

Love Got You Here

Presented to the Commencement Ceremony

Pacific Rim Christian University

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Kawaiaha'o Church, Honolulu

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Members of the board, students, faculty, staff, families, friends, honored guests. Thank you for being part of this joyful ceremony this evening.

It is my privilege to share a few words with our graduates. My message is simple: *Love got you here. And love will get you where you need to go.*

It is a fact that none of us would be here without love: the love of God, our Creator, who gave us life and unique gifts, including the ability to learn; the love of Christ, who saved us, and taught us to use our knowledge to benefit others; and the love of the Holy Spirit, who encourages us to grow toward God and help others to grow toward God as well.

Then there is the love of our families, in many cases sacrificial love, supporting us from the first moments of our lives. Then there is the love of our friends, sharing our happy and not so happy moments. And here at the university, there is the love of the faculty and staff, committed to helping you grow in knowledge and faith, so that you can develop your gifts and advance the kingdom of God.

Love got you here. I am sure you worked hard, and I hope you feel good about what you have learned and the effort you put in to learning it. But we all depend on the love and support of others. I know you are thankful to God, and to your families, friends, faculty members, and staff members who have supported you so that your graduation today has become a reality.

Of course, new adventures await you. Love got you here, and love will also get you where you need to go next. Jesus was very clear about that.

As followers of Jesus, we are aware that he gave us two Great Commandments, and they are both about love—the commandment to love God, and the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Scot McKnight, who will be teaching at our university this summer, is the author of many books,

including *The Jesus Creed*. He points out that Jesus took the commandment to love God—the Jewish *Shema*—and added the second Great Commandment, which is to love others.

I think it is very significant that Christ *commanded* us to love others. It's not a *suggestion*. He did not say, "Please think about the possibility of maybe considering the idea of loving people, if you feel like it, and it is convenient, and you aren't too busy, and the people you consider loving are really lovable, and they will really appreciate your love." He didn't say to give it a try, but if we get tired, or it doesn't work out, we can just give up. No. There are no excuses, no exceptions, no escape clauses. We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, no matter what.

So why is that? Why are we *commanded* to love? Why isn't it just a suggestion? I can think of at least three reasons. First, that is how we come to know God best. Second, that is how we represent Christ best. Third, that is how we become our best.

First, when we love others, we come to know God. I am sure you know the Scriptural passage from 1 John 4:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

We are created by God, and we worship God. If we are to know God, love is the key.

Second, when we love each other, we demonstrate the love of Christ, and are known as his people. Jesus prayed during the Last Supper that we might be one, so that the world will believe that God sent him. At John 13 we find these familiar words:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

We want to share the Good News about Jesus with the rest of the world. Jesus said that others will know him by the love we show for each other. If we are to truly represent Christ, love is the key.

Third, when we love others, we become our best. I believe that we were created to love and be loved. That is how God designed us. We are designed to run on love. When we love others, we are more giving, more caring, more patient, more kind. When we love others, we become a gift to others. If we do not love others, we are not who we are *supposed* to be; we are not all that we *can* be; we are not doing what we were born to do.

Love is what the Christian life is about. It is why we are here. If we do not love others, we miss God's purpose for our lives. Without love, our lives can easily become meaningless. As we are reminded by the first verses of Corinthians 13, without love we are nothing, and we gain nothing. When we have love, the Holy Spirit lives in us, and we find meaning and deep happiness at every turn.

As you move forward on your journeys, I hope that you will nourish and will be nourished by love within your families. I know that I have been blessed in that regard. My earliest childhood memory is simple. I remember being in my mother's arms as a toddler, sitting with her in a chair, near a lamp with a soft yellow light. I don't know how long she held me, and I don't remember if she said anything. I just remember that I felt warm, I felt safe, and I felt loved. I wish every child could start life that way— warm, safe, and loved. My mother is now 92, and while her physical body is causing her trouble, her spirit is still strong. She is still a warm, loving person, filled with a graceful appreciation for life and for others.

My wife and I have three children, two girls and a boy. We have always tried to make it clear to them that we love them. They are adults now, but when they were young, one thing I used to do was to tuck them in at night and say the words that our kids called "the nice words." Night after night, year after year, I told each of our children: "I love you. You're a good kid. I like being your Daddy. I'm glad you're my daughter, I'm glad you're my son. I like being part of your family. I hope you have a good night's sleep." And then each daughter got a kiss on the cheek and my son got a pat on the head, and I turned out the lights.

