

*A Celebration of Graduates*

Ephesians 1:17-19

It's our custom in this church to take a Sunday, usually right about now, to honor members of our congregation and our families and friends who are graduating this year. We usually have to schedule this day around all kinds of ceremonies and parties and grad nights—not only here in Los Altos, but all over the country—because it's not only high school graduations we honor, but colleges and graduate schools. The children of this church, and grandchildren, and honorary children and community children are our joy and our pride. They reflect the best of us. **You** reflect the best of us.

This year feels different. This year graduations and celebrations have been different. They've been done across physical separation. Even at this moment, we're worshipping in our own homes, with only our own families around us. Usually, we talk about a world full of hope and optimism for our graduates. Instead, today, we're pausing for a moment of respite from a week that has reminded us over and over again that the world our graduates enter this year contains a lot of uncertainty and inequity and mistrust.

And yes, the picture of graduation this year might have a darker background than it has in past years. But that darkness is allowing something else to show up in the foreground of the image, something that has been there all along but that sometimes gets lost in the flurry of speakers and parties and ceremonies. It's the graduates themselves. No one has to fill them up with new life and purpose on the day they graduate; they already have those things. They carry them in their energetic bodies and curious minds and thirsty spirits. They *are* our hope for a better world. *They* are the graduation speakers who bring the message that says this world is going to be all right. Watch them, these graduates of 2020:

Video of graduates

I want to say a few words to you who are graduating this year. The rest of you are welcome to overhear.

I know that coronavirus took over your senior year. That demonstrations and riots about a whole history of injustice have overshadowed the weeks of your graduation. That colleges and jobs and opportunities have temporarily shut their doors instead of throwing out their arms and greeting you like they were supposed to. You are not moving from one chapter of your life into the next the way anyone else has done before.

But what if these interruptions and changes aren't taking away your special moment? What if they are making your moment?

It's all in how you tell the story.

I'm asking you today to think about this question: What is your story? What is the story you will tell—not just to your grandchildren, but *now*, this year, this fall, this summer—about how you are connected to this moment in human history?

This—this choice about how to tell your story—is the most important decision you will make this year. It's more important than where you go to college or what you're going to do next with that degree you're holding in your hand.

And maybe even more important than your own story is this question: What is the bigger story you want your life to be part of?

The story you choose to tie yours to matters. The work of our lives is linking our individual stories to the biggest story we can imagine.

If the biggest story you can imagine is *My people are the best*—my school, or my church, the town I came from, the profession I choose, even my country— then that's the narrative that will shape your life. Everything else will seem small and pale. You will spend your life making every other group smaller, so that yours can look bigger.

If the story is *Successful people win at every thing they try*, then your world will be limited by the possibility of failure, and you'll be reluctant to risk something big, even for something good.

If it's *Making a lot of money is the key to living well*, your choices have already been defined for you.

You get it.  
Choose a bigger story.

Christians are people who are defined by the story they have attached themselves to. It's a story that says the universe is ultimately a safe place, because it was made by a Creator who loves every living thing in it so much, so passionately, so stubbornly, that God simply can't leave it alone. Came and lived in it himself, at a time that was just as chaotic as this one. A story that says God stays here with us, keeps forgiving us, lets us start again—no matter how many times we mess this world up—by our bad choices, our blindness, our refusal to take care of each other.

It's the story that says we are all connected to something Infinite, Someone infinitely loving.

If you imagine yourself a character in *that* story, if your choices are part of *that* plot, it changes everything. Then the story you are writing with your life isn't meaningless or absurd, or tragically unfortunate, or hunting around for some purpose.

Your life isn't just about your story. You're part of *the* Story. With your life, you are creating a piece of God's story of love and justice and healing.

This spring, the coincidence of your age and your educational path and what's happening in the world has planted you squarely at the door of some of the greatest challenges this world has ever faced.

This is what is being asked of you: To think about—to decide—how you will tell the story of this year, and your life in this time, and your graduation. Will it be a story about disappointed expectations and traditions you missed out on? Or will it be a story of how you joined this generation's calling to rise up to meet some of the biggest challenges of this century?

Is your story about what has been lost, or is it about your place in a great drama that is just beginning to take shape?

Because in the midst of all that is going on right now, this story is also true: You, and your family, your school, your community, your church, your country came together in this year you will never forget, to protect the most vulnerable among us from the most deadly virus anyone has seen for a hundred years. You are part of a great, generous, care-filled coming together that happened, ironically, by separating from one another. You gracefully gave up your traditional graduation celebrations, because this is what caring for each other required.

And we thank you for that. We hear and honor your sacrifice with gratitude and wonder and admiration. You too are our heroes.

Bless you, graduates of 2020, this extraordinary year. This is our prayer for you, as it was Paul's prayer for people he loved and who he had great confidence in, just like we have it in you: We pray that the God of the universe, who was strong and humble enough to come to earth as a baby, will fill you with wisdom. That you will know God more and more, and know how near to you God is. That the eyes of your heart will be open and filled with light, so that you will know—*know*—the hope of this story you are part of, the unimaginable richness of the life God wants for you, and the greatness of God's power for goodness that you hold and carry inside of you. It is beyond all measure, bigger than any challenge you will ever face.

Amen.