

We Stand on Sacred Ground

- Baccalaureate Mass
- June 13, 2015
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

We stand on sacred ground. This hill rising up from the bay was and still is the sacred land on which the original peoples, the first nations, the Coastal Salish Peoples lived. Where this city and cathedral and our own campus stand was densely forested with evergreen trees, and among them the most majestic was the Red Cedar. I'm told it was so dense you could not work through it. Down this hill and right through our campus where now we have chapel, bookstore, Law School, and University Park ran streams, up which salmon from the ocean and bay fought in order to spawn. This very pulpit, made of cedar, with a tree carved on it, is a remembrance of this sacred ground on which we stand. We Jesuits were explicitly invited by the people to come into this land 174 years ago. Actually, all of us are guests here of the original people whose land this is. We are not resented by them, but welcomed in their customary hospitable ways. They ask of us only that they be respected, acknowledged for who they are, and allowed their sovereignty. This land was sacred before we came here; we did not make it sacred by our coming. We can live in harmony with our hosts if we live with gratitude for the gift of this land by the Great Spirit of this land to them and if we accept their welcome of us upon it as grateful guests. We stand on sacred ground.

Of everything that was sacred of this land, the most sacred was and is the majestic Red Cedar. It was given by the Great Spirit for longhouse, for canoe, for clothing, for medicine, for life. The Red Cedar so tall and yet so graceful, so straight and yet so bending down in its generosity is, perhaps, our hosts' strongest image of the life-giving Spirit. How wonderful, and more than coincidental, that on this graduation weekend we hear the prophet Ezekiel speak of the image of the cedar! The prophet says God will take a tender new growth shoot from the topmost branch of the high cedar and plant it on a mountain and it will grow up strong and tall and wide with branches as a dwelling place for the birds. The prophet says it will "become a majestic cedar", so majestic that, as it were, all the other trees will bend down in respect.

This is an image of what God can do with what is most tender and still small. Our friends, our hosts, on the land know this. It was already an image for the Great Spirit before Ezekiel the Prophet far away in Israel was inspired to proclaim it as an image of the creating and bestowing and loving God. It is an image for you this day of how what is still a tender shoot of your education can be made by God and God's Spirit into something majestic within which you can welcome others to dwell. Allow the image of the cedar—and, particularly in our land, the great Red Cedar—to be your image of what God's Spirit can and wants to do in you. Be grateful and respectful as you stand on your own sacred ground.

Jesus himself picks up on this in two little image-stories. How Jesus loved those image-stories which we call parables. No wonder our original hosts on this land, the Coastal Salish Peoples, find such a friend and elder in Jesus. He says what God is bringing about, what God is at work building, is like the seed a farmer sows and waits patiently as it becomes on its own and beyond the farmer's comprehension so much more than what was sown, yet fully arising from the seed,

becomes a harvest ripe with blade and ear and full grain. Jesus tells another image-story of how what God is doing is like planting one smallest of all seeds, a mustard seed, which should grow up into a small bush, but because it is planted and nourished by God, becomes against all expectations the largest of plants with large branches under whose shade the birds come and dwell. It's as if the mustard seed became as big as the Red Cedar! Jesus knew his prophets but he knows God more deeply, so he goes far beyond the prophets in his seeing and his telling. He is more than a prophet; he is the Son of God.

A seed is sown by God at all times in our lives, obviously in the lives of the parents and families proudly and gratefully here today at this harvest time. The focus today, however, is on you the graduates. Perhaps your parents and families today are like the birds who find happy shade under your branches! I ask you to reflect on what small seed, perhaps the smallest of all, was sown in you in your Seattle University education. Was it a throw-away comment by a professor, unaware of how important something he or she said was, potent for you and found good soil in you? Was it a spark of life and affection from a classmate or roommate or friend which taught you more than a whole five-credit course? Was it a child in a neighborhood public school, a homeless person, an elderly or ill person whom you thought you were serving but who served you and was the instrument for God to plant a small seed in you which can grow into a great tree?

You too stand on sacred ground, the ground of your own land, your own original life, the life given you by God the Creator with the cooperation of your parents, the sacred ground of your life with its own creeks, streams, struggling salmon, grand cedars. This ground of your life God loves. God has planted in you during your years of education seeds which are small but powerful, simple but promising, contained but meant to explode, buried but eager to come to light, seemingly secular or ordinary but actually sacred and godly. Perhaps like the farmer in Jesus' image-story you are like that farmer of your own sacred ground, for perhaps you too "sleep and rise night and day through it all "and you do not know how what has been planted in you by God sprouts and grows". You know the big things of your education—courses, majors, projects, degrees—but trust the small things, the ones about which you have an inkling, have an intuition of their importance from how your soil was probed and disturbed. Know by your faith—even if that too is small and buried—that God has been the One active in you in his Great Spirit, he who sends the rain and the warmth of the sun to make what has been sown in you the tall cedar and the ripe harvest.

As we all stand on this sacred ground and are so grateful to our hosts, the people of the majestic cedars and the life-giving streams, may you, our graduates, stand on the sacred ground of your own precious lives, educated and developed during your Seattle University years, educated and developed with the cooperation of others, by God working quietly, deeply, hiddenly, and in very small ways in you. Stand grateful and tall on that sacred ground today, and though you go forth from Seattle University, never go forth from your own sacred ground.