

Remarks for the University of the South Winter Convocation
January 17, 2020
The Rt. Rev. Phoebe Roaf, bishop of the Diocese of Western Tennessee

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We gather this evening to acknowledge women and men who have made substantial contributions in their respective fields, and the students being inducted into the Order of the Gown.

I would like to congratulate this year's honorary degree recipients and members of the Order of the Gown.

The Order of the Gown involves more than academic accomplishment. These students are also charged with promoting the spirit, traditions and ideals of Sewanee.

What are the ideals of the University of the South, and what does it mean to uphold them today? Sewanee's founders, who were lay and clergy delegates from Episcopal dioceses throughout the South, had a very specific purpose in mind.

Their objective was to prepare Southern white men to be profitable slaveholders.

In fact, the University of the South is the only institution of higher education in the country expressly designed to promulgate a plantation slave economy and society.

The founders envisioned successive generations of young men serving as masters of their communities as well as their wives, their children and their enslaved workers.

The Sewanee man was expected to uphold the tenants of racial supremacy and Christian evangelism in what I would characterize as an unholy alliance.

The premise of racial supremacy is predicated upon a pyramid where your worth is determined by race and gender.

White men are at the top, white women are in the middle, and people of color are at the bottom.

As a woman of African descent, I occupy the lowest rung in this hierarchy.

This year we celebrate 50 years of female students at Sewanee, and a little more than 50 years of

black students at Sewanee.

For the first hundred years of Sewanee's existence, neither women nor African Americans were welcome as students.

I'd like to spend a few minutes unpacking the history of African American education in the United States.

Because brothers and sisters, it's truly been a struggle.

During the slavery era, the only form of permissible education for black people was religious instruction, where the passages of scripture commending enslaved persons to be obedient to their masters were emphasized instead of Jesus' message that all people are worthy of dignity and respect.

Many Southern states criminalized the education of black people because literacy was viewed as a threat to the institution of slavery.

South Carolina was the first state to pass laws prohibiting the education of enslaved persons in 1740. Between 1740 and 1834, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and Virginia also passed anti-literacy laws.

These laws were an extension of the slave codes which dehumanized and controlled the enslaved population. They also reinforced the false narrative that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites.

Black persons' inability to read and write was blamed on their inherent inferiority instead of the fact that they were denied an opportunity to receive formal education. Whites received fines or jail time for teaching blacks, whereas blacks who disobeyed these laws were punished with whipping and other forms of physical abuse.

In spite of these efforts, the black community devised several strategies to transmit information. We understood the critical importance of obtaining an education and would not be deterred even when facing harsh consequences.

Enslaved persons working as house servants secretly taught themselves to read and write by observing the lessons given to the master's children. The house servants then instructed the field workers. Most of these efforts took place in secret prior to the Civil War.

Once the Civil War ended, black teachers who had surreptitiously conducted classes began openly teaching black students. In March 1865, Congress created the Freedman's Bureau which helped educate thousands of black students.

In addition to traditional forms of education, blacks used storytelling, hymn lyrics, crafts such as quilting, and knowledge of the natural world to convey cultural traditions and other valuable information.

My own history reflects the emphasis black families placed on education.

My great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Ballard Trent Edwards, was among the first men of color to serve in the Virginia General Assembly during Reconstruction. Ballard served one term in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1869 to 1871. His family members were part of the free and educated African American community in Chesterfield County. Ballard's primary occupation was brick mason but after the Civil War, he opened a school in Richmond to educate black students.

One thing that all of the people I have discussed this evening have in common is their faith in God. We have gathered this evening in All Saints Chapel during the season of Epiphany, where God is manifested to the world through the birth of Jesus Christ.

The wise men from the East are among the central characters of Epiphany. When they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and to reveal Jesus' identity. Their actions indicate that Jesus came on behalf of all peoples, races and nations, and that God's work would not be restricted to a few select groups.

Yet throughout history, human beings have been tribal in nature, emphasizing what is different among groups instead of what we have in common. Holding up the stories of some but not all members of our community.

The reality, brothers and sisters, is that black folk and women have always been part of Sewanee's story. Yet the contributions of women and people of color to Sewanee's success are rarely acknowledged.

Instead, we have focused on the founding bishops such as Leonidas Polk, a former Confederate general, dealer in enslaved persons, and beloved child of God. Bishop Polk has a complex legacy.

And he is unconditionally loved by God just as all of us are.

God may not be pleased with our decisions but there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God, thanks be to God.

The challenging aspects of our history have been difficult to acknowledge. Because all of this makes us uncomfortable, we've just avoided the conversation. We have been unable to reckon with the past in ways which will lead to repentance, reconciliation and restitution.

If church folk can't speak the truth to one another in love, then what hope is there for our broken world?

I want to commend the work of the Roberson Project on Slavery, Race and Reconciliation and its efforts to be honest about the history of this holy mountain. I would also like to thank the Vice-Chancellor for the invitation to speak this evening, and for his efforts to make Sewanee a community where all people are truly welcomed. You are engaged in the difficult work of creating a safe space where everyone's story can be fully acknowledged.

The reality, brothers and sisters, is that all of this is complicated.

Our founders sacrificed to establish the University of the South, even as they behaved in ways we may not agree with today. I study history not to castigate or condemn the actions of our ancestors but to be reminded that we all have blind spots. To be honest with myself about the ways in which I fail to respect all members of God's family as well as this planet.

Who have I assigned to the role of second class citizen?

How can I work to eradicate the discrimination which exists in society?

Can I acknowledge my own blind spots about other people and about myself?

Can I discipline myself to spend more time listening to others instead of rushing to argue my point of view?

All of this internal work is necessary before I can truly engage in conversation with others.

So what gives me hope?

I am hopeful because of all of these the young women and men gathered this evening who want to make a difference in our world. I want to encourage you to continue reaching across

boundaries, to be bridge builders in your local communities.

To utilize the gifts God has given you to eradicate the structural barriers which continue to lock some members of our community in cycles of poverty and despair.

When people gather at Sewanee 50 years from now, the story they will tell about the University of the South doesn't have to focus on the founding bishops. That story can involve all of the steps your generation will take to help usher in a new era for the South, where all people are honored.

God has commanded that we love our neighbors as ourselves. As far as I'm concerned, that's a non-negotiable part of the job description for Christians. And I believe love is a verb, not a noun. In fact, love has very little to do with our feelings on any particular day.

What love entails is acting on behalf of others to ensure their wellbeing. Living lives that are sacrificial and self-giving in nature. None of this is easy.

However, God has sent the Holy Spirit to be our advocate and guide, to help us discern how to navigate the challenging times we find ourselves in. May God who has blessed us with wonderfully creative minds empower us to be compassionate and humble and tenacious as we strive to be reconciled to our sisters and brothers.

Amen.