May 1976
SELL YOURSELF TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

Life is filled with beginnings and endings. Today you officially end one phase of your life and at the same time begin another. That's what graduation ceremonies do--they mark the ending and the new beginning.

As we begin each new stage in life, there are always idea. bidding for our loyalty, just as there may be employers bidding for our services. All through life, there are ideas and people saying to us, "Come follow me. Sell yourself to me and I will give you what you want — you will find meaning for your life."

Generation after generation, people come and go. They pass on. But ideas do not always pass away. The remain. And at each stage in life, ideas knock at our door and bid for our allegiance.

All through life, ideas are constantly bidding for our loyalty and the ideas we sell ourselves to determine what kind of person we become.

Take selfishness, for example. Persons who give their overall allegiance to this idea which is as old as history and always seems to place a high bid, become bitter small people and their lives are ultimately filled with ruined homes, broken friendships and every other kind of hideous thing.

Or take racism as another example. That idea has also been around for a long time and many people still sell themselves to it. Almost from the beginning of time, there has been abroad the idea that one race, or color of skin, or people from one locality are somehow superior to all others. It's a deep sickness within the human race. And the people who let this idea be the highest bidder in their lives can cause more evil than almost anything.

Another very popular idea in our time which people sell themselves to is the belief that the sum total of life is the accumulation of more and more creature comforts and that the more things we have, the happier we'll be.

The reasoning goes something like this — "If I can find a job that will make me lots so money so that I can buy lots of things, a big house, at least two cars, several television sets, a boat and a citizen's band radio, then I will be happy." Some people become slaves to such an idea. But it should not be the highest bidder for us.

Another version of this idea which is particularly prevalent in our time is that "bigger is better." Now bigness in itself is not necessarily bad or good, nor is smallness. What we're talking about is the tendency to believe that something is good or better merely because it is bigger. Thus, millions of people believe that if taking one vitamin a day is good for you, taking three vitamins a day is three times as good.

Others believe that if an automobile runs well with 100 horsepower, it will run twice as well with 200 horsepower. We've lately had an emphasis on small cars, but even then, auto manufacturers often advertised their small car as the "biggest small car."

You may have heard about the two dumb brothers who owned a truck and they each had $150 dollars in cash. So, they decided to go into business. They bought 300 watermelons at a dollar

apiece, which they sold at a dollar a piece. Then they bought 300 more watermelons, which they sold at a dollar a piece. They repeated the operation, buying and selling at the same price. At the end of a long hard day, they settled down to count their money. They had $300.

The one brother said to the other, “After all that work, you’d think we’d have a little more than we started with.” The other brother agreed, saying, “I know where we went wrong. What we need is a bigger truck.”

We value bigness in almost everything by the questions we ask. If someone hears a famous pianist, it is not long before he wants to know what he makes per week in dollars. Often our first questions about people or things or institutions are always the same. How much did it cost? How big is it?

Quantity however tells us nothing about quality. The size of a person’s income tells us nothing about his or her personal qualities. The length of a freight train is irrelevant to the commodities it carries.

I’m all for education, but the quantity of education tells us nothing about the quality. Teddy Roosevelt once said-- “Give a person an eighth-grade education and he may steal from a freight car. Get that same person a college education and he may steal the whole railroad.”

Another idea which is even more dangerous, and it always bids for our allegiance and there are many who sell them-selves to it — the idea that the end justifies the means. Or to put it in other words, — “winning at any cost!” Vince Lombardi used to say, “Winning isn’t everything--it’s the only thing.”

That’s the story of Watergate — winning at any cost. Any-one who sells himself or herself to this idea will eventually become corrupt. We are dealing here with the belief that winning, no matter what the cost, is what will give life meaning, stability and permanence. Winning is nice, but it isn’t everything!

These then are some ideas which are constantly bidding for us; but they shouldn’t be the highest bidders.

On the other hand, there are some ideas which are the highest bidders and when we sell ourselves to them, they help us to grow. No person can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself.

What then are some of these great and enduring ideas--those which are the highest bidders for our loyalty, now as we graduate and throughout our lives?

