

**Trinity College
Hartford, Connecticut**

**A Service of Remembrance
The Class of 1967 - Fiftieth Reunion
Friday, June 9, 2017
Half past ten o'clock in the morning**

And Jesus said to them, 'Blessed are those who know their need of God. Blessed are those who mourn: for they shall be comforted.'
(The Gospel according to Matthew 5: 1-10)

Take these words, such as they are, O God, and make them be and do what you would have them be and do. Let those who hear them find in them a word of consolation, or a word of conviction, or a word of challenge.

Let them be your words, O God. And let the congregation say, *Amen*.

Professor George Brinton Cooper always challenged me and I should think all of us to reduce a paper, however long or brief, to one or two sentences.

So, too, I suspect, did Ned's/Cal's/Stewart's/ John's and my divinity school homiletics professors...

My two sentences are borrowed from that English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth:

Life is divided into three terms--that which was, that which is, that which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present; and let us learn from the present, to live better in the future.

A fiftieth reunion. Five decades, 18,268 days ago (if we believe Wiki), we were graduated from Trinity College: Commencement Day, Sunday, June 4; warm/pleasant/a hint of a breeze; the pipe of peace; the lost-again lemon squeezer; Senator Percy's address--"In today's society," he proclaimed, "we are losing individuality." Looking at us today, I wonder about that insight.

Those fifty years that have gone by but are not gone. So much has happened to us all. The rough and tumble of experience with all of its ups and downs, its multi dimensionality, its polyphony. The mysteries of experience--its hay-bales of exhilarating surprises, its bundled, exultant joys, its dangling, loose ends..

The cataclysmic events - death, divorce, trauma. The seismic shifts of falling in love, new vocational calls. The seemingly inconsequential events that shape us--the sarcastic joke that makes us wince, the bid for friendship that remains unanswered.

The mysteries of experience. So much has happened to us.

And so much has happened within us and through us. Fifty years.

This weekend--a time of recollection, of reminiscence. A time for remembering both memorable moments and un-memorable moments; mind-boggling serendipities and dreams, dashed on uncharted rocks.

A time for revisiting special nooks and crannies of places, buildings, events, people from long ago.

Remembering. Revisiting.

In the few moments we have in this place, in this chapel, in our memorial service, we remember now--“finished” lives and our “unfinished” love for those friends--classmates / roommates / team mates, professors / coaches, rivals/competitors, authors/poets/composers, parents/siblings, spouses/ partners, children--people who have seen us for no more nor less than who and what we are; people who have touched us deeply, inspired us.

We mourn them. We honor their loss. We re-member them now, in our stillness. We shall remember them always. They are with us in a way--for some of us, it's a certain/sure way. We see their faces--They hang like portraits in the galleries of our minds. We hear their voices, their words--a phrase; a paragraph, a chapter in a book; a lecture, a verse of poesy, a letter, a precious child's unspoken tear of disappointment, disillusion, despair, shed on our semantics or our behavior--encouraging, emboldening, rebuking us; prodding, jollying, worrying, cajoling; opening a window, bludgeoning us, toward maturity--

To whom much is given, much will be required, my mother's voice says.

Is this who you want to be? Is this your best self, the you of whom you are proud? Is this the best version of you?

Live each day. Don't merely exist. Be curious, my father's voice says. Live in the need of the day.

Tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

Prize tolerance---but challenge what is wrong and change it--whatever the cost to your self.

Turn to others when you need help. Very little of consequence is ever accomplished alone. Much is accomplished by joint effort.

Turn to others. Listen to them. Don't be afraid.

Honor the dignity of difference--honor differences--but tear down those false walls that divide "us" and "them": those boundary lines are imaginary. There is only "us."

Don't make excuses. Learn from your mistakes--the tragic blunders, the foolish missteps. Don't be shocked by them. Face them. Accept them. Digest them--mistakes are a baseline human fact. Admit them.

And apologize. Apologize sincerely. Apologize authentically. Learn from the mistakes--and move on.

