"Because it’s 2016”? What about eternity?
Opening Convocation Address
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Theme for 2016-17: "Hope, Call, God".

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6.

Dear students, colleagues, and friends: welcome all of you to the start of our 2016-17 academic year at Redeemer University College. To those of you who are returning, it’s a joy to have you back. And welcome especially to our new students – the Class of 2020.

I’m glad that we can start our academic year with this opening convocation chapel. We’re about to set out on an exciting journey of learning, and like travelers preparing for their trip it is vital that we set the course for our journey. As a Christian university, we do so by orienting ourselves to God and within the Biblical story of His work of creation and redemption in Jesus Christ. In fact, we will check our orientation repeatedly in our regular Wednesday chapels throughout the year, and I urge all of us to participate in them as often as possible.

Our theme for this academic year is “hope, call, God,” based on the verses from Ephesians 4 that we have just read. These verses call us to a certain way of living together – a life characterized by unity and service, that in turn reflects God’s character and purpose and our hope in Him. The passage is brief and allusive. And we might ask, what’s so unique about this call to unity anyway? In a global age and a society where “inclusion” is a dominant and favourite goal, what else is new?

But hold on – it is precisely here that we are called to discernment. After all, what is it that truly unifies us as a community? What is it that ties people, and all of reality, together? What does our contemporary world say about this, and what
does it expect from its members?  “Ideas have legs,” according to our emeritus professor Al Wolters, and how we answer these questions is loaded with our assumptions about reality and about what is really going on in the world, and our answers have implications for how we live.

Let me illustrate with a simple example of the “story” that seems dominant in our culture today.  In November 2015, when asked why it was important to have gender parity on his cabinet, PM Trudeau’s answer was “because it’s 2015.”  At the time it seemed like a snappy answer – perfect for tweeting – as if to say “this is what everyone believes today – it’s normal – and in the progress of rational, liberal society we have come to know that this is normative.  No need to examine or say more.”  It’s, like, “duhhh…”

Now I’m not concerned here with debating the merits of gender equality, or the status of LGBTQ people, or “Black Lives Matter,” or how any other group in our society should be treated.  To be sure, all of these are important issues.  Rather, I want to say that we DO need to examine our society’s underlying assumptions about “why” this or that.  What is the story of human life and meaning that undergirds the ideas and way of life that we are shaping?

And I have to say that, besides evoking a barrage of sometimes hilarious memes, Trudeau’s comment seems both shallow and dangerous.  Suppose it were, say, November 10, 1938 – the night of Kristallnacht when Nazis attacked Jews in German cities?  Imagine Hitler explaining their actions by saying:  “well, it’s 1938 after all.”  Or suppose it’s 1894, the year that Canada’s Department of Indian Affairs made schooling for First Nations – including residential schooling – compulsory.  Most of those in positions of power might well have said:  “well, it’s 1894, and we all know that the solution to ‘the native problem’ is to culturally assimilate them to our modern Western values.”  Or suppose now that it’s 2020, and if it happens by then, Redeemer no longer can be part of some organizations because our policies affirm a traditional Biblical view of marriage and sexuality?  “Well, it’s 2020,” someone might say – “get with the program of what we – those who hold power – now consider to be ‘Canadian values’.”

Of course, underlying Trudeau’s “because it’s 2015” remark is the assumed modern liberal story of progress toward reason and self-determination, and in it’s
post-modern form the struggle of each person and group to define and control ourselves over against the power and control exerted by others. And we’re already seeing across the Western world that a society based on these principles can only offer a very ragged, partial unity, -- one that ironically struggles to resolve the tension between a “unity of toleration” that the majority imposes on those who seek to be “other.” In addition, the rhetoric of “well, it’s 2015” is especially insidious because it seems to push us to go with the flow without examining it – like the movie Divergent, based on Veronica Roth’s novel by the same title, that some of you may know. All of which is to say that the spirit of our culture evidently does not reconcile us to each other, much less provide eternal reconciliation with God.

Our theme for the year points us to an alternative narrative to that of “because it’s 2015” or 2016. Our text comes from the letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, in around 60 AD. In some ways, the Christians of Ephesus faced an environment similar to ours today. Ephesus, located in western Turkey, was the commercial and administrative hub of the eastern part of the Roman empire – the empire which claimed to represent an eternal, divine order. The centre of town was marked by two main temples to gods which represented the main competitors to Christianity. The largest of these was the temple for worship of the Greek goddess Artemis, which in turn was appropriated by the Romans as Diana. Artemis was the virgin goddess of the hunt, of wild animals and woodlands, the moon, and childbirth and mothers. In Ephesus, she was associated especially with fertility. She was considered to be an ancient, heavenly divinity who lived on mountaintops, high in the sky, and as such was associated with heavenly light and authority. Throughout the Roman empire she was looked to for the preservation of humanity (childbirth), for bestowing authority and succession of rulers, and as the patroness of the lower classes and slaves.

