

The Gift of Joy

- *School of Law*
- *Baccalaureate Mass*
- *May 17, 2019*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

The Baccalaureate Mass for the graduating students of the Seattle University School of Law is intended to be a moment of quiet reflection on a busy weekend, a gathering in a sacred space to acknowledge what is sacred in life and in service in the law, and a gift to the graduates and their families. The gift that I would like to speak about is the gift of joy, the joy that you can experience in how you serve others through the law and the joy of how you can live your lives.

I start with the well-known sentence from the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The words in this sentence which are capitalized are Creator, Rights, Life, Liberty, and Happiness. In them we are approaching something sacred. Indeed all people, because of their sacred status, have rights to life, liberty and the opportunity to pursue happiness. These cannot be taken away from them, alienated from them, because of their sacred dignity.

I would like to borrow from David Brooks’ recent book, The Second Mountain. The Quest for a Moral Life, to reflect more deeply on this. Brooks distinguishes between happiness and joy. Happiness is indeed pursued and all should have the opportunity for that pursuit because happiness is the result of striving, accomplishing, working, winning. That’s the first mountain and all should have the right, the opportunity, to climb it. You are on that mountain in your careers in the law or in the use of the law. It is good, it is necessary; all have a right to climb their first mountain of accomplishment, and by this climb, this pursuit, find happiness.

But there is another mountain, a second mountain, beyond this one which is not about one’s own accomplishment or pursuit of goals or of winning but is the mountain of the giving of oneself to others, forgetting oneself and one’s success, focusing on the good of others and doing this not from afar but by being in relationship, in kinship with others whether in work, or in marriage, or in community, or in calling. What one experiences on this second mountain is not happiness but joy. One does not seek joy but finds it, experiences it, or joy finds us in this givenness to others. If I were to draw a parallel with the famous triple rights in the Declaration of Independence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, I would speak of the three experiences of service, kinship, and joy. That is the gift I wish for you at this Baccalaureate Mass in what lies ahead of you, the gift through service of others, of kinship and joy.

The Servant we read about in the Prophet Isaiah is fully the one who is given over to others, humbly, quietly, called and grasped for justice, for the blind, the poor, prisoners in darkness. This kind of servant experiences the spirit of God, joy and light in dedication of others, covenant or kinship with others and with God. This kind of servant is chosen by God, upheld by God, is

the delight of God, experiences second-mountain joy. This too can be yours; you are chosen for and called to it.

The gospel shows this by way of a contrast. Crowds flock to Jesus of Nazareth because no one speaks as he does, they pursue him in order to be relieved of their unclean spirits, they seek to touch him because power comes from him for their healing. All well and good. All first mountain. But then by way of contrast he raises his eyes toward his disciples in their service to and with the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, the excluded, the insulted. He tells them to rejoice and leap for joy for how they and those with whom they are in kinship will find the very reward of God being with them. This topsy-turvy vision is the ultimate second mountain, the mountain of God, the mountain not of inalienable rights but unexplainable joy. This is the gift I wish you going forward from this day.

I believe the mission or motto of your School of Law is “A life in the law at the service of justice.” That’s a good one and very Jesuit. However, just this week Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, who works with gangs in L.A. said in a talk held at S.U. and I quote him, “I see service as only the hallway that leads to the ballroom of kinship.” He sees all work on behalf of justice, equal rights, overcoming poverty and discrimination as necessary steps toward the real goal which is kinship among people, and there, only there, in that relationship is joy.

You don’t get out of a homily by Father Steve without a little bit of poetry, for poetry goes below the surface of our lives, lived most often in first-mountain climbs to happiness, and reveals a deeper dimension of life. The poet Jack Gilbert helps us understand how only a life lived with joy is worth living:

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

I believe what I have said about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness being the proper rights we most secure for all by law is true; and that the experience of service, kinship, and joy being our fuller, truer, and deeper possibility is also true. There is, however, something even beyond joy which must be left to each of us in our faith in God or in our search for the sacred. Again, a poet says it best, Richard Wilbur. I give him the last word in what I hope you are experiencing in this Baccalaureate Mass as a quiet reflection on a busy weekend, a gathering in a sacred space, and a personal gift for you. Richard Wilbur ends one of his poems about a brook, and I end these remarks with his words:

Joy’s trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy.