

**Jay Parini**  
**Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2020**  
**The University of the South**  
**May 14, 2022**

Thanks to you, Vice Chancellor --

Let me be one of the first to say congratulations this morning to my fellow honorands and, of course, to the graduating students, as well as their families and friends, all of whom have waited a long time for this day! Is it really two years since, rather abruptly and without much pre-warning, everything in the world seemed to veer off-track? I'll get back to that rather astonishing thought in a moment.

But let me first say I was delighted to be asked to say a few words at this baccalaureate service by your former president and Vice Chancellor, Dr. John McCardell. He is a very dear and valued friend. And this friendship goes back over forty years, to the very early 1980s, when he and I were both untenured assistant professors at Middlebury College in Vermont: a part of the world that rivals, I would suggest, the Cumberland Plateau for beauty. John and I played tennis most Sunday afternoons, and we had some fun with practical jokes in Munroe Hall, where we each had offices then.

I've long admired the work John has done as an historian of the American South – and recommend that you get a copy of *THE IDEA OF A SOUTHERN NATION*. With a lovely wry ironic tone, John writes: "The Constitution embraced the belief for which the colonists had fought; it represented a definition of the new American nation. Yet no sooner had Americans expressed their commitment to the principles set for in their new charter than they began to detect difference among themselves." And, of course, the differences only widened in the decades before the Civil War, and – well – we haven't seen much in the way of convergence in our thinking about what it means to be an American in recent times. *Plus ca change*.

I've also admired John's inspired leadership in the academic world, as president of Middlebury and as Vice Chancellor and president here. I can tell you: we've missed John sorely at Middlebury, and I know that Sewanee will miss him and his wife Bonnie, too. I'm sure they'll be missed here as well. But you can rest assured they will not abandon Sewanee.

From what I can tell, Sewanee gets into your bloodstream. It's one of those places that can change hearts and minds – and I expect every graduate this weekend knows exactly what I'm talking about.

A great deal of love and work by many people has gone into the making of this special weekend. Having three sons and four grandchildren, my wife and I know what a huge effort is involved in getting someone to this pivotal moment. It takes a village to raise a child, as the old

African proverb says. None of us gets happily through life without a lot of help from the community we live in.

It's at times like this, in ceremonies that mark a distinct transition from one phase of life to another, that we focus on the meaning of these changes, thinking about where we've been, where we're going. And it's not easy to keep so much in mind. Even to understand deeply what these transitions mean.

I'm now in my 48<sup>th</sup> year of full-time college teaching – so (if you'll indulge me) I will try to say a few things based on this experience. Having attended countless occasions like this one – you don't really want to know how many graduations and baccalaureates I've sat through -- I will confess that I've rarely – **rarely** -- been impressed by the advice parceled out by speakers or much moved by their rhetoric. We all know that the future lies ahead of us and not behind, and that we live in difficult times.

But how can we **not** feel that these last couple of years have been, well ... kind of “special” in their difficulty? Let's leave to one side the noisily unresolved culture wars, the clash of red and blue states of mind, and the ongoing disaster in Ukraine. I don't have all year to talk, and even if I did, I doubt I could say much of value.

I suspect that many of you – the younger ones among us -- will say to your grandchildren in fifty years, “Yes, indeed, your grandpappy or grandmamma was a student during the great pandemic!” I should tell you here that my own grandfather often recalled that he'd been a young man during the so-called Spanish flu, which he claimed was responsible for the loss of his hair. (I will not, I repeat **will not**, blame my own rather shiny dome on Covid.)

Let's just say that not a **single one** of us here today in All Saints Chapel will forget that moment when it became obvious that a full-blown pandemic had swept the globe. It felt like a bad sci-fi novel, or some dystopian film by Stephen King, maybe some lost episode of Rod Serling's TWILIGHT ZONE. But this wasn't fiction. To date, over five million deaths directly related to Covid have been recorded by the World Health Organization, and that's very probably a lowball number. The human consequences of this pandemic are beyond calculation, and I will NOT try to loft platitudes into the air about what any of this means. We simply don't know yet where we've been, or where the trauma of the past two years could lead. Let me side with Plato, the greatest philosopher of the West, who quotes Socrates as saying: “The only thing I know here is that I know nothing.”