The second temple was for the worship of Serapis, a deity proposed by Ptolemy I who was the Greek ruler of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great in the 300’s BC. The deity “Serapis” was put up as an attempt to synthesize the ancient Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis, the sacred bull, and to depict these in Greek form. Serapis was regarded as the god of fertility and the underworld (eternal life), and worship of Serapis spread throughout the Hellenistic world and was in turn also adopted by the Roman empire.
Together then, the worship of Artemis (Diana) and Serapis represented heavenly authority, the source and preservation of life, and the governance of the underworld – in effect, they covered the whole order of life and eternity. By appropriating these deities, it’s as if the people and powers of the Roman empire could say: accept the Roman empire “because it’s 60 AD” – with the triumph of the Roman empire, we have come to know that Rome is the eternal and divine order that will surely bring unity and peace to the world. As it turns out, we now know, it didn’t.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, written at the height of that Roman order, offers a radically different and subversive view of reality and what is happening the world. Throughout the letter Paul emphasizes that we have been saved and called by God as an act of His grace in Christ, and as part of His overall eternal purpose. That purpose, he writes in chapter 1, is “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:10), for the praise and glory of God. All of which would have been a very stark challenge to the Roman imperial order.

And this is where the church of all ages, including you and I, fit in. In Chapters 2-3 Paul describes how God is working out this purpose: First, He has saved and reconciled believers to Himself, all as an act of grace in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:1-10). In doing so, he has placed His call and seal on believers. Second, He reconciles individuals to each other (2:11-22), and has united them into one body, the church (3:1-6), through the mysterious uniting presence of His Spirit. And third, this body is now the temple where God lives and the means by which God displays His wisdom and purpose to all creation, and to earthly rulers, and even to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:7-13).

Paul’s letter depicts an eternal world order that is dramatically different from that of the Roman order -- one of grace, redemption, and reconciliation under the reign of Jesus Christ. And the goal of the church – of you and I – is to reflect this alternative order by following a radically different way of life, which we see in our text and in the rest of the letter. Since we are saved by God’s choosing, and we’ve “got the call,” we now are challenged to live up to that calling – to live out the hope and purpose of God and to be the united body that displays God’s grace and sovereignty to the world. This hope and calling are the basis of a new community,
which exists not for itself but for the sake of God’s kingdom and glory.

Notice how Paul characterizes the counter-cultural way of life of this community (v. 2-3): “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Through the rest of the chapter, Paul urges the Ephesians to recognize and honour the diverse gifts given by Christ to members of the body, and to use them for building up the body toward unity, truth, and full knowledge of God.

Paul expands on this in his letter to the Philippians, where he writes: Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. “Then, … I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.” (Phil. 1:27-28) “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil 2)

The characteristics of this new community are clearly not the ways of the world and the ragged unity that it offers. Instead, they are the ways of Jesus, who did not grasp for power, authority, rights, or any other form of autonomy or self-determination. As Paul goes on to say in Philippians 2: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
- rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant,

…

- he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—
- even death on a cross!”

This is the Christ, the model of the new Adam, that God raised up to rule over all of creation and to reflect God’s glory!
As Paul goes on to write in Eph 5, we are to be imitators of this kind of God – to be servants of each other, to love as Christ loved us, to speak truth in love (4:14), to be light to the world and to live as children of light which bears the fruit of goodness, righteousness and truth (5:9).

Throughout his letter, Paul expresses his appeal with passion and urgency – it is vital to him that Christians understand and are enlightened about who we truly are and about what God is doing in the world, so that we can become mature in our knowledge of God, so that our hope and confidence in Him may increase, and so that we can truly reflect God’s purpose in the world. By the same token, he warns us not to be swayed by the ways of the world: don’t be taken in by the latest “wave” or “wind of teaching” or by “the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (4:14). Instead, our task is to expose and mirror the real truth.

That’s why it’s so important that we’re here today, and that we understand deeply the life that we are called to and that unifies us as a unique community:
1. First, our hope… is in God who has redeemed us through Christ, and who already has triumphed and has placed all things under His feet. Because of this, there is no problem too great, and nothing that we need, that He cannot provide so that we can serve His purpose.

2. Second, we are united in being called by God. None of us are here by accident – it’s not just because the financial aid (or the pay) is so good, or because the program is right and promises a job, or because we have the opportunity to play varsity athletics, or because our friends are here. No, we’re here because God chose us, and because he has called us to be a holy people, set apart to serve and represent Him. It’s like we’ve been chosen as top picks in the draft of new athletes, or we’ve been given the part in a play.

And now we’re in training, or rehearsals for that part. Each of us has an individual role, to become mature in our understanding and faith, in our gifts, and in our service to each other, to become children of light who mirror Christ. But we don’t grow alone, nor only for ourselves. Remember that part of becoming mature is becoming an integrated body, like a really good team, in which each one of us gives our gifts and humbly serves each other for the good of the whole body.
3. And third, the whole purpose of this body is to embody and reflect God’s purpose and glory -- the one true God, who is the only hope of the world – so that the world may see God in us and may praise God because of us. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, we have been redeemed to be the light of God to the world, a city set on a hill (Matt 5:14). In our hope, in following the call to unity and service, we mirror and represent Him and Christ’s kingdom to the world. Because Christ’s eternal kingdom and God’s glory is at stake. You could say, our story and the way we live is “because we’re in eternity.”

My friends, I am confident that during your Redeemer education you will learn a lot about specialized fields of study, methods of research and experimentation and discovery and critical thinking, and skills and techniques needed to engage various aspects of reality. Outside of your classes, you will have opportunities to be involved in arts performances, athletics, clubs, and many other activities, and you will develop lifelong friendships. You will grow, as we say, intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

But most importantly, I pray that in all of these activities, and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we all will become mature followers of Christ who live a life worthy of the hope and calling we share to serve each other, the body of Christ, and Christ’s kingdom, so that the world may know the good news and so that God’s glory may be revealed throughout all creation. May this be the story, the hope, and the purpose that unites us throughout the year.