1. First, sell yourself to the idea of the dignity and worth of every human being, and of seeing all human beings everywhere as brothers and sisters of one large family whose home is the spaceship earth. Only when enough people come to see this idea as the highest bidder to which they are willing to sell themselves, will we have peace on this earth.

We all know how difficult it is to acknowledge the human being in other people — even those in our own cities and our own nation, much less those in other cultures. So quickly and finally we size up a person, mark him down, label him, dismiss him with a word — “He’s a grouch!” “She’s a reactionary!” “He’s a radical!” “She’s uptight!” “He’s a bore!” With one little word, we

squeeze the humanity out of the other person and turn off our own humanity as well. Young and old, black and white, we dehumanize each other in so many little and big ways.

Once we begin to see and treat all people as human beings, miracles happen.

One day a minister friend of mine was seeking out a newcomer in town who worked as an auto mechanic. He found the man repairing an engine. “Sorry I can’t shake hands with you, preacher,” the auto mechanic said, holding up his hands black with dirt and engine grease. Impulsively, the preacher stooped over and rubbed his hands in the dirt that lay on the floor. “Now there’s no difference between us,” he said, “You see, sir, I want to shake your hand!” That man was the preacher’s friend for life.

To learn what errors young people starting on their first jobs should be warned about, a group of vocational teachers wrote to several thousand employers asking them to look up the last three persons dismissed and tell why they had been let go. The teachers expected a long list of reasons. They were amazed to find that more than two-thirds of the persons losing jobs had been fired for one reason. It was the same in every sort of business and for workers of all ages and both sexes. It amounted to this: THEY COULDN’T GET ALONG WITH OTHER PEOPLE! They were not able to see enough people as human beings.

Not long ago a person was telling me that when he was a child in a small town, the mother of a family not far from him died, and the father often drunk was unable to care for his children. So, a woman in the community had taken one of the boys to live with her. Widowed, poor and un-educated, she nevertheless had love and energy to spare for the shivering, curly child. Almost overnight, the boy began to change, to grow and blossom. But one thing held him back; because he was so strange to other children in the neighborhood, none of them would play with him.

One day, his foster mother caught the other children in the neighborhood playing together while her foster child stood to one side, crying and rejected. She sent him into the house and then turned to the other children and said, “I won’t have it. That child matters. It’s being decided right now whether he’s going to be somebody and every time I get him ahead an inch, you children push him back. Don’t you want him to live?”

The person telling me this story said that through the year she had not forgotten the incident. It was his first brush with the profound and painful truth that people heal, and people hurt and destroy. We help or hinder one another, summoning one another to be and grow, or to surrender and retreat, influencing one another as sun and frost influence a green field.

So, the idea is bidding high for all of us to be helpful healing persons and we can perform miracles. What we need more than anything else in our world are persons who are-- persons who through their understanding and patience give power to others to live.

2. A second idea which is also a very high bidder for each one of us, is to find a job or vocation which you enjoy. Make that the first priority and not which vocation will earn you the most money.

Choose a vocation through which you are certain that you are contributing something to society and through which you are certain that your own talents and potential are constantly being developed and renewed.

There are lots of vocations which are exciting, but you have to enjoy your work and the more you enjoy it the better you will be at it.

Recently I heard about a mother who was trying to get her son up to go to school, but he kept lying in bed. “Wake up” she said, it’s time to go to school.”

The son pulled the cover over his head and said, “I’m not going to school. I’m not every going to school again.” Mother was appalled. “Are you sick?” “No, but I’m sick of school,” he said. “They hate me. I hate them. They throw things at me. They call me names. They make fun of me. They laugh at me. Why should I get up and go to school?” The mother replied, “There are two very good reasons why you should go to school. First, you’re 42 years old, and second, you’re the principal.”

My friends, sell yourselves to the highest bidders. Don’t settle for anything less — and those highest bidders are such ideas as the dignity and respect for every human being, the power of the personal and using that power for good and finding a job or vocation that you enjoy.

Congratulations and best wishes to all of you. Amen.