Friday, May 13, 1983
A LETTER TO CARIS: CHOOSE THE GOOD PORTION (Baccalaureate Sermon, William Woods College)
Luke 10:38-42

Today the Baccalaureate sermon is in the form of a letter to my daughter, Caris, a member of the Class of 1983; but it is, through her, a letter to all of you. I have chosen to address this letter to her because I know her better. But I'm sure it's what many of your parents would say to you if they were in my place this afternoon. So during these next minutes, I want you to eavesdrop on this letter.

Dear Caris:

No moment in the life of a parent is more awesome than when a child leaves home for the first time, and as you watch them walk away, you wonder: "Have I prepared this one adequately for all he or she will face?" In a similar way, no moment in life is more awesome than when a young person is about to graduate from college, and then both parents and faculty wonder: "Have we prepared these young people adequately for all they will face?"

Of course we have not prepared you adequately — that's impossible. We can only make a small beginning and hope that you will continue to learn throughout your life. After all, the most valuable gift we can give you is learning how to learn, coupled with the love of learning.

In the Bible story read earlier from Luke's Gospel, Mary is said by Jesus to have chosen "the good portion," while her sister Martha was distracted with trivial details. As Jesus put it, "She was anxious and trouble about many things, and thereby was missing some of the most important things in life." Throughout your life, as during these past years in college, you will be faced time and time again with decisions. I hope you will continue to choose the "good portion."

What is this good portion that Jesus Christ is talking about?

1. First of all, choosing the good portion means choosing good religion over bad. In past months I've come across several surveys which indicate that Americans in overwhelming numbers believe in God. Recently I was at a gathering in which people were talking about these surveys, and someone turned to me and said, "Isn't it wonderful that so many people believe in God?"

I only nodded politely! I wanted to say, "And do you think God is pleased with this endorsement?" More pointedly, I wanted to ask, "What kind of God do you suppose it is in which so many people say they believe?" The fact is that religion in general is popular in our time, and many people believe that any religion is better than none. But such is not the case. Not all religion is good, and some religion is very bad.

Religion can be lyrical and lovely and humane and uplifting, but it can also be wicked and damaging to the human spirit.

Too many people today are easily tempted into dividing humans into two groups, the religious and the irreligious, and then supposing that being religious confers a certain superior quality upon them. Yet look at what religion has done, and what some suppose God has endorsed: the inquisition, the crusades, the ritual sacrifice of humans, ugly superstitions, barricades built

against every advance of science. Just this past week, 350 years late, the Pope finally admitted that the Roman Catholic Church was in error in condemning Galileo.

On the other hand, it was religious groups who built the first hospitals, the great universities, and homes for the poor and the hopeless. And it has been religion that has preserve culture, given meaning to life, comforted the suffering, offered courage to the living and dignity in dying.

It's a matter of choosing the good portion, being able to distinguish good religion from bad religion. That was the problem in Jesus' time. He never dealt with irreligion, but rather with one kind of religion against another kind: a morally sensitive and caring religion set over against a religiousness that really didn't care much what happened to persons.

Here are some of the marks of good religion: good religion always enlarges the human spirit and does not suppress or confine it. Good religion is open and growing and sensitive and curious. Nothing that suppresses human curiosity, no religion that keeps one from listening to others and learning from them is worthy of the phrase, "good religion." Good religion is inclusive, not exclusive.

In one of his tell tales, Mark Twain tells how exercised he had become about the considerable amount of discord among God's creatures and how he had decided to take the matter in hand.

So, I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage.

This story, as we are painfully aware, continues in many places and in many ways to be true. Tragic confrontations and collisions — religious, political, and ideological - persist in destroying human relationships. It's in the news every day. Much of human history seems to be the history of violent conflict. It is one of the terrible ironies of history that religion has been among the primary sources of this conflict. While religious beliefs have been offered as the true basis for harmony and salvation, both here and in the hereafter, they have served equally well as the basis for alienation, hostility, and destruction. Holy cities become justifications for the most unholy sentiments and atrocities. The gracious word of God becomes a vehicle for dispensing grace to ourselves and damnation to those who disagree with us.

Good religion is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Religion is not for the sake of religion; it is for the sake of helping men and women to love God and one another. Bad religion calls attention to itself; it makes religiousness the goal of its endeavors, and it always ends with a lot of silly little rules and regulations. Good religion points beyond itself, lifts itself above the trivial, and makes itself a servant of God and human need. It remains curious and concerned for the human condition everywhere and tries to do something about it! Choose the good portion. And choosing the good portion means choosing good religion over bad.

2. Secondly, choosing the good portion means not being afraid of uncertainty and change. In the Bible story Martha had to be certain of everything all the time, while Mary was not afraid to take time and listen. She knew that she did not know everything, that there is always much more to learn, and that the world would continue to change.

To some degree the future is always uncertain. That's part of the mystery of life. Who can predict where you will be living ten years from now or what you will be doing or what kind of position you will be filling?

I believe the world and our lives are open-ended, filled with infinite possibilities. And we should delight in this fact. Too often we are altogether too complacent, too rigid, too dogmatic about our assumptions and conclusions.

Do not be afraid of uncertainty, of questioning basic assumptions. The lust for certitude keeps one from being open to new knowledge and new experience.

