

LEAVE-TAKING REMARKS

John M. McCardell, Jr.

All Saints' Chapel

June 16, 2020

Please pray with me:

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.
Under the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure
Sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.
A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone.
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.
Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all our years away.
They fly, forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.
O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Be thou our Guide while life shall last and our eternal home. Amen.

We gather today to mark another milestone in the lives of several individuals and also in the life of this University. We are reminded in the words of the old hymn that in the shadow of God's throne all saints have dwelt secure, even from before the earth received her frame. We are reminded, too, that time passes, bears all our years away. And so we pray—for help and for hope—as we cast our eyes first backward and then forward, remembering, as the psalmist teaches us, to number our days, to give thanks for them and for all the people and all the experiences that enriched them, and then to resume our journeys, each of us, to our eternal home.

We give thanks today for the good work of Chaplain Tom Macfie, for whom this morning a citation adopted by the Board of Trustees was read and to whom a gift of affection and gratitude was presented. Tom completes fourteen years of service to this community in this place today. From him we have learned many things—that righteousness properly understood means wholeness; that when we pray, we should name those things and those people we pray

for; that in Christ there is no East or West; that all of us are loved by the God who made us. Thank you, Tom, for your selfless and devoted service to this University and this community.

We welcome as our next Chaplain the Rev. Peter Gray, from the Diocese of Mississippi, who begins his work officially tomorrow. And we welcome the Gray family, whose presence among us in time to come will enliven our work together and brighten our days. Welcome, Peter.

We give thanks today for the service of Dean Neil Alexander, for the past eight fruitful years Dean of the School of Theology and before that Chancellor of the University and before that—and now also after that—a distinguished scholar and teacher and member of the School of Theology faculty. A servant leader, Neil practices what he preaches—eloquently—and preaches what he practices and, as a resolution read in his honor this morning appropriately noted, is mindful that all good gifts around us—perhaps most especially baseball, pimento cheese, and fried apple pies—are sent from heaven above. A music space in the renovated School of Theology will bear Dean Alexander’s name. Thank you, Neil, for the many contributions you have made to the Church and to the University, both of which you have served faithfully.

We welcome as our new Dean of the School of Theology an old friend, the Rev. Canon Dr. Jim Turrell. Jim has served as academic dean at the School for many years. Seminarians refer to his final examination as “climbing Mt. Liturgics.” He has earned the respect of our faculty, our staff, and our students, as well as the wider Church. He begins his work July 1. Welcome, Jim.

And tomorrow, the 17th Vice-Chancellor of the University, Ambassador Reuben Brigety, assumes office. This community welcomes you warmly and is eagerly ready to support you in your work. I am reminded of that passage in the Book of Esther, Reuben, which I think speaks to the hope everyone harbors for your success, even or perhaps especially in these difficult days: “And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” Welcome, Reuben.

And now, finally, one last leave-taking, one last farewell. What, really, is left for me to say? I’ve had ten years to say it, and you to hear it. If I were to say anything this afternoon that I have not said many times before, you would be entitled to wonder what took me so long. And haven’t we really, especially recently, had rather too many words uttered, too many names

called, too much derision tweeted, too many social media postings to closed groups, too much cowardly anonymity? —words that may make the speaker or the writer or the tweeter feel better, words that might motivate listeners or readers, but still—words; words. Do you remember Eliza Doolittle’s song in *My Fair Lady*? “Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme! Don’t waste my time! Show me!”

Don’t waste my time, Show me!

OK. I could, but I won’t, because it would seem entirely self-serving, enumerate the many ways in which this University has advanced over the last decade. Instead, I would rather first extend my deepest thanks—to the Boards of Regents and Trustees for your leadership and support; to my administrative colleagues who have done so much of the actual work and deserve the lion’s share of the credit and who in these last three months have sacrificed much of their own time to help us navigate the first months of the COVID crisis and then prepare us for a fall reopening; to our faculty for their exemplification of what it means to be a teacher/scholar and in particular for their immediate and heroic embrace of new forms of pedagogy that made this past semester a testimony to lifelong learning; to our staff, so often overlooked or taken for granted, who support us all the day, and all the night, long, who are themselves educators and for whom anyone who spends any time at all here forms a deep and genuine respect; to our students, in the College and in the School of Theology and also in our many other programs, some bearing degrees, some not, grasping the intangibles as well as the tangibles of full-time residential study and understanding that a Sewanee degree is not for a season but a lifetime; to our friends and neighbors in the Sewanee community and across the Plateau, partners for certain and friends for all time; to our parents, for your faith in us; and to our alumni, for your never-failing support in so many ways, even when it comes in the form of tough love. And finally ... to my strength and support, to the engine, to the one who has done so much that no one will ever know to strengthen this University and its 16th Vice-Chancellor ... to Bonnie.

