Presbyterian College’s 133rd Commencement Address
Dr. Robert A. Bryant
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A Life Worthwhile

Not too long ago, a scientist by the name of Albert Einstein summarized what he had learned about life and the universe in which we live by saying, “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” Little did he know that he was providing a topic worth our while today on this 133rd Commencement of Presbyterian College as we celebrate your wisdom, Class of 2016, in joining the PC community, obtaining a PC diploma, and now entering a new life in the fine Blue-and-Garnet line of PC alumni.

“Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” Consider the long reach through time and space of these words from just one of the many people who have pursued a life worthwhile ahead of you. Our words and actions matter, and they have a life of their own once we give them birth. So…what effects will your words and actions have today and in the years ahead? In what ways, both direct and indirect, seen and unseen, will your life impact the lives of others in your lifetime and beyond?

“Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” As a professor of religion and philosophy, I can’t help but point out that when Einstein said this, he was encapsulating the timeless wisdom of the ages. It’s not an original thought, as famous as Einstein may be for original thinking. Yet it is completely Einstein-ian in its attentiveness to reality, the reality of the world in which we live, even a deep reality of the universe. The world’s great religious and philosophical traditions through the ages agree with this great scientist’s assessment.1 Serving others is the key to having a life worthwhile, an honorable life that has value for you and for others and causes life to flourish.

Every organism affects its environment, and every environment affects its organisms. This means that your relationships and the communities to which you belong matter—they matter a great deal. Certainly, your PC experience has emphasized the importance of relationships and participation in community. But I want to stress again the critical importance of your relationships with all those you know and all those you come to know, as well as of your committed participation in the communities to which you belong, now and in the future.

Of first importance: relationships. Humans are relational beings. They are so relational that they can relate to everything in creation, from mosquitoes to elephants, from quarks to galaxies. No other organism in creation can relate like humans can to creation. On one hand, this highlights the enormous vocational possibilities that you have before you. On the other hand, it highlights the importance of your relational character. So the fundamental question here is not “whether or not you will relate to others.” The question, rather, is “what kind of relationships will you have?”

Will you see other people as the sisters and brothers they are? Or will you see them selfishly as objects for your own advantage? Will you treat them with kindness? Or will you attack them as opponents or enemies? Will you recognize their gifts and help them contribute to the common good? Or will you dismiss and ignore them? Will you try to understand views different from your own? Or will you try to impose your views on them? Will you care for this good earth? Or will you abuse and spoil it? What I’m asking is this: How self-centered or other-
centered will you be? How arrogant or humble will you be? To what extent will you strive to live by the PC motto, “While We Live, We Serve”?

Of course, there is a certain danger we all face in this regard, so treacherous are our egos. We can be well-intentioned and even be good and yet still do harm, even great harm, even in the name of God. While hiking in the Black Forest a few years ago with a close German colleague, I learned that his father had served in the Third Reich, a regime which had been supported by a majority of German citizens who wanted to make their nation great again. Before I could catch myself, I asked what that was like as a Christian family. He was silent for a good while as we continued our climb up the mountain. I was afraid I had overstepped the bounds of our friendship. At last, as we neared the summit, he stopped, turned to me, and said, “We learned that people who think they are the most right often do the most wrong.”

So, friends, be careful and considerate and humble in your relationships with other people, with creation, . . . and with God. Think about the impact of your words and actions, beforehand, when you can, but certainly afterward. Choose to be a blessing in all your relationships, and work to cause life to flourish, whatever you do, wherever you go. And remember: “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

Also of first importance, along with relationships, is community. You don’t have to be a Nobel Prize Winning scientist like Einstein to see that communities are important or that they are collapsing like dark matter all over the world. Humans are dehumanizing other humans and spoiling the earth. Communities are breaking apart, and the earth is groaning in travail. We are not unaffected by the demise of communities and the assault on the environment, here in our country, in our state, in our neighborhoods. We are not untouched by failures in community and caring for our world, even here at Presbyterian College.

Brokenness in relations and communities is bad, but it is especially bad when it happens—as it is happening—in any context of the Christian faith, because Jesus commanded his followers to love and serve one another, even to love and serve their enemies, which of course is only possible by the love of Christ at work in them. But we live in a culture that stresses self-fulfillment and independence over relationships and community.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of people, throughout history to this present day, who have lived and are living a life worthwhile in the service of others and for the betterment of communities and who model for us ways of building community. In no particular order or criteria of assessment, and only to get your own thoughts going, there are famous contributors in every field. Here are some of my personal favorites: In Art: Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci; In Music: Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven; In Religion: John Calvin, Martin Luther, Pope Francis, Mother Teresa; For Racial Equality: James Farmer and Martin Luther King, Jr., For Social Justice: Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi; For Women’s Rights: Malala Yousafzai; For the Environment: John Muir, Rachel Carson, Sigurd Olson, and Bob Marshall. On and on we could go.

There are also people whose names are known only to a few; some whose names are known only to God. There are people in our own lives whose example of self-sacrificing service in relationships and tireless efforts in strengthening communities has been and is life changing for us: parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, family members of every kind, teachers, coaches, ministers, rabbis, imams, colleagues, employers and employees, even strangers.

You get the picture. If we look, we will see all around us women and men, young and old, of every race and nation, people with and without jobs, with different degrees of education and no education, and from every religious, philosophical, political, and socio-economic location.
on the planet who both know and adhere to the universal truth of which I speak today: “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

Class of 2016, you are a great class, and you made a wise decision four years ago when you committed yourself to a relationship with this community called Presbyterian College. And over these past four years, we—the faculty and staff, your family and friends—have seen you grow in your capacities for good relationships and beneficial community engagements. Our lives are better because of you. You have also strengthened the PC community, a community that for over 136 years and now 133 graduating classes, has sought to be purposeful, open, caring, disciplined, just, and joyful. With your continued support from this day forward, there will be many more classes after you that will also learn more about life’s deep truth that “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”

Now, friends, it is time for you to receive your diplomas so you may go out into the world and make your life a blessing to others, even to the end that all the families of the earth and the earth itself be blessed. Wherever you go and whatever you do, dare to love your neighbor as yourself! Dare even to love your enemies! The world is literally dying for neighborly love and reconciling justice in pursuit of the common good. The world needs you, Class of 2016, and it is my great privilege, on behalf of the faculty, to charge each of you to go out into the world to build meaningful relationships and communities where everyone matters, where everyone is treated with kindness and justice, and where everyone experiences grace so that life will flourish.

And know for certain this timeless truth: “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” Or in the language of PC, “While We Live, We Serve.”

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1Jesus said, “Even as you do unto the least of these brothers and sisters, you do it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Fortunately, Christians do not have a monopoly on this Golden Rule and doing good to others. In Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not to your fellowman. In Hinduism: Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself. In Zoroastrianism: That nature alone is good which shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self. In Buddhism: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find harmful. In Confucianism: Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself. In Shintoism: Be charitable to all beings. In Islam: None of you is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself. In Sikhism: Don’t create enmity with anyone for God is with everyone. In Bahai: Blessed is he who prefers his brother before himself.