Forgive yourself. Forgive others, as you wish to be forgiven. Don't stand in your own way!

Love your enemies. Pray for them. Soon they will cease to be foes.

Love the Earth and its abundance.

Don't lie. Don't steal. Eat your carrots! Eat your spinach! Do your homework! Look both ways as you cross a street! Don't run with scissors in your hand!

Get to work on time. Be early on Mondays. Pay your taxes. Share what you have. Extend a hand to those who are falling.

We hear the words of those who have known us, of those who have touched us deeply.

We notice their gestures--awakening in us guiding principles, virtues--virtues like humility, honor, respect, duty, loyalty, compassion, generosity; virtues which we observe and absorb and transform into personal disciplines which become ingrained habits.

We hear the voices of those companions, breaking into our internal dialogue of judgment, causing us to wander from the tyranny of our own hungry egos.

We listen attentively to those dear people as they help us live the capacities that are planted in us. We speak to those beloved souls in our hearts, in the depths of our selves, in our daily choices, in our daily deeds.

For me, perhaps for you, many of those mentors are with us in a less certain, more subtle, way.

No one ever passes through this life and then just disappears. As we go through life, we leave marks of who we are. We impress the lives of others for good or for ill. They carry something of who we are. And we, we carry them. Your life and my life, as another preacher says, flow into each other as wave flows into wave.

We become part of others--and they, of us--part of each other, I say, for ever. Their lives, ours, all, lives of infinite value, lives of strength, lives of weakness, lives of eternal significance. All, encircled in, enlivened, ennobled by the God who refuses to be God without us.

We are bound--bound to God, bound to each other, bound to God's precious planet--in love.

Death and Life are not enemies--Life and Death are one in the purposes of love.

Three words to offer this morning.

Not to focus on what was or on what might have been had not distance--death or geography or job change or circumstance or the distance imposed by real or imagined slight; or an inconvenient correction spoken by someone that pierced convincingly our everyday crust and punctured our preconception, that wild notion, about our place at the center of the universe. We have likely always resented that telling correction and that speaker--message heeded, perhaps, messenger, dismissed...

Today, not to focus on resentments, the sad dyings that separated us from those people. And no well-intentioned, pious platitudes this morning. No humorous anecdotes. No do-overs to "fix" those nasties of life we know as misery-making truths.

Or those disabling "regrets"--words I said, words I did NOT say; actions I took, and, worse, actions I didn't take--Gee, I wish I had. Gee, I wish that you had not. Regret--the eternal question that haunts us for ever, the question that defies the answer--What if? If only. I wonder what would have. We shall never know.

Platitudes. Anecdotes. Resentments. Regrets--all are pointless; pointless, since all speak of the past, of the traveled trail--when what we are (more) about in this moment is the future, the stretch ahead--leaning forward, not backward.

As sentient human beings, we consider TIME to be a property of the mind, an experience of perception: (So it is that) Time is a slippery thing. It drags, it flits by. It ticks away, it flies, and it collapses. It is more often lost than it is found. Time runs by. Days pass quickly, nights are seldom long. What seemed like months in 1967 now feels like minutes. Time runs by, unceasingly. Time runs out.

We know TIME as a passing of unrepeatable events. In the course of time, everything passes away--happy days and days of foreboding, weeks of slogging through the mud of the ordinary, weeks of striding with purpose and wonder beneath the endless dome of hope.

Everything passes away--people, our selves. All pass away.

As human beings, we also know occasions when we stand outside the passing of events and we glimpse their meaning. A moment of unusual beauty--a graduation, a birth, a wedding, a daughter's Bat Mitzvah, grandchildren playing together on a warm summer evening. A moment of laughter.

Or a moment of pain, of searing loss--we fail a dear friend, a friend fails us, our cherished partner dies.

Both JOY and SADNESS.

In those moments, we catch a glimpse of what our lives are all about and, maybe even what life itself is all about.

