

“OF PARABLES AND TALENTS”

Commencement Address

by

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President Campbell, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, distinguished alumni, parents, spouses, friends and soon-to-be graduates:

Good morning to all of you. I am honored to join you today, both as speaker and as recipient of the doctorate of laws you have so kindly chosen to bestow upon me. Your generosity allows me to join in your celebration in a special way and touches me deeply. I thank all of you for this honor and I particularly want to thank Dr. Campbell, who has welcomed me so warmly to Virginia. I look forward to a long, productive association with Dr. Campbell and with his colleagues.

The honorary degree that I receive this morning carries particular significance for me because of the high value I place on the multitude of contributions that all of Virginia’s independent colleges make to our Commonwealth. The programs of Averett College figure prominently among this abundance—and that includes those programs, so well represented in today’s graduating class, which enable you who are already in the workforce to continue your formal education.

I am especially delighted to participate in the first commencement exercises to be held in the Grant Center. This capacious facility, anchoring the athletic center complex, reminds us that the goal of a college education is to develop the whole person—mind, soul, and body. Indeed, the old use of the word “gymnasium” to signify an academy of learning used to reinforce for us the integrated education of body and mind, once espoused by Plato. This magnificent facility also calls to mind the munificence and the profession of its donor, the late E. Stuart James Grant. The freedom of the press and the intellectual freedom of the academy pull in tandem to produce the educated citizenry that is the bedrock on which American democracy rests. It is particularly fitting, therefore, to see this edifice—made possible by the publisher and founder of the Danville Register and Bee—housed within the academy while also intended as a resource for the entire community. Averett is blessed to have such support from the community and the college and, in turn, gives much to the community.

My remarks to you this morning highlight the use we make of the many gifts we each are given in our lives. It will not surprise you, I think, to hear that this son of a Baptist minister turned, as I have so often before, to Scripture to prepare my remarks. Nor do I so merely because this college yet embraces its Christian heritage and values. The parables were explained by the Master as mysteries to all but them who had “eyes to see” and “ears to hear.” With Scripture I invoke that power of poetic intervention that makes light and sound in the work of understanding.

In Matthew 25:14, I read these words:

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Matthew then tells us that “he who had received five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents.” Likewise, the man with two talents doubled his by putting them to use. But the third man—the man who had been given but one talent—hid that money in the earth.

When the time of reckoning came, the lord of these men praised the two who had multiplied their talents, saying to each of them, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.” But the fellow who had hidden his lone talent was cast into darkness.

Our lessons from this parable are plain enough. Speaking to a graduating class in which business degrees—at both the baccalaureate and master’s level—predominate, I hardly need point out the aspect of the parable that encourages wise financial investment. I might suggest, however, that you would be well challenged today to double your funds within so short a time—not withstanding the robust economy we have recently enjoyed!

I want, rather, to draw our attention to this message of the parable: As stewards of those talents and other gifts that have been granted to us, we each are charged with their growth and sound utilization.

Each graduate here this morning possesses unique, God-given talents. Your class brought a multitude of talents to Averett College. By entering into your studies, you placed your trust in the faculty, staff, and your fellow students. You had faith that they would prove wise and caring custodians of that trust and would invest themselves in your attainments. You hoped and believed that they would foster the development and multiplication of your talents.

I am confident you found that your trust was well placed. One of many accolades that I have heard about Averett is that this college makes the success of its students job number one. This commitment to the students is a palpable presence to those currently enrolled and a fond, proud remembrance of alumni. Indeed, you would not be here, receiving these diplomas, if not for the diligent efforts of your teachers and the throng of staff who serve in supporting roles. We celebrate their work and convey to them our shared appreciation.

We ought, also, to recognize the support that each graduate has received from families, friends, and perhaps your employer. That support takes many forms—financial, emotional, the gift of confidence in you, and the willingness to structure family activities so as to enable you to pursue your studies.

The focus of our celebration today, however, is on the labors and the success of you students who are about to receive this outward certification of your attainments. You know that the person who is ultimately responsible for how your talents are increased and how they are put to use is you. It is fitting for you to reflect with pride on your accomplishments and to consider how you have developed—in mind, soul, and body—during your time at Averett.

The fact that so many of you have carried out your studies while also managing the responsibilities of work and family makes your achievements all the greater—while in no way diminishing the accomplishments of those fortunate enough to pursue collegiate or graduate studies full-time. Today we commend all of you and proclaim our pride in what you have done.

A commencement, as the name implies, is a time to look forward as well as back. And so, we not only reflect upon what you have accomplished but also look ahead with anticipation to what you will do next. Now that you have honed and increased your talents, how will you put them to work anew?

In *The Web and the Rock*, Thomas Wolfe wrote:

If a man has a talent and cannot use it, he has failed. If he has a talent and uses only half of it, he has partly failed. If he has a talent and learns somehow to use the whole of it, he has gloriously succeeded, and won a satisfaction and a triumph few men ever know.¹

Our hope—indeed our expectation—for you is that you will know that triumph, or, if you have known it already, that you will encounter that satisfaction again and again, in new and expanded ways throughout your lives. Our prayer for you is that you will put your talents to work not only in pursuit of economic gain but also in service to your family, friends, colleagues, community, and nation. We pray that you, remembering the many gifts that have been given to you, will repay those kind investments with your goal to “transform everything you touch into something finer, worthier, and more useful,” as the president of another Virginia college has urged many graduating classes before. In pursuing that goal, you will not only change the lives of others, you will make your own life happier and more fulfilling.

