

Remarks for the 2015 Senior Luncheon

May 15, 2015

President Patricia McGuire

The talent in this room today is remarkable. Some of you are scientists and social scientists who will go on to terrific graduate schools and continue your research projects in major laboratories. Others will be teachers on the front lines of improving lifelong opportunities for children; still others will be nurses and occupational therapists, bringing your gifts of healing and comfort to so many who will be glad to know you. Some of you will be business managers making vital decisions for others about hiring, pay scales and benefits. Others will be nonprofit advocates and volunteers for the great causes of your lives. Many if not most will be parents and spouses, leaders of families, influencing future generations with the knowledge and wisdom we hope you have gained at Trinity.

Beyond your academic achievements, many of you also rightfully claim personal achievements that may not be listed in any program or recognized with any medal, but you know that these go well beyond mere mention: you have triumphed over poverty, discrimination, discouragement and fear, you have proven that a woman from the city need not be “just another statistic” on the wrong side of the ledger, that you can create new metrics for positive achievements and role modeling for greatness for the girls and women who follow you.

Many years ago I sat with my classmates in this same dining hall, enjoying one last moment together, feeling the mixed emotions of wanting the rituals to be over, wanting to commence our lives beyond Trinity, and yet, wanting to savor the moment just a while longer. At our class reunion last spring --- 40 years, where did the time go? --- the Class of '74, true children of the counterculture, compared notes from the other side of the looking glass of our Trinity days. Amid many personal stories, we kept coming back to the sense we shared in common that we were called by Trinity to do something socially important with this education, to be leaders for change, for justice, for peace; we pondered the long unfinished agenda.

My classmates agreed that we're still a pretty revolutionary bunch, age and all things considered --- but we have a new appreciation of the ways in which we share the social justice imperatives of Trinity across the ages. No one class, no one era can completely fulfill this great mission on our own. The real hope and promise of Trinity can only be realized in the collective effort and example of each graduating class living and working in solidarity with all others who share our deep belief in the power of educated women to change the world, a belief we get from the great women who founded and still inspire Trinity, the Sisters of Notre Dame. Each generation goes forth with the charge to use this great education not simply for our own pleasure and enrichment, but truly to be of service in every place we find human need.

Our unfinished agenda for social progress, for justice and peace looms large these days. 239 years ago in Philadelphia, the idea that “all men are created equal” sparked a revolution that founded this great nation, but from the start the idea of “all men” was highly problematic. 152 years ago amid the appalling bloodshed of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln signed the

Emancipation Proclamation, but justice and equality for all remained elusive. 61 years ago the Supreme Court of the United States declared that separate could never be equal in education, but educational injustice still represses the potential of too many children of many colors and social classes in our nation.

Half a century ago, when my class was growing up in the 1960's, the nation's cities burned with rage over racial injustice, and so they still burn today. Members of this graduating class had the privilege of tracing Dr. King's steps across the Pettus Bridge in Selma on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the great march for civil rights and justice; and yet we ponder the long distance we still must walk to achieve true racial justice and peace in this nation.

Baltimore and Ferguson in 2015 join the names of Birmingham and Little Rock and Watts and Detroit and Harlem in the long and treacherous list of flashpoints that keep illuminating the American original sin of racism, born of slavery, still stubbornly embedded in laws and customs and discriminatory practices, in racially biased police tactics that leave the lives of children draining down the streets. This nation squanders its promise of freedom and equality by tolerating egregious private bigotry, by looking away from the appallingly amoral violence of a culture that arms itself against the inevitability of demographic and social change.

We can watch the news and react with rage and despair; or we can BE the news for a new way of life, actors and advocates for justice, raising our voices for true social change that must start with our own spiritual awakening and moral conviction to be leaders for justice in our communities and workplaces. Be the good news; be the agents of change that your Trinity education calls you to be!

Racial injustice sinks long and treacherous roots in poverty, a social disease that grows more pronounced each day even in the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. We know that a tiny percentage of the earth's people grow richer each day while the poverty gap grows more pronounced. Even as the demographics of the United States change rapidly, the wealth gap between white families and black and brown families grows larger, driven by huge disparities in education, home ownership and employment opportunities.

Every person in this room lives these realities each day, one way or the other. Achieving a college degree moves each person a little farther along the continuum toward economic stability; when you receive your diplomas tomorrow, you will join just 7% of the entire population of the world with college degrees, and an even smaller percentage of educated women. And each of us who has the privilege of a Trinity education has an obligation to use the gifts of this education to address these challenges of equity and opportunity in our workplaces, our communities, at the ballot box and in our public engagement with issues that should not be left up to the people and parties who amass enough wealth to run for president.

As a university devoted to the Catholic faith tradition of social justice, we resonate clearly with the words of Pope Francis: "Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons.

Poverty today is a cry.” (Pope Francis, Meeting with Students of Jesuit Schools—Q&A, 6/7/13)

President Obama has also spoken passionately about the need to address the conditions of poverty and racial injustice. In remarks at a conference at Georgetown just this week, attended by some members of this Trinity class, he reiterated the need for us to demand that our leaders enact public policies that help to close the wealth gap, improve the fairness of the tax system, expand educational opportunities and strengthen the social safety net.

Well, you might be saying, “I know all about poverty. I know all about racism and injustice. I’m just going to move on and live my life as best I can.” And so you do, and so you will. But. BUT. From graduation day forward, you will also carry with you that special Trinity thing --- that tiny little voice in your ear, that clanging alarm bell in your head, that bright neon sign that wakes you up in the middle of the night to call your attention to conditions beyond your own, just next door, in the cubicle down the hall, around the corner of your neighborhood, across the river and in a country you’ve never heard of. Your Trinity conscience calls you to get up and move out of your comfort zone, to ask how you must help, to pursue your life’s work --- sometimes paid, sometimes in volunteering your time --- to make the lives of others a little bit better, to teach, to heal, to comfort, to confront when necessary and to speak out when silence threatens to smother justice.

Your Trinity conscience expects you to disturb the false peace in order to achieve the real peace, which is only possible when justice prevails. Trinity calls us, in the words of the U.S. Catholic Bishops in a letter called *Economic Justice for All*, to use “... your voices and votes to speak for the voiceless, to defend the poor and the vulnerable, and to advance the common good. We are called to shape a constituency of conscience, measuring every policy by how it touches the least, the lost, and the left-out among us.” (1986, p. 9)

This weekend is rightfully a time for celebration, for the joyful expression of pride and satisfaction with your achievement of a Trinity degree. But we call it “commencement” for a reason, because you are not done, not by any measure. Rather, you are beginning your new lives as bearers of the mission of Trinity to the world, as servant leaders equipped with the best tools we have to effect social change, the tools of a great education. Great as your achievements are today, burnish them in the best way possible, by making it possible for others to achieve at least as much, if not more. Your achievements are so much greater when you help others to reach their goals as well.

May the power, wisdom and love of the Trinity be with you, always.

Congratulations, seniors!