

Commencement Address

Covenant High School – Graduating Class of 2019

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First Presbyterian Church
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Tacoma, WA 98402

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For 45 years, my great-Grandfather was a strong and driven Communist leader in Peru. Later my father at age 14 would follow in his footsteps, and live a life committed to the same dangerous cause.

My father went to university and became the General Secretary of the dangerous “Student’s Revolutionary Front” and was a personal disciple of a man who led the Maoist Communist Group called *The Shining Path*, a movement that killed over 70,000 people.

While my father was delving deeper into the radical ideology of communism in his university years, he was asked to speak to a high school graduating class on the topic of his choice. Without a second thought, he accepted and seized the opportunity to persuade those students for the cause of the revolution.

My father felt that all had gone well until a high school student approached him after his speech and invited him to have lunch with him in his home. It was there that this young man named Pankiko shared his love for Jesus Christ with him.

The young man said to him “I’d like to be like you, but I can’t.” When my father asked “Why?”, the young man said, “Because I have Jesus in my heart.” “Because I have Jesus in my heart?!” my father thought. “Seriously?! Come on! Really? !Carambas! !Que tonteria es esto! Acaso me esta tomando en serio este jovencito? A mi no me vas a convencer con estos cuentitos. And other such thoughts.

You see, he couldn’t believe this young high school student could say something so foolish. So ignorant. So simple.

But those words shook him to his core. They never left him. Those simple words were the first link in a long chain of Christian witnesses that the Holy Spirit used to bring my communist father to his knees.

With a simple word from a young high schooler, my father, one of the top 10 most wanted men in Peru, was transformed from his life of communism to a life filled with Jesus.

Pankiko's words opened the door to missionaries who had been praying for him. They challenged him to read the gospel of John and to try being a Christian for just a month. My dad proudly said, that he would not do it for 1 month, but "try" Christianity for 3 months. He thought it would have no effect on him.

He read and he prayed, and soon he found himself pleading for God's forgiveness and embracing Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Soon after, my father studied to be a pastor and a missionary and opened an orphanage for children whose parents had been martyred by the Shining Path. No longer a revolutionary for communism, he became a revolutionary for Jesus Christ.

That word spoken to him had a ripple effect that changed the trajectory of history in Peru. After his conversion, my father's life was used to change the lives of thousands of people throughout Peru and then later throughout the world.

I remember as a young child learning that my dad was on Air Force one with Vice President Dan Quayle, and then I learned that the Peruvian President Alan Garcia was in our home. Of course, I will never forget the embarrassing moment my parents made me play the piano in our living room for the Prince of the Western Sahara, Mohamed Abdul Assisi. The list goes on and on.

My father shared his faith and testified to Presidents and Princes all over the world, all because one young student spoke up about Jesus.

Words matter. Your words matter. They don't have to be eloquent or perfect, but they need to be spoken. You have had four years of speech and rhetoric training, you've had rigorous training in English through writing and in reading classic works. You know the power of words. Words change history AND they impact eternity.

Now students all across America are graduating, and they are hearing commencement speeches. Some of them are really amazing. I mean, I've listened to a few, and it is really unfortunate that you got stuck with me. I mean you could have had the guy who gave money to everyone who was graduating! Could you imagine, thousands and thousands of dollars to start off this next step stage in your life?! Wouldn't that be amazing?! But instead, you got me. A missionary and pastor. Sorry guys.

But in all seriousness, these commencement speeches can all start to sound very similar: "Succeed in life. Be the best you can be. Make a difference." Sure, these are nice messages, but there is something missing. And NO, it's NOT a lot of money. It is the absence of a deeper purpose.

Years ago, my father tried to sway high schoolers with the message and cause of communism. But just like many other speeches, it was a cause so empty that right after his own passionate speech, it was devastated by the power of the gospel.

He had a desire to give himself to a cause, but he soon realized its insignificance when presented with the truth of God's word, giving purpose to our lives.

Our Purpose

You see, God created us for a purpose, just not a worldly one. Eph. 2:10 says "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." But what does that mean for you?

As graduates of Covenant High School, you have been given the gift of an education that has a Biblical purpose. On your school profile it says "CHS strives to deepen our student's relationship with Jesus Christ and prepare them for fruitful and joyful service to God and man."

God is calling you to serve him joyfully. To be fruitful with your education.

Pankiko, the young high school student, had barely graduated when he obeyed this call. He spoke into the life of someone older and smarter than him. He lovingly shared the gospel with the most radical person he knew. He was not intimidated by this man's passionate cause, he was not afraid to offend him, he was not insecure about his age or his abilities. He simply spoke the truth of the gospel. He knew its power.

The Apostle Paul tells his young disciple Timothy to not be filled with self-doubt or insecurity, but speak the truth with boldness when he said, **"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."** (1 Tim 4:12)

Graduates of CHS, hear Paul's message today. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set an example in the words you say, in your purposeful life, your love, your faith and your purity.