Earlier I mentioned Galileo. It is said that when Galileo showed his telescope to the leading sages of his day, the responses generally fell into three categories. Some people were properly struck by what they say and were not afraid to begin to see the universe in a new way. They were not afraid of the uncertainty and change which new knowledge brings. They were willing to consider a new point of view. A second group peered around at the other end of the telescope, convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass. They were so certain of their present point of view that anything which conflicted with it had to be false. The third group refused even to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything which might cause them to re-examine the beliefs on which they thought their lives depended. That's how frightened they were of uncertainty and change. Better to stay with their present beliefs. I hope you will always be in the first group — among those who are not afraid to look through the telescope and at least consider another point of view. Every major leap in human progress has come about because of someone having the courage to question and re-examine a basic assumption.

Here's one of my favorite stories about a woman who refused to consider other possibilities:

A woman was on a tea break. She decided to read a magazine and have a cup of tea and eat a snack. She ordered and the waitress brought a cup of tea and a sack of cookies. She opened her purse and took out a magazine.

As she read, a strange man joined her at her table. She continued to read, and they did not speak. Suddenly she was aware that the man had reached into the sack of cookies and had taken one and proceeded to eat the cookie with great gusto. She glared at him and took a cookie herself. He glared at her.

Coldly, they eyed each other. Defiantly, he reached out and took another cookie. She was furious. Her face flushed with anger. Blood pressure rose at the impudence of this stranger. He advanced his hand one more time and took another cookie. Coldly, he awaited her response. She was livid. Jaw set, eyes unblinking, she stretched forth her hand and took another cookie. He watched her take and eat the cookie with a fixed stare.

One cookie remained. The man reached for it, picked it up, snapped it neatly in half, and offered half of the last cookie to her. She was outraged and shook her head vigorously in a negative response to his offer. He shrugged and ate the whole cookie himself. Whereupon he got up and left the room.

The woman's day was ruined. She could not believe the uncouth manners, the blatant greed, the territorial encroachment of some people. With an abiding fury, she opened her purse to put

away the magazine and leave the room herself. Her heart skipped a beat as she put the magazine in her purse, for there, safely tucked inside, was the bag of cookies she purchased. She must have put them in when she took out the magazine, and he must've placed his cookies on the table as she read her magazine. She dashed from the room to seek the strange man to confess, apologize, and make restitution, but he was out of sight, never to be seen again.

Be careful when jumping to conclusions until you have all the facts. I recently read of two first-time railroad passengers who had just opened their lunch boxes when the train entered a long, dark tunnel. "Have you tried your sandwich yet?" one asked. "No, why?" said the other. "Don't touch it! I took one bite and went blind."

3. Thirdly, choosing the good portion means not always being overly concerned about trivial details, like Martha in the story, but rather to keep developing your own potential, to keep growing. Each one of us has an incredible potential to love and to be loved, but it's only a potential to love and to be loved, but it's only a potential, and like all potentials, unless it is realized, unless we do something about it, it's not going to happen.

Some time ago I was riding on an airplane, and a woman sat next to me and said to me, "I bet I can guess what you are." So I asked, "What am I?" She said, "I bet you are a lawyer," and I said, "No, I'm not a lawyer." "The what are you?" she asked, and I said, "I'm a minister." "How nice!" she said, and I went back to reading my book.

But after a bit, she started to talk, and as I listened, she began to tell me all kinds of things. Sometimes we'll tell a stranger what we won't tell our closest friend.

She told me that she had four children and had just come back from the Bahamas. "Did you have a good time?" I asked. "No," she said, "it was terrible!" I asked, "Were you alone?" She said, "Yes. I'm trying to get myself together. Two months ago, my husband left me." "I'm sorry," I said. Then she told me the story of her life. "Imagine! I gave him the best years of my life. I gave him beautiful children. I gave him a magnificent house, and I always kept it clean. There was no dust anywhere. My children were always on time to school." She went on and on, "I was a magnificent cook. I always entertained his friends. I was always ready to go every place he wanted to go." I really felt sorry for this woman, because all of the things she had considered essential were things that she could have paid for. She had lost herself. She had not given her husband what was essential about her: the magic, the wonder, the undiscovered self.

I asked her, "What did you do for yourself?" She said, "What do you mean!" What do you mean for me?" "I mean what did you do for yourself?" "There wasn't any time to do anything for myself." Then, after a pause, I said, "What would you like to have done?" And she didn't know. She had lost herself in a role. She was fulfilling a role. Then the story unfolds: husband meets interesting young woman in office who isn't interested in dust.

This woman had never bothered to ask herself, "What is essential about me? What is my worth? What are my needs?" Thus, she had no self to give. People have to develop themselves, and this kind of development is not selfishness. It means finding and fulfilling your own potential. It means the right kind of self-love. More and more I see this as crucial, and it's part of the Christian faith.

More than anything else, I hope your experience of the love of God and of God will continue to expand and grow. For me, God is more and more a loving presence, a transcendent power, a forgiving love. I believe we human beings can never be separated from God. We are an expression of God. Though God is not a person, God is, at the same time, very personal. There is no place that God is not. God is not selective. God does not love some more than others. As Jesus said, “God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” God is more than just an object of worship. God is also a presence dwelling in each one of us. God is the loving power that permeates creation.

And do not be afraid of difficulty. There is an old adage in nautical circles which says, “No sailor ever distinguished himself on a smooth sea.” What we call human greatness is never achieved apart from difficulty and conflict. And remember our love goes with you wherever you are.

With love,
Your Dad