Sunday, May 16, 1980
GIVE YOURSELF TO THE HIGHEST! (William Woods College Baccalaureate Sermon)

Life is filled with beginnings and endings. This weekend, 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 enter each new stage of life, there are always ideas asking for our loyalty, just as there may be employers wanting our services. All through life there are ideas and people saying to us, "Come follow me; give me your loyalty and in return I will give you what you want, you will find meaning for your life."

So, this evening, as you are preparing to graduate tomorrow morning, I ask you to consider which ideas, which values you are going to give yourselves to, or have given yourself to in the past? Are you giving yourse1£ to the highest? Or have you settled for something less?

Nothing is more important to consider because the ideas and values we give ourselves to determine to a large extent the kind of person we become.

Take selfishness for example. Persons who give their overall allegiance to this idea which is as old as history, become bitter, small people and their lives are ultimately filled with ruined homes, broken friendships, and other tragedies. It's the idea that "I" am the most important!

Or take racism as another example. That idea has been around for a long time, and many people still give themselves to it. Almost from the beginning of time, there has been abroad the idea that one tribe, one race, one color of skin, or people from one locality, or one ethnic origin, are somehow superior to others. It's a deep sickness within the human race. And the people who give themselves over to this idea can cause more evil that almost anything else.

Another very popular idea to which people give themselves again and again is the belief that the sum. total of life is to be found in 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 of money so that I can buy many things, a big house, several automobiles, the latest in all kinds of gadgets, the right kind of clothes, belong to the most exclusive clubs, then I will find happiness."

Another version of this idea is that "bigger is better!" So, we believe that the best jobs have the biggest salaries. Or we believe the bigger the company, the better it is, or if an enterprise is not expanding, there must be something wrong with it. It's not necessarily so!

There were two 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 one dollar each, which they then sold at one dollar each. Then the bought300 more watermelons, which they again sold at one dollar each. They repeated the same operation, buying and selling at the same price. At the end of a long, hard day, they sett1ed down to count their money. They had the same $150 dollars each.

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!”

But bigger is not always better. Quantity or size tells us nothing about quality. Simply having a bigger education does not automatically make you a better person. Theodore 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 to which many people give themselves is “the end justifies the means.” Or to put it in other words — “We got to win, no matter what it costs or how we do it.” So, people come to believe that “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” And some go on to believe that to win, one can’t be nice because “nice guys finish last.”

That’s the story behind most corrupt practices in this world — the need to win at any cost; the end justifies the means and we become corrupted in the process. Winning is nice, but it isn’t everything.

Give yourself to the highest! There are a number of ideas and values which claim to be the highest, but none is higher than the belief in the dignity and worth of every human being. There’s no more important idea in all the world.

It’s the highest, because the way you treat people is the way you treat God. Whether one is Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Humanist, this is basic. The Bible says — “If a person says he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar.”

St. Paul wrote, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” When you give yourself to the love of human beings, you are giving yourself to God and you can’t go any higher than that.

Human beings are the most important thing in this world. Thus, the way in which you treat people is basic to everything else that you do. The Carnegie Institute of Technology analyzed the records of 10,000 persons and arrived at the conclusion that 15 percent of success is due to technical training, to brains and skill on the job, and 85 percent of success is due to personality factors, to the ability to deal with people successfully.

In another study of 4,000 individuals, the percentage ran even higher. Out of 4,000 persons who lost their jobs in one year, only 10 percent, or 400 lost out because they could not do their work. Ninety percent, or 3,600 of them, lost out because they were not able to deal successfully with other people.

Regardless of our occupation or vocation, we are all in the people business. And the secret to getting along with others, whoever they might be, is to see and treat them as persons with dignity, as equals. One day, a man 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,” the mechanic said, holding up his hands black with dirt and engine grease. Impulsively, the other man 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’s putting the idea of the dignity and worth of every human being into action.

It’s people who care for us that make a difference in our lives.

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 uneducated, she nevertheless had love and energy to spare for the shivering, curly child. Almost overnight the boy began to change, to grow and to 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 the story said that through the years he 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 grow and be, or to surrender and retreat, influencing one another as sun and frost influence a green field.

So, give yourself to the highest! Be a lover and respecter of human beings o Be a friend. If you are these things, will also be a lover and respecter of God.

Give yourself to the highest in your work or vocation — that means remembering that people are the most important — no matter what business you are in. Probably no profession in all the world should be more people-oriented than health care. Yet even there, the person can be forgotten.

Recently while visiting patients in a hospital, I noticed a sign taped to the wall of the nurse’s station, just above the Vital Signs Remote Sensing Console that enables the nurses to record whether the patient is breathing and even take his pulse without actually going down the hall to see the patient personally. The sign said: “The Chart is Not The Patient!” Unfortunately, in this particular hospital, the slogan turned out to be misleading. The nurses were neither attending the patient nor making notations on the charts. They were in the hospital auditorium taking a course in Interdisciplinary Function.

In this matter of giving yourself to the highest, it’s easier to do if you choose a vocation through which you can feel that you are contributing something to society and through which you are convinced that your own talents and potential are constantly being developed and renewed.

There are many vocations which are exciting, but the more you love your work, the more you will be able to love the people with whom you are associated and those you are supposed to serve.

Recently I heard about a mother who was trying to get her son up to go to schoo1, but he kept 1ying 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 ever again.” The mother was appalled. “Are you sick?” “No, but I’m sick of school,” he said. “They hate me.” “The students hate me. The faculty hates me. They throw things at me. They call me names. They make fun of me. They laugh at me. AND I hate them.” “Why should I get up and go to

school?” The mother said, “There are two very good reasons why you should go to school. First, you’re 42 years old, and second, you’re the Dean.”

Graduates of 1980, give yourselves to the highest! Give yourselves to the dignity, respect, and love for every human being and at the same time find a job or vocation you love. That will take commitment on your part and commitment is not always easy. Many times, we have doubts and questions. We don’t want to believe in the highest.

There was a skier who wandered over onto the professional ski slope and found herself hurtling down the mountain at a frightening speed. She crashed into a tree and found herself dangling in space over a thousand-foot precipice, hanging on a single limb. After a while, she called up the mountain: “Is anybody there?” A voice came back: “Yes, I am here.” “Who are you?” asked the skier. To her amazement, the voice replied, “I am the Lord!” After sustaining the shock of this, the skier said, “Well Lord, you see the shape I’m in, please get me out of this predicament!” The voice replied, “I will. Now listen carefully. Turn loose of the tree, put on your skis, and I will take care of you.” There was a silence and the skier answered, “I can’t turn loose of this tree. I will be killed by falling down the cliff.” The voice persisted - “Turn loose of the tree, put on your skis, and I will take care of you.” There was another silence and then the cry from the skier, “Is anybody else up there?”

There is nobody else — God is the highest and we give ourselves to the highest by serving our sisters and brothers in the human race, by being friends to the friendless.

Give yourself to the highest! Amen.