As Albert Schweitzer said, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know. The only ones among us who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve humanity.”

You will each discover the unique set of services you can offer to humanity. That service can take many shapes. For some, the contours of your service will be found within your chosen profession. For others, the demands of raising a family may require that you give your greatest gifts within the home for some number of years. I hope that many of you will apply your talents in service to your community on school boards, through civic organizations, through the work of your church, and perhaps as elected officials.

We remember that the lessons from Matthew 25 do not teach us only that we are accountable for how we use our talents. At the heart of the parable is a forceful message about our fundamental obligation to care for our fellow beings:

For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

We each have opportunities, daily, to put our talents to use in care and service to those around us.

There is one special category of care and service that I want to highlight—namely, that of teaching. I hope that many members of this graduating class will take up the work of teaching—whether as your chosen profession, as the first and foremost teachers of your children, as tutors to at-risk learners, as Sunday-school teachers, or as mentors to those who follow you in the professions in which you will mature and thrive. Education is one of the greatest gifts we can receive in this life. Insofar as we, as a society, are able to offer that gift, we have a moral duty to do so.

Education carries with it an inescapable stewardship responsibility. As educators, we are charged to aid in developing the talents of the students whose learning is entrusted to us. Having taught nearly

¹ Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 431.

continuously for the past thirty years, I know first-hand that teaching offers much joy at the same time that it demands us to give of ourselves liberally, with deep care and respect for the student with whom we engage. I might add that learning, no less than teaching, offers that same opportunity for joy while demanding a giving of oneself. Every teacher knows that we learn from our students even as they learn from us. We grow our talents together.

Each of Virginia's colleges and universities—both public and private—brings its own unique set of talents to these acts of teaching and learning. The talents of a given institution may find their fullest and most ideal expression in the college's statement of mission. The realization of that talent finds its fullest expression in the lives of its alumni.

Our institutions, too, are stewards of talent. We must judge them in the spirit of the parable, as good and faithful servants, when we see that they have added value to each talent entrusted to their care.

At the same time, each institution is itself a talent, entrusted to our stewardship. We will be called to answer for what we have done with each of these talents. If ever you wonder why I devote such effort to talking up Virginia higher education and urging upon it continuous quality improvement, it is because I am determined to add value to the talent entrusted to me, to see the good we enjoy multiplied for the enjoyments of ages to come.

The heart of all education is liberal education. That is the great multiplier that extends skills beyond occupations, raises hopes beyond class and status, and informs opinions beyond prejudices. Our most successful institutions offer students increasing knowledge and confidence in their judgments of their own needs and what is good for them. We praise the doing so. But we ask yet more: that our institutions assure that every graduate will attain not only a clear, critical understanding of their own needs and skills but also a sensitive and well-informed understanding of the needs of others. That is the value added that multiplies talents not only at the individual level but at the institutional level as well. That is the heart of quality in higher education.

One of the guiding principles in SCHEV's emerging strategic plan is quality. We define quality, in part, as the "enhancement of an already robust, vigorous higher education system by maintaining the distinctive missions for each of the constituent institutions." With each added visit that I make to another Virginia campus, my awareness deepens of how blessed we are in the Commonwealth to have a system of higher education that offers so much to so many. Even so, our aim remains one of continuous improvement.

One of my jobs, as director of SCHEV, is to inform the Governor, the General Assembly, and the public at large of the quality of our system of higher education. While it is easy to describe quality in general terms, it remains a challenge to articulate, in clear, unambiguous ways, the value that we add to the lives of our students. I will need your help in this work.

Luke tells us, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48). The Commonwealth of Virginia—blessed with a system of higher education of such quality and talent; blessed with public and private institutions alike that achieve such distinction—has a responsibility to act as a wise steward of these gifts.

Some of that stewardship falls to the Council members, who have set quality, access and affordability as principles to guide their work. Substantial accountability for that stewardship rests with the boards of visitors and the boards of trustees. The faculty and staff of our colleges and universities have a central role, and we see in your accomplishments today clear evidence of their success.

I believe, also, that each of us here today has a share in this collective stewardship. I trust that each citizen of Virginia present this morning will recommit to participate through public forums, private donations, conversations with legislators, service on boards and advisory committees, and with your ballot to help shape, support, and extend the blessings we have in our colleges and universities. I trust that the faculty and administrators of Averett College will continue to excel in nurturing this growth in many graduating classes yet to come. I trust that you in the graduating class will be generous in attributing to your *alma mater* the important contributions it has made to your own growth in intellect, character, knowledge, and skills.

You perhaps imagined that you had been charged for the last time. You met the final due date, turned in the last paper, completed the final exam. I am sure that you did it all well, distinguishing yourselves by accepting challenges to work and study in a rigorous program, persisting in the face of daily reminders that your study and application were conditions not of excellence alone but of self-respect. You won the honor of being able to say, "I can do it." So now you may think of yourselves as having joined Sir Edmund Hillary atop Mount Everest.

In fact, even here I remind you—and I know your faculty joins me—that what you have done with them has been only training for what the world will demand of you every day from now on. I don't expect you to be daunted by this realization. That is why I summon you to celebrate today and stand ready to take up our work tomorrow.

As you strive to multiply your talents, you will discover in your education a resource that is still with you. We will no longer give you assignments, but you can still call on the education you have received. Remember that. And God go with you.