In these moments of standing outside the Reunion Weekend of tall tales from those thrilling days or bittersweet nights of yester-year, I invite you to join me in looking at our lives, in looking at life. What IS it all about?

A key that is entrusted to each of us to unlock that door of musing of what IS-it-all-about is called "gratitude," "giving thanks."

Today, the key is gratitude for what those people whom we no longer see--whom we no longer touch--have taught us--and gratitude for what life has taught us--gratitude for the lessons that have put strength in our marrow, vision in our eyes, warmth in our hearts, conviction in our touch, and courage, courage that shuttles us from one moment to a next.

Gratitude for those generous people. Gratitude for those rich moments. And gratitude to God, to God who in those around us seems to lead us day-by-day through the dark shadows and passed the terrifying demons that loom and lurk both without and within--those real monsters under our beds: the ones hidden in our own mind, the ones we see standing before us in our mirrors.

Today, the key to understanding what IS life about? IS gratitude to God who, in those around us, seems to lead us beyond where we are prepared to go; God, in other people, beckoning us to crawl or walk or run on paths we've not seen, on lanes we don't know are there, to those places where, perhaps, we should go, as we figure out who WE want to be.

Three brief words: You have learned them, too, taught on the stage of life, on the unyielding anvil of personal experience.

As that person who sits at the edge of the stage, behind the curtain, with a script in hand to prompt the actors, I have a script. I will try to kindle our memories, refresh our lines--WHAT WE have learned.

A first word: Bereavement/loss brings a depth to life.

When someone whom I love dies, when she/he becomes separated from me, the humdrum routine ends. I am knocked off that grass-less, hardened path that I've worn thin. I feel loss. I am hurt. I am in shock. I'm paralyzed by grief.

Joy, happiness, have departed. I am angry. I grit my teeth and clench my fists to secure myself against the harsh reality.

I steel myself. And I steel myself, secure myself, from moving on. But then, after a while, seemingly in another instant, I begin to realize that I cannot live ONLY on the familiar path. I cannot follow only its scarred, beaten furrows. I cannot bumble along from day to day on auto-pilot. I cannot live ONLY on the surface of life. The surface is broken by bereavement. Like ice on a pond split open by a cascading, crashing boulder--life's surface is broken, and I look into the depths that are beneath the surface.

I open my eyes—death and dark and despair may NOT be the last reality. I discover a new dimension to life--no longer can I be content with the trivialities, the superficialities.

When someone whom I love dies, I begin to see that ALL moments are KEY moments. I begin to pay attention to the world and to all that dwells therein--and, thereby, to myself and all that dwells herein.

When someone whom I love dies, a new perspective causes me to look differently at flora and fauna, to look differently at my family, at my work. When someone whom I love dies, a new perspective causes me to look differently at myself--and, again, I see something NEW.

When we love someone and then that love seems to be broken by distance, by death, we are introduced into the most profound understanding of the mystery of the meaning of human life: what it's all about.

Bereavement/loss brings depth. That's the first word.

There is a second word. More difficult to say, more difficult to hear: We cannot hold on to those whom we love who have died. We cannot hold on to those whom we have loved who have died.

You and I have learned that, the truth of that. We have learned that the hard way. We must let them go. IF we really love them, we must let them go.

If we try to hold onto them because we miss them, we will be consumed with that corrosive person-eater called "self-pity."

Life teaches us that the nature of love is not to hold on to another for one's own self. The nature of love is to set the other person free, free to become the person she/he will become, to become her/his BEST self, to stand on his/her own ground, to become THAT person--NOT our fanciful creation, NOT the expression of my will, NOT my clone.

What WE think, what WE believe, what WE value, may be interesting and, perhaps, informative to someone who loves us, but it is not compelling. No one can grow up, no one can mature, for another. Each of us must walk through life on our own two clay feet. Each of us must work through life on our terms, never on some else's.