The only certainty is that not a single **one** of us has been spared a good deal of anxiety related to this pandemic. There have been huge leaps in alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and worse, all starting in the spring of 2020. We're facing a global crisis in mental health.

And yet life goes on. Somehow, the world keeps spinning on its axis. Spring is fully in bloom in Tennessee, as we can see by the wildflowers everywhere around us, and many in this chapel

have a lot to celebrate. There's a joyous line in a poem by D. H. Lawrence that I've always loved, and it seems appropriate here. "Look! We have come through!"

So here we are on this glorious day in this beautiful and sacred space. And we've certainly come through...well, through SOMETHING. Once again, we gather in person with friends and family, even with strangers – but together.

Let me go back to the idea of community, thinking again about our common lives. We don't live in a vacuum, alone, but with others. And there's something wonderful about this fact: as noted in the lovely motto of this university: ***Ecce Quam Bonum***. This is the Latin opening in Jerome's 4<sup>th</sup> century translation of the great Hebrew Psalm 133, which is a robust celebration of community: *Behold how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in harmony!*

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Sewanee has, of course, its roots in the Christian tradition, so I will look (as I often do) to Jesus for good advice. In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, a Jewish leader approaches him while he's in full swing in front of a crowd of disciples, and this person – probably determined to cause some trouble for this upstart teacher who was making waves in Galilee -- asks what must have seemed to Jesus like a leading question. Which of the many commandments in the Hebrew bible were the most important? Remember that according to traditional Judaic teaching there were 613 laws or *mitzvot* that you had to observe!

That's, shall we say, a lot of observation.

Like any great teacher, Jesus was a master of simplicity and compression, and he swept aside the massive Hebraic rulebook with a bold gesture, saying there were only two things to keep in mind. Just two. Not 613. **You must love God, and you must love your neighbor as yourself.**

Now that word – God – is a vast catch-all. It can mean the traditional Godhead, a commanding spiritual force, part of the Trinity. Or it can simply mean, as one theologian famously suggested, one's "ultimate concern." In times of personal distress, or maybe when lying on the grass at night looking up at the stars, I think we know intuitively that we're not alone in the universe. But the journey to God, I would argue, passes necessarily through other people, through our neighbors.

Which connects us directly to the second part of the great commandment: **to love our neighbors as ourselves.**

I mentioned this to someone on the phone recently, and he said: Jay, my friend, you obviously haven't met *my* neighbors!

I won't pretend to know exactly what it means to love our neighbors in this deep way. And yet it's a simple enough idea. We must try to LOVE our neighbors, to hold them in mind, treating

them with the same respect we might wish for ourselves. We should be kind to everyone we meet, even when they don't seem, well... as friendly as you might wish.

This is an active, not a passive, pursuit: kindness. It's something you should consciously try to do, every day. I've always liked what Mother Teresa said about this: "Spread kindness wherever you go. Let nobody ever come to you without leaving happier."

When I think about this business of loving our neighbors, memory carries me back to the finest graduation speech I ever heard, bar none. The speaker that day in May of 2001 at Middlebury College was Mr. Rogers – Fred Rogers, the creator and host of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," a wonderful old TV program for children. Those in this chapel of a certain age will remember the show.

Mr. Rogers came to Middlebury when John McCardell was our president, and Dr. McCardell put it well that day. "Mr. Rogers has never wavered in showing love and compassion to our children," he said.

Mr. Rogers spoke in a gentle, modest, and familiar voice to the assembled graduates and their families, ending his talk by saying: "I think I may have said enough already. Why don't we just hold hands and sing a song that I suspect most of you will know?" Of course, Fred Rogers and his show are long gone, and most of you under thirty probably don't know the words or the tune.

But the song ends like this – and forgive my attempt to sing:

*Let's make the most of this beautiful day,  
Since we're together, we might as well say:  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?*

Why not really try to do this? We can, if we choose, make the world our neighborhood, taking everyone – whatever their political orientation or racial or religious or sexual orientation – seriously, treating them with real compassion. I know this is how I'd like to be treated. And I'm sure you're all the same.

On that note, I'll say again: congratulations and good luck to all of you, graduates and families and fellow lovers of Sewanee. And God bless on this beautiful day among friends and, yes, neighbors.