Of course, there were some nights when I was angry at my kids for what they had done that day. There had been name calling, or hitting and shoving, or dishonesty, or the shirking of chores. When I tucked them in, I talked about that, and made it clear that what they had done was wrong, and it was important that they not do it again. Then I would say "the nice words." Sometimes the words were hard to say, but I wanted them to know that even if I was upset with their

behavior, I still loved them. When they behaved themselves I was happy, and when they didn't behave themselves, I was sad, but I loved them no matter what.

I kept saying "the nice words," year after year. Then the day came when our youngest daughter, Angela, let me know that she didn't need to hear "the nice words" anymore. I think what she meant was that she was a grown-up twelve-year-old, and "the nice words" were for little kids. I was surprised, but I said okay. Several nights went by without me tucking her in or saying "the nice words." Then one night, when I was working at my desk at home, I heard Angela calling down the staircase.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, honey."

"Aren't you going to come up and tuck me in? You didn't say the nice words yet."

"Oh. Okay," I said. And the nightly ritual began again. She still wanted to hear the words, and I still wanted to say them.

I think we're never too old to say the nice words, and we're never too old to hear the nice words. I'm sure that a lot of nice words are going to be shared here, this evening, among all of you.

Fortunately, loving people does not mean agreeing with them, or approving of their behavior. Love is deeper than agreement or approval. When I was 19, a college sophomore, I wrote something I called the Paradoxical Commandments. The first commandment was "People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway." I don't believe that all people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The point was that, even if they are, it's no excuse. You have to love people anyway. You don't want to limit your life by limiting your love.

In our families and friendships, love is unconditional. It has to be unconditional to survive the ups and downs of our relationships as we grow and develop and try to become who God wants us to be. It is not easy.

When our children were teenagers, unconditional love became both harder and more important. Our children were developing their own identities, and were focused on their friends, not their families, and certainly not their parents. In fact,

they let it be known that anything that we parents said was, pretty much by definition, not relevant or useful, and in any case, *very embarrassing*. We noticed that if one of their friends said something, it was considered highly intelligent. If we said the same thing, it was not considered intelligent at all. My wife and I were under the impression that, through no fault of our own, we had become two of the *dumbest* people on the entire planet. Now, ten years later, the five of us in our family are the closest we have ever been. Through no fault of our own, my wife and I are now two of the *smartest* people on the planet.

It reminds me of a story attributed to Mark Twain. He said that when he was 16, his father was unbearably ignorant. So he left home, wandered around the world, and worked at various jobs. Eight years later, at the age of 24, he returned home, and was astonished to see how much his father had learned in only eight years.

My wife and I think that parenting is a very humbling profession, and we know we are not perfect. My point is that love kept us together. Yes, I admit that there were times when we wondered if our cute pre-teen children had been kidnapped by aliens, and were not returned to us until they had become normal young adults, ten years later. But in any event, love was the glue that kept us together.

As I look back on my life, I realize that I have been fortunate to have many interesting jobs and experiences. I am grateful for all of them. But the moments that I cherish are the simple moments, such as the times we sat around our dinner table, all five of us, my wife and our three kids, talking and eating, teasing each other, laughing, and feeling the love, the togetherness, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Those are the moments I most want to remember, because those are the moments I cherish the most.

There are many journeys yet ahead of you, and some will be with your families. Others will be with your neighbors. When Jesus shared the second Great Commandment, he was asked: Who is our neighbor? In response, he told the story of the good Samaritan. Loving others means helping others. It means the parable of the sheep and the goats, giving drink to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, helping the sick, and providing hospitality to strangers. Around the world, God's children are suffering, and we are called to love and serve them. When we show our love for others, they will come to understand who sent us. Many will be ready to hear the Gospel. And so obeying the Great Commandments can help us to fulfill the Great Commission.

Love got you here, and love will get you where you need to go. Love is strong enough to sustain you and energize you as you move forward, serving God by serving others. If you love people and help people, your life will have meaning. As a result, when you look back at the end of your life, you won't have many regrets. You may not have any. You will have been who God wanted you to be. You will have done what God wanted you to do. Above all, you will not wonder why you have lived. You'll know. *You'll know*. And that is a blessing that I wish for each of you.

Again, congratulations! God bless you, and Godspeed.