

“God’s Gift to our Graduates”

Acts 1:1-8

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Graduations and gifts go together. This is true whether you are graduating from pre-school, high school, college, trade school, boot camp or graduate school.

I am confident all our graduates have begun receiving gifts from friends and family members that not only mark this significant achievement in their lives but affirm the value of education and the importance of learning. If you have not given your gifts yet to the special graduates in your life, let me remind you that ‘green goes with everything’.

How appropriate it is that the recognition of our graduates falls on Pentecost. This ancient Jewish and Christian celebration reminds us that God, too, has a special gift for each of our graduates. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s presence in their lives as they travel down new roads.

Listen to some of the final words Jesus spoke to his disciples before he left them to return to his Father.

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4b-5)

Why do our graduates need the Holy Spirit? As they embark on this new journey down unfamiliar roads, the Holy Spirit will give them the **ability** to do things they have never done, the **confidence** to believe they can do them and the **courage** they need to overcome their fears and take risks.

This is what the Holy Spirit did for the disciples in Jerusalem at Pentecost. The Spirit enabled and empowered them to speak boldly of their experiences with Jesus and to share their faith with people from places near and far. Never in their wildest imagination did they believe they would have this opportunity and ability.

I wonder what opportunities await you and where your imagination will take you.

What dreams will you chase? What challenges will you accept? What mountains will you climb?

Only time will tell, but this I know now. The potential to make your dreams come true increases substantially if you consult the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction and rely upon the Spirit of God for strength and power.

Years ago a friend of mine shared an idea that transformed my life and ministry. “Bob, if you can do it by yourself, it won’t be very big.”

I pass this advice along to you today. If you chart your course without God’s help, whatever you do will not be as good or as big as it could have been.

Through the Holy Spirit, God will give you the ability to exceed even your expectations, the confidence to believe you can be effective when others doubt you and the courage to listen to your faith more than your fears.

God certainly did this for those early disciples. The very people who abandoned Jesus during his trial and crucifixion by going into hiding were now boldly telling thousands of people from all over the world about their experiences with Jesus and the difference he made in their lives.

What made this so unusual is that the disciples were able to share the good news of the gospel in ways people from every nation understood. Even the disciples were amazed at their ability, confidence and courage.

This led theologian, scholar and preacher, Dr. George Buttrick, to declare that Pentecost was the first time the disciples had associated the Spirit of God with power. Prior to this, the

disciples associated God's Spirit with comfort, encouragement, enlightenment, guidance and conviction.

They seemed to be unaware of the empowering role the Spirit would play in their lives. This changed that day at Pentecost when they courageously walked outdoors after the Holy Spirit descended upon them and began communicating and connecting with people from all over the world.

Why do our graduates need to rely upon the Holy Spirit as they embark on their new journeys? The role the Spirit of God played in the lives of the early disciples is the same role the Holy Spirit will play in theirs. The Spirit will also give our graduates the ability to do things they have never done, the confidence to believe they can do them and the courage to overcome their fears and take risks.

About ten years ago, I preached a revival at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. This is the church where President Carter teaches Sunday school each week he is in town. He and Mrs. Carter are faithful members of this church.

On Tuesday afternoon, the Carters invited me to go to the nearby town of Americus to tour the devastation caused by a recent tornado. We went to the local hospital, most of which was lying in rubble. I walked alongside President and Mrs. Carter as they listened to hospital administrators talk about their immediate and long range plans, and they offered hugs and encouraging words to every employee.

When we returned to Plains, we went by their home for a few moments to drop off Mrs. Carter. President Carter then took me to the cemetery where many of his family members are buried, the farm where he grew up and a large patch of land where peanuts were being grown.

As we stood gazing at the field, I asked "What made you, a peanut farmer from an obscure town in Southern Georgia, believe he could become President of the United States?"

This began a conversation that lasted for several minutes. I'll paraphrase a portion of it for you now.

“It was not what convinced me I could become President,” he said, “but who.”

“God gave me the ability to see the critical issues facing our country at that time, a vision of a better world for all people of every nation and the courage to take the first steps.”

I hope our graduates will let the Holy Spirit do this for them.