In preparing these remarks, I returned to the words—more words—I employed at the time of my installation as Vice-Chancellor. Here’s what I said then, in describing the Sewanee I presumed to lead: “a campus, on a mountain, where those fleeing an increasingly soul-less world find a place that has not lost or compromised its own soul; a place shaped by the knowledge and experience, first-hand, of what it means to live in a fallen world; a place that reminds us that

history did not begin on the day we were born or the day we arrived; where as few utterances as possible begin with “I” or end with “me;” a place where incompleteness becomes less incomplete, where the unmade becomes made; and a place from which young men and women, refined by study, depart, in the words of Fosdick’s great hymn, “armored with all Christ-like graces in the fight to set men free.”

I hope, and believe, that all these are things for which this University still strives. We still have a long way to go. The historians will in time render a judgment. When they do, I hope they will look at the size and quality of the applicant pool in 2010 and then in 2020; at the diversity of our student body, faculty, and staff in 2010 and then in 2020; at the quality of our spaces; at the growth of our resources; at the quality of human relationships, on campus and beyond; at our commitment to sustainability; at the achievements of our graduates; and most of all at the strength of our institutional character, informed by a commitment to honorable behavior in all we do, and determinedly committed to informed citizenship and civic engagement. With these things I am content to tell the story of the last ten years and of the contributions every single group I have named has made to that record.

But of course there is always more to do. Always. I asked two fundamental questions ten years ago: What does it mean to be the University of the South in the 21st century? And what South are we the University of? Those questions continue to challenge us and will for a very long time. We have come some considerable distance in answering them, but there is still much too much unfinished business, in the South where we live and in this country of which we are citizens. There are painful reminders of how far we still have to go, and that pain is acute among some members of our own Sewanee community. We share the burden of that pain, and we must recommit ourselves to the hard work of reconciliation. That work must and shall go on. The 400-year taint of racial prejudice must be eradicated. Like all of you, I want to help that process along. It has been, and will be, a frustrating process. Getting there will be the result of many, many small victories until, finally, we overcome. We cannot change the past. But we can act in the present, and we can shape the future. So let’s look forward, not backward. Let’s not try to alter or erase the unalterable narrative of the past. Let’s instead write a new narrative, our own narrative.

And so today I offer a modest effort to do just that. Today I am establishing a fund of \$50,000 for a particular purpose. These dollars have been contributed to the University to be used at my discretion. Here's what I'd like them used for:

How often, when you attend a lecture or a presentation or a meal or a game—or a march—do you see, ourselves included, people standing, speaking, listening, eating, marching, with people not like themselves? Not very often. Not often enough. It is entirely natural to stay close to one's own, whatever one's own may mean, to stay in one's comfort zone. Look around you—you'll see this everywhere, all the time. I do not exempt myself from this critique.

We can try, nobly, to change the world. But remember the old song—“Let there be peace on earth”—and the next line, the one that matters, “and let it begin with me.” Not with somebody else. With me. This is called personal responsibility. And each of us has it. We can make demands of others. We can tell other people what to do. “Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! Show me!” Or we can actually do something ourselves, each of us, all of us. The Salvation Army has it right: one soul at a time. Yours first, mine first, and then our neighbor, one soul at a time. Loud voices and more words are not required. All that's required is an outstretched hand. Inconspicuous, but genuine, human solidarity.

So that's what the fund is for. I am placing its administration under the oversight of our new University Chaplain, who will have total discretion over how the money is spent and with whom he works to spend it—well, almost total. There is one condition, one only: that whatever program is planned, whoever comes must, *must* come with someone who is not like them. No need to specify what that means—you all know. Come with someone who is not like you. Make this demand of yourselves. Let it begin with me, with you, with us. This will be hard. Peace is hard.

“Read me no rhyme. Don't waste my time. Show me.” Please. Please.

At the end of that same installation address, I took the audience on an imaginary tour of the campus of 2020. We won't do that here. But as the tour ended, so the visitor noted, “We place a cell call—the service is excellent—to the old VC. We say to him that we now know what William A. Percy meant—‘it is so beautiful that people who have once been there always, one

way or another, find their way back.’ Tell us, how did it happen? In a voice softened by age the old VC said these words: ‘I had a lot of help. We took a few risks. But we knew we were building on the firmest of foundations. And we were guided by the poet Wordsworth’s admonition: “what we have loved, others will love, and we may teach them how.” We knew the words but we also knew the music. And knowing that, how could we keep from singing? Not all who came here found what they thought they lacked—for some it came quickly, for others it took longer, and still others remain on the journey. Above all, we took upon ourselves, in our time, a charge most clearly stated by Sewanee’s own poet Richard Tillinghast. We took upon ourselves “a sense of obligation that made this place liberal, in the sense of generous, willing to give, ready to help others. There would never be a place here for meanness. . . . Yes, we were challenged by the challenges of our day, but good sense, kindness, civility prevailed.”

“As the shadows lengthened, and the evening came, and the busy world was hushed, and the fever of life was over, and his work was done, the old VC concluded wistfully, ‘It was a great time to be at the University of the South.’”

And so, as we conclude, please pray with me:

Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.

Let the fierce fires which burn and try our inmost spirits purify

Consume the ill, purge out the shame, O God be with us in the flame.

A new-born people may we rise: more pure, more true, more nobly wise.