Love that binds and coerces and grips and grabs and refuses to let go--love that tries to protect blindly, to rescue, to judge, to manage--love that insists that one other person, that many others, be what WE want or need or imagine them to be--THAT's abuse. THAT's "false love"/ "fake love"--It constricts, it chokes, it suffocates, it embitters, it destroys both the "loved" one and the "lover."

We hold fast by letting go. We find by losing. We become someone new by ceasing to become someone old.

A parent must set a child free, a couple must be free to choose to love each other every day.

And so, too, when separation, when death comes, we let those people go. We let them go, willingly.

The people who come into our lives and stay with us, beside us, nurturing us by challenging us, those people are given to us--parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, classmates, professors, spouses, partners, children, grandchildren, fellow workers, members of a common life, members of a congregation, perhaps an online community--(President Berger-Sweeney)--MyTrin Net / Trin LinkedIn Groups.

We haven't earned those people, acquired, purchased, bought them. We don't own them. We don't "deserve" them, any of them. They are gifts to us.

As PEOPLE are given to US, so WE offer them back, each day, this day, and every day. We entrust those whom we love, we offer them, I say, to God, to God, the Source of Life, to God, the Source of Love. We offer those whom we love, we entrust them, to the relentlessly revealing God who stands with us, wounded as we are; who loves each of us, all of us, dearly, equally.

We offer the people whom we love to whatever sense we have of the meaning of life and death and eternity.

The loving and the letting go. The offering, the giving, in gratitude, in thanksgiving, in trust--

That is the point, that's the second word.

Give those gifts to God. Trust those people to life. Gratefully, give them to love.

A third word: Death makes a difference for living.

WE know that. You and I have lived that--death makes a difference for living.

Most of us can say quietly/confidently, I remember when my mother, I remember when my father, died, and life hasn't been the same since.

And some of us can whisper, since my partner or my wife or my husband or our son or our daughter, died, my life has moved onto another, deeper level.

“A deeper level.”

Bereavements/losses bring gentleness into our lives, less passion to possess things or people or prestige or power; a willingness not to have my own way ALL of the time. Bereavements bring an abiding courage. Bereavements help us find the path and the practices that set us free from living small and frightened and self-centered lives that are overshadowed and undergirded by a fear of death.

Bereavements/losses bring us a grounding in life unseen and eternal, a grounding that cannot be shaken. When someone whom I love dies, I sense that somehow suffering loss brings greater power than wisdom, greater power than even knowledge.

When someone whom I love dies, I realize that life's satisfactions are in a peace and joy that the world can neither give nor take away. When someone whom I love dies, I begin to realize that all life, finally, is grace: The richness of human nature, the boredom and the vexation, the excitement and the gladness, the magic and the fathomless mystery of life, the deep darkness and the flickering starlight, joy-intoxicated discoveries about wondrous holy things and wondrous human things.

The manifold possibility of life becomes transparent to something extraordinary beyond itself.

Life is grace--Life is “God's outgoing love for all of us.” It is gift.

When I wrap my mind and my heart around that truth, when I trust that life is grace, that every minute of every day is gift, I live more fully, more deeply, than I have before.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, my life overflows with more tenderness, with a gentle spirit, a spirit that flows with great generosity and authority through my eyes, through my hands, through my mind, through my words.

My life overflows for the benefit of others. Not only do I dream good, I do it. I do good.

Life flows out of death.

Death makes a difference for living. It can make all the difference in the world.

(William Wordsworth)

Life is divided into three terms--that which was, that which is, that which will be.

Let us learn from the past to profit by the present; and let us learn from the present to live better in the future.

Take these words, such as they are, O God, and make them be and do what you would have them be and do. Let those who have heard them find in them a word of consolation, or a word of conviction, or a word of challenge. Let them be for all of us your words, O God. And let the congregation say, *Amen*.

~The Reverend James H. Purdy

In thanksgiving
for the many faces, voices, words, gestures, sites, sights and sounds
that I have gleaned and gathered through these several decades
and which continue to shape and fill my life