

August 21, 2007

Thank you, Dr. McCluskey, for that gracious introduction.

What a gift it is to be here. What a privilege it is for me to stand before you as the 14th president of Texas Lutheran University. Thank you.

For 116 years, TLU has been a community of faith and learning - preparing students for lives of service in the world. Today, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before – countless faculty and staff and students who have led and served and sacrificed out of love for this school and its mission in the world. In particular, I am deeply grateful for the leadership of my predecessor, Dr. Jon Moline, and feel privileged to follow him in this work.

The poet, Mary Oliver, concludes one of her poems with the question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

We, in this room, believe that TLU is the perfect place to explore such a question. To be sure, it's not an easy question to explore – it may be the biggest question of your life. It's really the question of vocation – how am I called to live my life – to use my gifts – to spend my time? What do I choose for a major? For a career? Should I get married? Become a parent? What kind of volunteer work and community service should I do?

In one of the most quoted definitions of vocation, Frederick Buechner writes:  
“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the

world's deep hunger meet.” Earlier, he said (I quote) : "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that (a) you need most to do and that (b) the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've probably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, chances are you've missed requirement (b). (end of quote)

Several years ago, when I was serving as a pastor in Minneapolis, a church member really took this definition to heart. The woman came up to me after worship, and said, “I quit my job last week.” Surprised, I asked, “Why?” “Well,” she said, “I’ve been paying attention in worship..”

Now, I wasn’t just surprised, I was curious. Could worship really make such a difference – leading a bright, gifted, successful woman to leave her six-figure income and her prestigious job at a major advertising agency?

“Actually,” she said, “I was being asked to develop a campaign to get 4th-6th grade kids hooked on caffeinated sodas. I just didn’t think that’s what God wanted me to do with my life.”

You are called to the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. But, where exactly is that?

That’s a key question for college. Clearly, the needs of the world are great. And, I would venture to say that most of us in this room want to make a difference. We want to work for good. But, how do we know the particular way in which we’re called to enter into God’s healing work? How do I know? How do you?

I would argue it takes a village to discern a vocation. It takes a community of friends, mentors, companions. The African proverb tells us it takes a village to raise a child – I would argue it takes a village to recognize and to sustain a vocation.

I think of the story of Moses. Often we think about his call in that burning bush – God appearing out of nowhere. But, actually, God was at work long before. It took a village to foster his calling – it took a village just to keep him alive. My personal favorites in that village were the two midwives whose civil disobedience saved Moses' life. As you recall, in Pharaoh's ruthless policy, the daughters were allowed to live – but the sons were supposed to be drowned in the Nile. But, the midwives disobeyed the Pharaoh. The daughters saved the sons.

Oh, the village was full of courageous characters. Moses' call story is full of irony and wonder. First, to save her child, Moses' mother floats him down the Nile, the very river that Pharaoh intended for his destruction. Pharaoh's daughter disobeys her own father – but takes advice from a Hebrew slavegirl – who has safe-guarded Moses down the river. Moses' mother gets paid for what she wants to do most of all – to nurse her son – and her payment comes from Pharaoh's daughter – that is Pharaoh's own purse. Pharaoh's daughter educates Moses in the royal palace, the perfect school for his calling. Out of this community – this village – Moses has been well prepared for the calling God will reveal in the burning bush. No one will ever forget about Moses. But we also

remember the community – the courageous village that prepared Moses for his calling.

While you are students here, you are blessed with an amazing village for vocational formation and discernment. That was also my experience. I came to college with only a hint of what I might do with my life – and becoming a pastor was the furthest thing from my mind. But, my college years were transformative - years for which I'm ever grateful. In particular, I especially remember one vocational conversation. As a junior I was trying to decide whether to run for student body president. Having gotten to know the college president, Paul Dovre, I sat with him in the cafeteria and asked: "How were you sure it was God's will for you to become President of Concordia?" He responded with wisdom and grace. And, though I would ask the question much differently today, I still think about his answer. He said, "Well, Ann, I think we do our best to think things through, we seek advice and wisdom, we're attentive to God and thorough in the process, and then, finally, we just decide. We don't know with absolute certainty about our decision. But, we do know one thing. God is faithful. Just as we are saved by grace, we also live by grace. Whatever you decide, Ann, God will be there on the other side. God is there on the other side of our decisions – to bless, to redeem, or if needed, to guide us in a new direction.

