

MEADVILLE LOMBARD  
theological school

CHARGE TO THE 2006 GRADUATING CLASS  
Meadville Lombard Theological School

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So, it has come down to this. After endless hours spent reading shelves full of books and responding to arcane arguments, after months devoted to practice and reflection; after uncounted opportunities for endless, deep self examination and unnumbered learning opportunities; after writing reams of papers and spending more money than any of us want to think about, it has all come down to this: A gaudy hood hung around your neck and a piece of nicely printed paper to hang on your wall. Like T. S. Eliots' world, theological school ends less with a bang than a whimper, and we send you off to make your way in the world.

Before you go, there is a secret I must share with you. Now you can be told that what is central to your success in ministry is not what you have learned, not what you know, important as that may be, but what you do not know and what we could not teach you. In a recent essay, Wendell Berry argues that the only way to make it safely through the kind of world in which we currently live is what he calls "the way of ignorance."

Berry reminds us that all our knowing, all our wisdom, all our convictions float in a vast sea of ignorance and misconception; that what we don't know, what we don't understand, what we cannot envision may be more important than all of our highly attested competencies and brightly burnished truths. Berry reminds us that behind all our brave assertions about the world, about truth, and about justice lie profound unasked, indeed, often half-formed questions. In light of that reality, he suggests, we are driven to embrace humility and mercy as the cardinal human virtues.

The great temptation we face as ministers is to assume that our knowledge and insights, while admittedly partial, are, nonetheless, sufficient. And so we go out to preach our truths, to share our convictions, to bring our enlightened compassion and demand for justice to a bleeding world. And thus, we fall into the trap of a very sophisticated idolatry, trying in subtle ways to conform reality to our understanding of it.

Curiously enough, ministry has never been about definitions or answers. It has always been about questions--questions too deep and profound for any of us to answer definitively in one lifetime. Ministry is not about understanding the mysteries but embracing the mysteries, living with the mystery, encouraging people to be comfortable with a world that is forever transforming itself in

ways we could not predict, and, in the process, transforming us as we cannot transform ourselves. Ministry has always been about asking the needed question at the right time. Ministry is rooted in trusting the unknown that is the rich source of all existence, the essentially unknowable out of which all being spirals.

And so, my charge to you as you leave this place is to carry with you the deep and abiding questions. In those moments when you are uncertain about your ability to meet the demands of your vocation, in those moments when you are overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of the world, in those moments when your own doubts undermine your confidence, I charge you to center yourself in the questions, in these questions: ask of yourself what is it I believe--understanding that belief and knowledge are not the same thing; ask of yourself in whose behalf do I act--knowing that we do not live for ourselves alone; of yourself to whom or to what am I responsible--affirming that our lives are lived in a larger, broader, deeper context, one that is rich with meaning beyond our comprehension.

Your success in following your calling will depend less upon your ability to marshal the facts, the knowledge, the learning you have spent so much time accumulating over these past years than upon your ability to be open to the deep, persistent questions and to hear the quiet, unsettling truths that the world is constantly whispering in your ear. So, wear that hood proudly, and hang that paper on the wall, but remember to embrace the questions, for it is in asking the questions that ministry acquires depth and power.

Blessings on you all