

THE MEASURE OF GREATNESS
Southern Nazarene University
Commencement address
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In early March of this year, on a Saturday evening in Manila, the Philippines, I sat in a coffee shop with two SNU alumni, Julie and Brian Woolery. Brian is the Asia Pacific Regional coordinator for Nazarene Youth International. Julie teaches English, and both are graduate students at the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila.

During the conversation that evening, the enjoyable discussion shifted to the rather serious probing of caring for others. Julie was a Social Work major at SNU; Brian majored in Theology. Both were resident directors during the last two years of university life. They were leaders on this campus. They are leaders in their present assignments. They will continue to be leaders in their vocations in the years to come. Just like many of you!

In the midst of the seemingly heavy Saturday evening conversation, the comment was made, “caring for others is the measure of greatness.” Not brilliance in the classroom, money in the bank, status nor position. But, “caring for others... is the measure of greatness.”

I’ve been thinking about the discussion in Manila with Brian and Julie. What does “caring for others” look like in the real world and everyday realities in which you *presently and in the future* will live, work and *lead*?

I read of a former pro basketball star who said, speaking of his university basketball coach, “My development as a person was as important to him as my development as a player.” What a compliment to a coach, parent, friend, employer, employee, university administrator or faculty member whose priority concern is a person to be developed and not a “thing” or “It” to be manipulated. It is greatness, indeed, when we focus more on the *person* around us than on our *power or position*.

Three questions have captivated me during my years in Christian higher education:

Question #1. How can we live together as a diverse faith community in such a way that our relationships are *redemptive* and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?

Question #2. If, “in Christ, all things are made new,” then how does our relationship with Christ convert or *transform* the way we live and lead?

Question #3. In conflict situations, especially when *seemingly irreconcilable expectations* are placed on the leader, how can we lead in those situations, really lead, with “the mind of Christ”?

These are leadership questions, and our responses to them will, I believe, determine **our** measure of greatness. When good and godly people differ and often collide with us over vision and values, *great* leaders choose to “care deeply.”

CARING LEADERS:

#1. Speak Gracefully. They watch the words they use. Words spoken can bless or “destroy” people.

According to Eph. 4:25, God uses the words spoken to others within the Body of Christ to extend His grace through us to them. What a powerful and probing thought! Choose to “bless” people with your words.

#2. Live Gratefully. Comparison can eat us alive. It feeds the sense of inferiority many of us have experienced. In the good days and the not so good days, don’t whine (cry)—*chose* to be grateful.

Christians can feel good about themselves—gifts, talents, and abilities—until we compare ourselves with the gifts, talents, and abilities of *other* people.

What is the antidote to comparison? Three profound biblical qualities:

Gratitude!

Thankfulness!

Appreciation!

In every situation, choose to be grateful (1 Thess. 5:18).

Caring Leaders speak *gracefully* and live *gratefully*. They also:

**#3. Listen Intently. They seek first to understand.
Understanding, not agreement, is the key to conflict management.**

Believe that good and godly people *can* have honest and intense differences. Yes. Good and godly people sometimes *collide* over vision and values. You may have testimonies to this reality!

This is why servant leaders must possess a *theological* vision (what you believe about people/what you see in them). Theological vision precedes *organizational* vision (what you want for the church, university, graduate school, or workplace). God can give us “eyes” to really see the people with whom we live and work and “ears” to really hear what they want and need to say to us.

In the book, "The Leadership Challenge" by Kouzes and Posner (Jossey-Bass, 1995), three central themes are identified in the values of highly successful, strong-culture organizations:

- a. High performance standards,
- b. A sense of uniqueness and pride.
- c. A caring attitude toward people.

The authors conclude, "Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of the head."

#4. Forgive Freely. Caring leaders are proactive in extending forgiveness. A spirit of forgiveness transforms and empowers leaders.

Remember the words of Jesus on the Cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, KJV). Was Jesus naïve? No. Jesus was not going to permit what others *said* against Him or the evil they *did* against Him to create a bitterness or resentment *within* Him and thereby create a rupture in the relationship with God.

Caring Leaders speak gracefully, live gratefully, listen intently and forgive freely. They also:

5. Lead Humbly. Leaders must be decisive and avoid paralysis. They seldom enjoy the luxury of having all the information they need before making necessary decisions. Arrogance does not characterize caring leaders. Rather, they lead with grace and humility.

Leaders move between two competing needs: the need for long-range and strategic planning for our assignments and the need for the daily routine of budget balancing, personnel development, facility maintenance, and the management of the myriad of interpersonal conflicts. *Caring* leaders balance these twin and sometimes conflicting responsibilities with great grace and much humility. They lead from their knees.

Affirming, respecting, caring and praying for others, especially those with whom you differ—even collide—is at the heart of what it means to “lead with the mind of Christ.”

To lead decisively with *grace and humility* demands that you and I continue to develop and nurture:

- Listening and communicating skills,
- Timing and processing skills,
- Affirming and encouraging skills,
- Asking and Inquiring skills, and
- Delegation and empowering skills.

Yes. *Asking* the right questions and then *listening* to the responses given are critical leadership skills that reflect a significant dimension of caring for others with whom we live and work.

In leading collaboratively with a bias toward people, not power, you and I increasingly communicate to others that we care deeply for them as we:

1. Honor *their* time.
2. Value *their* work.
3. Build *their* confidence.
4. Increase *their* competence.
5. Support *their* decisions.

6. Hear *their* words.
7. Network *their* ideas.
8. Affirm *their* dreams.
9. Simplify *their* assignments.
10. Strengthen *their* faith.

The evidence of leadership is seen in the lives of the followers.

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, talks about the critical characteristics of leaders. He speaks of *humility and fierce resolve* as essential for level 5 or top leaders. Whatever else you discover in Christians functioning at level 5 leadership, you will also find that they:

1. Speak Gracefully. They watch the words they speak.
2. Live Gratefully. They don't whine but are grateful.
3. Listen Intently. They seek first to understand.
4. Forgive Freely. They are proactive in extending forgiveness.
5. Lead Humbly. They harness the power of community life and make decisions with much grace and deep humility.
6. Care Deeply. They value people, not power.

CONCLUSION

Back to Manila. Near the end of March I took Julie and Brian on a Saturday evening to a "Texas Roadhouse Restaurant" in Manila. Yes, in Manila. Remember, Julie is from Texas!

Interestingly, with us that evening was a Japanese man, a fellow student at APNTS, whose wife and son had recently returned to Tokyo for a few weeks in order for the son to enroll in a Japanese university. Brian and Julie were concerned that this Japanese student, and their best friend on campus, a former missionary to Taiwan, and fluent in four languages, was lonely without his family and not eating properly as he studied many hours to complete his semester assignments.

In and of itself, treating a Japanese friend to his first ever full slab of ribs is not necessarily a sign of caring...or of greatness. But when you place this seemingly small evening event along with numerous other unrelated events and expressions of kindness, to this Japanese student and to other students as well, it begins to speak of a pattern of caring for others...and of greatness.

Many simple, unrelated and random acts of kindness begin to make a big, very big statement. They care for others.

To each member in the class of 2008, be known as one who goes around doing good, not just at home but in the community, congregation, graduate school, and in the workplace, especially with those who differ with you over vision and values. Let your gentleness be known to all.

Happy are those who dream big God-inspired dreams ...of caring for others, especially those with whom you live and work. Determine to make this care and concern for others – this gentleness and kindness-- *your* measure of greatness! Amen.

5/17/08

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