I hope and pray you will have such conversations during your years here at Texas Lutheran – conversations that explore the poet's question: just what will you do with your one wild and precious life. I hope that you will enter fully and deeply into this community. Unfortunately, not much in our culture encourages

us to be active participants in community, in relationships period. Having just lived in the very urban area of Atlanta, I am more and more convinced about the ease with which we can live anonymously in this country – without tending to any relationships. Just give me the internet, Tivo, the remote control, and there's enough to fill the day without the messiness of real people. The philosopher, Albert Borgmann, tells about an average evening for an adult in this country: "You come home from work, frazzled and tired. You get some food from the frig and put it in the microwave. You eat in front of the TV, watching whatever's on. You go to the computer to finish some work, surf the net, play a new web-based game, and call it a day. You haven't really sinned. You haven't coveted your neighbor's spouse, you haven't stolen anything. You've simply retreated into what Borgmann calls the "cocoon of autonomy." And, it's hard to encounter anyone – God or neighbor - from inside a cocoon.

But that's what many Americans are doing. Research has found that participation of Americans in regular face-to-face meetings has gone down dramatically in the last decades. PTA, Scouts, labor unions, religious organizations – decline has occurred across the board, except for groups like the AARP, where there's membership but no meetings – no relationships.

So, maybe the first step in discerning vocation is to become counter-cultural and throw yourself into community. I am so delighted that you students have chosen TLU – because I believe this is such a place – a community of faith and a community of learning. We need a community that will empower us to say,

“enough of these computer games, I’m going out for intramural basketball.

Enough tv, I’m gonna join the Men’s Breakfast Bible study.”

At TLU, you have lots of opportunities to be in community – football games, choir concerts, campus worship – the list is almost endless. Unlike the bigger schools, we can be a community – where we actually get to know one another by name. The Harvard professor, Robert Kegan, has studied educational institutions throughout the centuries. He writes, “if I had to summarize ...I would say people grow best where they continually experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge.” A blend of support and challenge.

Well, that’s what we seek to provide at TLU – support and challenge – and people who know you well enough to provide the right amount of each – teachers, coaches, conductors, staff, teammates, friends – they will know you well enough to sense when you’re down, to give you a push you when you’re behind, and to challenge you to be your very best.

And, dear students, our world needs you to be your very best. Your deep gladness meeting the world’s deep hunger. Our country needs young people who will live at their full potential – who will enter the world to make a difference. This is God’s world – God’s precious creation. But, there is much at risk. Sharon Daloz Parks reminds us that we live in an age of unprecedented change: “we live in a cusp time – a turning point in the flow of history – shaped by new technologies that have spawned accelerated, permanent change and unprecedented conditions prompting reconsideration of every feature of life.”

And, in this changing world, you students are among the 1 percent in the world who will one day hold a bachelor's degree. Only 1 percent of the world's population. So, like it or not, you will be a leader. TLU is committed to preparing you well for leadership – preparing to think critically and creatively – to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously – to respect diversity – to write and speak clearly, to imagine new possibilities – exploring solutions that aren't yet apparent. All of us need to help society address the new and daunting ethical issues like stem cell research and genetic engineering, global markets and global warming. We need our best minds to address the fact that, in this country, 46 million people are without health insurance, 35 million have trouble putting food on the table, and we continue to cut funding for the very fine arts that feed our souls. We don't just come up with the ability to address these complex issues. We're not born with it. We learn, we grow – and we do that best in a community of support and challenge – a community like TLU.

Yes, the world is much more diverse, much more complicated, changing at a much faster pace. We need you to be your very best as you live out your vocation for the sake of the common good.

I love the word vocation; from the Latin, to call. It is a rich way to speak of the life of discipleship lived in every area of one's life. But, there's something even more wonderful about this word, vocation. It never stands alone. There's an implied subject -- The word, vocation, or calling implies that there is Someone who calls. Someone, with a capital "S". To speak of vocation is to speak of God,

the caller, the One who stands behind it all. And to speak of God, the caller, is to speak first of grace, of love, of mercy.

We don't always get it right. Still, we are called by God – a God full of grace and truth – a God who holds us in love, no matter what.

It takes a village to sustain a vocation. We need the village – we need faithful communities where we are loved and stretched and challenged. For it's in the context of these relationships that we discern our callings – it's in the community that we're forgiven when we fail – and given grace to start anew.

It takes a village. And perhaps, just perhaps, one part of the vocation of this institution is to bear witness to that truth. Here, at Texas Lutheran – where the village is strong –grounded in faith and shaped by mission – we can proclaim to others the goodness of this counter-cultural experience called living in community.

The poet asks: Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

May God bless us all as we share the holy adventure of exploring that question together.