

Franklin College Baccalaureate Address May 2020

Good morning!

Thank you, President Prather, for introducing me so kindly and inviting me to share this day with Franklin College's graduates. It's an honor for me to be counted among them. It's humbling, too, to become part of a history that began almost 200 years ago with a faith-filled preacher who believed in the promise of combining manual labor with liberal arts education in pioneer country, and a history that continues today with the College's courageous efforts to prepare a new generation for meaningful lives in uncharted, even perilous times.

CONGRATULATIONS to you graduates! You made it! And congratulations also to your loved ones, your teachers (from kindergarten to senior seminars) – to all who supported you along the way. This isn't the ceremony that you expected, but this IS the big day you've long anticipated. We are proud of and we celebrate your achievement. God willing, we hope still to come together face-to-face in the fall, a true homecoming. But today we mark the completion and awarding of your degrees – a long journey with triumphs and some unexpected curves along the way.

Today is a time, too, to give thanks. As Maya Angelou said, Thank You is the message that's right in every season and at every turn on the road. I'm honored to speak for you graduates – sharing your thanks TO all and FOR everyone who has accompanied you: *Thanks* to your parents and families, *Thanks* to teachers

and mentors and coaches; *Thanks* to upperclasswomen and men who set a high standard with their example, underclasswomen and men who are following your example; and *Thanks* to the close friends you've made here and whom you sorely miss today. Let's say *Thanks* for all who gave you the opportunity you embraced, with all of its challenges and rewards.

In the last months, you've had to reframe what it is to be a "senior." What looked at the time like an extended spring break has turned into a long and lonely slog as you cleared the last hurdles – exams, papers, senior projects – but in isolation without the camaraderie of classmates. You've missed the spring sports seasons, the concerts and banquets and honors – those were expectations that you formed even in your freshman year, all kinds of "last things" that you looked forward to which you have had to sacrifice. Your sacrifice, though, has in fact been life-giving to another kind of "seniors" – senior citizens like me – whose lives you have truly saved and are saving still today by your commitment to social distancing. You've been better seniors than MOST OF us who've gone before you – you kept your priorities straight, connected to one another and to your dedicated faculty by Zoom, staying in touch, staying safe, saving lives.

Along the way, I think we have discovered that reframing is what a liberal arts education is really all about. At the core, it's not about the content of your major or getting a professional credential for your first job. Through your college years and the past 8 weeks, you've built the skills of adaptiveness, you've honed your resilience, you've seen yourself and the issues we face from multiple perspectives, engaging locally and connecting globally. The diploma you have

earned testifies to this fact: what you have done at Franklin, who you have BECOME at Franklin, has prepared you well for the unexpected world we have just begun to inhabit: we are interdependent in new ways, newly alert to the needs of our kin around the world, required to keep your footing on shaky ground.

We are not, of course, the first to have been called to a sudden, unsettling reframing of our expectations. Some of you, I'm sure, recognize the familiar passage we've just heard – the Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel in the Christian Scriptures. You may not remember the context of the Beatitudes, though. Jesus has just left a period of extended isolation in the desert – 40 days, we're told, about as long as we've been isolated this spring. After surviving the tests of the desert, he begins to build a community, calling Peter and Andrew and James and John by name – to join him in his new work. In the very next scene, his new team is surrounded by crowds on a mountain. They are starry-eyed to play lead roles in a new kingdom, ready to celebrate their new and important life.

And what do they hear? Not at all what they expected! Instead of the privileged positions they'd thought he was giving them, Jesus lays out a fundamental reframing of priorities – turning expectations about the Kingdom upside down with God's preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. In just a few days with him, the disciples had already gotten comfortable, as we often do, with the idea that their sacrifices would give them a sure entitlement, a reward that they deserved. But it was not about entitlement, it was about empowerment for

new forms of service: solidarity with the poor, the persecuted, all those who mourn.

Your mentors at Franklin College understand this mission clearly, requiring that community service is very important – along with the course credits you earned.

We could make the same mistake as the disciples, believing that an excellent education is a guarantee of an easier life. In the last weeks, just as the disciples did, we've learned an important new vocabulary. We've recognized our vulnerability, and we've had to sacrifice; we've come to see ourselves in solidarity with a suffering world – and we've come to know in this unexpected time that we are, in ways we barely understand, really blessed.

Three or four months ago, as you looked forward to this day, you must have pictured that you would march from here, in caps and gowns – through applause and balloons to parties and vacations, then into sure and promising futures in a solid economy, with your diplomas as a trustworthy GPS in your hands. Instead, you're celebrating in your homes, separately – wearing God knows what and heading God knows where. The map may be fuzzy, but, your eyes are open. And in your separateness, you are not alone. You are empowered by all you've learned, and are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, whose abiding love and company you can trust and whose work we know that you are ready to share. I look forward to reports of all that you discover in the days and years ahead – someday, God willing, even meeting you face-to-face.

In the meantime, Congratulations to EACH of you!

Be safe!

May God bless your hopes and your endeavors.