduates didn't know a lot about any one thing, but a little bit about everything, perhaps hyperbolic, but it means you can hold your own in conversation with absolutely anyone. And if you want to know God, have a conversation with someone who is other to you, an undocumented immigrant, a transgender teenager, a Black man in prison, a mother trying to raise three children alone and poor. The skills you learn at Sewanee aren't just good for cocktail parties. They're also good for justice work.
- Number six, don't confuse God with religion. God never gets it wrong, religion often does. But religion, be it Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist or whatever, can be a great place to hang out with others who want to know God and change the world. I highly recommend it.
- And number seven, lastly, in 2023, it is suddenly and sadly in vogue to belittle people for being woke. Before it was vilified as woke, it was dismissed as merely political correctness. But before that, it was called the gospel. And for those of us who are Episcopalians, accusing someone of being woke is in fact making fun of the respecting the dignity of every human being that we promise at our baptisms. Treat people like the children of God they are, regardless of how they treat you. If that's being woke, then wear the label with pride. In every religion on the planet, it's called loving your neighbor as yourself and caring for the most vulnerable. Don't run from it, embrace it.

That's what I've learned in the 54 years since I graduated, and I just wish that I could live another 54 years to see what you would have learned in your 54 years since graduation. But in this moment, I am so humbled and so grateful for this honorary degree and for Sewanee's kindness in offering it. It is a joyful and healing moment for me to feel once again like I've come home. Mere words cannot adequately express my gratitude.

So may God bless you as you learn from all that Sewanee has to give. More than a half century ago, I'm not sure anyone could have predicted where Gene Robinson or Sewanee would be in 2023. But by God's grace, it appears we've both come a very long way. Thank you.