You are graduating high school, and entering adulthood and responsibility. Some of you are moving out of your parent's homes, learning to handle your own finances, and managing your own life. You might be excited about this, or you might be completely terrified.

You know your weaknesses. You are more aware than anyone of your shortcomings. If you are like I was at your age, you don't feel ready right now. And though you are weak, God reminds you through Paul that you are strong and that God is with you. He will give you his strength.

Paul tells Timothy not to doubt himself because Timothy is not alone! And YOU are not alone. God is with you and he has equipped you. So be an example in speech and conduct. Don't wait for others to lead you. Show them the way, the truth and the life.

Most of you are probably around 18 years old. Now that you are leaving high school you are no longer the oldest and most popular in your circles, you will be the youngest and you will be the new noobs on the block.

If you are a normal human being, you will feel intimidated and insecure. You'll want to establish yourselves quickly, be liked and have friends. You will seek things that can sometimes come at a great cost to your integrity.

That awkward loneliness you will soon feel after leaving your friend base here at CHS will push you to make quick decisions that can make you sacrifice who you are as individuals and who you are as children of God. You must be careful

I know this first hand because I've been there. Serving in Peru and in Colombia as a missionary and as a missionary kid for many years, I often found myself saying and doing things to try to imitate the people around us so that I would stand out so much.

When people would serve me guinea pig at a special event, I would say things like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah....I like eating guinea pigs too!"

Which just so you know, doesn't actually make you more popular. But what it does do....is it GUARANTEES THAT FOR EVERY ONE of your next birthdays or special events, you will be served...yep. Fried guinea pig. Roasted guinea pig. Guinea pig on a stick. Guinea pig with fries and in more ways than you could ever imagine. Guinea pig. And just when you think it is all over, one of those furry little buddies will show up stretched out on your plate...staring you right in the face. Reminding you of all the bad choices you made.

So, learn from me. Just don't do it! --- Don't sacrifice who you are because you think others might like you more for it. There are more serious things coming your way than too much guinea pig. So, don't say something that isn't true about you. Be true to who you are in Christ. Do not be ashamed of your Father in heaven.

Like a chameleon, we are often tempted to camouflage ourselves, to transform and conform our way of being to our surroundings and be like those around us. We are insecure and full of self-doubt. We want to fit in, so people will like us. We hide who we truly are, and adopt the behavior of those around us.

You too will be tempted to disguise who you are....it happens faster than you think, and it is much too easy. First, you give up little things that seem insignificant, things that you think won't hurt you.

You sacrifice saying the right thing at the right moment. Desiring to be liked, you sacrifice your behavior, and do things you never thought you would. Being new and by yourself, it will be easy to gradually leave behind a life that serves Jesus, for a pursuit of acceptance in the new world you find yourself in.

But the Scripture tells us that you are not alone, and that you are not to be defined by your age or surroundings. You are children of God. You are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. You

have been set apart for his holy purposes. You cannot and must not “conform to the patterns of this world.”

How you begin this next stage in your life, is not predetermined by your age, history or your culture. It is determined by who you are in Jesus. God has given you a life, an education, and most importantly his son Jesus Christ for his purposes. He who has given you his only Son, will also strengthen you in the midst of these struggles – united with you.

And united with Jesus, you are powerful, you are leaders and you are messengers. You are heralds of God’s kingdom. So, do not conform yourself to your surroundings, don’t wait for others to lead you and change you. Don’t let others despise you because of your age or newness.

Rather than hide, speak up. Speak and live your faith. Own your identity in Jesus. And if people tell you your faith and identity in Jesus is offensive to them, then you are on the right track! The gospel is offensive! As Jesus reminds us, if we are not ashamed of him before men, he will not be ashamed of us before his Father in heaven.

So, don’t worry if you are talking to the most popular person in college, your boss, your friends or a communist leader. God is with you, and he has given you His Word so that you can use your words to change ideologies, to change history, and to usher people into eternity.

He has given you his image and identity to show the way of everlasting life. Clothe your life in love and purity and they will know you are Jesus’ disciples. Stand firm in your faith, and let no one despise you for who you are in Jesus.

Today you graduate from high school and enter a new world. How will you introduce yourself to a world that rejects Jesus and all that you have stood for all of your life? Will you be a chameleon who hides his or her true identity?

Or will you be like Pankiko? A young guy, who spoke the truth and made an impact so great that the ripples of his simple words are still being repeated today from this podium.

In 20 years, who will stand up and say, because of you, or you or you (pointing to graduating class), I am here today and know Jesus. Because they did not compromise. They stood for their faith and they were not afraid to use their words. I have faith that your lives and your words will impact thousands of people here and all around the world.

Graduating class of 2019, Congratulations on this amazing accomplishment! May you enter this next stage in life, proud of what you have accomplished here, proud of who you are in Jesus, and ready to proclaim him in Word and Deed. May the Lord bless all of you. Thank you.