

St. Mary's Seminary Graduation
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Archbishop Lori, Father Brown, Dean Burke, Dean Laytham, Faculty and Trustees, graduates, friends, and family:

It is an honor and a delight to be with you on this special occasion. The Italian writer and literary critic Italo Calvino once defined a classic as a book that has never finished saying what it has to say. By this definition I have a number of Presbyterian colleagues who might rightly be considered "classics." They have a talent for going on and on, never finishing what they have to say. So it was a daring leap of faith when you agreed to put me in front of a microphone. I will strive to practice a virtue that is little known and rarely practiced in my denominational tribe, the endangered virtue of brevity.

In contemplating your arrival at this crossroad, my mind kept circling back to a pivotal moment in the life of Moses. He has passed through the raging sea and is on his way to the promised land. And yet he finds himself pulled in opposite directions. His ears are throbbing with the yammering of a people who are terrified of a perilous journey to an elusive land that they can call home. At every step, he hears the grumblings of people who are driving into the future while their eyes are fixed on the rear view mirror. They cannot relinquish memories of what was left behind in Egypt . . . a familiar and predictable confinement, a bondage that was well ordered, the certainty of knowing when they could expect their next meal. So there stands Moses, caught in the middle of a tug of war, still riddled with doubts, age beginning to gnaw at his bones. Neither his balance nor his eyesight what they used to be. A powerful leader to be sure, yet hobbled by a hot temper and a nagging stammer.

In the midst of a people who have difficulty knowing if they are coming or going, Moses cannot resist the urge to climb, the compulsion to scale the mountain and get some distance from the maddening crowd. God knows, he needs some time out, an infusion of silence and solitude. A chance to clear his mind and recalibrate his heart. And this need takes

on the character of a command. So up the mountain he goes, and there he encounters the divine.

The rabbinic sages suggest a convergence of destinies. Moses and God follow their deepest passion, their truest vocation. They come together and (what else?), they study Torah. In the ensuing back-and-forth, God must reckon with the foibles and frailties of the human condition. Moses, who can't remember where he put his shoes, is easily distracted, discombobulated by the exulted company he is keeping and deeply embarrassed by his failures of retention. In the words of the Jewish commentator Avivah Zornberg, Moses embodies the pathos of the human situation. He is both a learner, and, alas, he is also a forgetter.

And so taking this fickle and feckless condition into account, God gives Moses a stupendous gift, an endowment that amounts to perfect recall. Moses is handed the stones that bear the imprint of God's fingers, the supernatural script that holds all that the community needs to realize its sacred calling. The two tablets, given to offset the vagaries of a fallible memory.

And then, abruptly, the scene shifts to the bottom of the mountain, where the congregation has slipped into panic mode. They fear that their leader has severed the cord, or worse, that God has rendered the separation permanent. The delayed return induces fear, distrust, forgetfulness. Lost and traumatized by this apparent abandonment, they seek relief in the frenzied and ecstatic worship of the Golden Calf.

Now turn you gaze back to Moses and note the expression on his face as he descends and encounters the wild revelry. The text says, "his anger burned hot and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain."

It is not difficult to imagine the shattering impact on Moses. How could the community, after all that it had been through, so quickly forget its commitments to God, to one another, and to their appointed leader? Perhaps their sin is a failure of memory. Or perhaps Moses is confronted with a rebellion, a betrayal, a collapse of trust, an act of infidelity.

On closer inspection, I can't help but wonder: Is Moses racked by guilt and outrage because he has failed to instruct properly, failed to listen, failed to comprehend his own people? Had he trained a band of followers pathologically dependent on him, incapable of independent judgment and incapable of covenantal loyalty when he wasn't there in their midst carrying a big stick and looming large? I can imagine his rage thundering outward and then redounding inward, a wave of disgust and indignation and hopelessness. The result: tablets slammed to the ground and broken. Or consider this. Just maybe it was not so much outrage as exhaustion. In the frenzy of the communal chaos, the weight was more than he could handle. The load was too heavy. Overwhelmed by the burden, utterly fatigued, he could no longer hold on. He dropped the sacred stones, and they splintered.

Well, I used to wonder what became of those fragments, the scattered bits and pieces of the original. Did they sink into soil and become indistinguishable shards in a barren landscape? Inconsequential splinters of the divine gift on which feet would tread? And then I was taught a rabbinic midrash that conjectured that the broken remains of the first set of tablets were carefully gathered up and stored alongside of the second set. The sacred fragments became intermingled with the complete second edition—both preserved and hallowed in the most holy tabernacle.

Well, as graduates of St. Mary's Seminary, you have no doubt scaled surprising theological heights, had magnificent views from the top of the mountain, and taken note of the mysteries that arise only when you are disciplined enough to step out of the hustle and bustle and escape the noise of the restless crowd. And yet St. Mary's makes it clear that you must not dwell in the thin air indefinitely. You are graduating and therefore called to come down the mountain. And guess what? At the base of the mount you will repeatedly encounter your community at its best, and also at its worst. No getting around it, you will stumble into communities in disarray, worshipping products of their own making, bowing down to devices that make them go faster and faster in the wild pursuit of wealth and fame and power.

I do not know how it will go for you as you put your education to work, but I must admit that there have been plenty of times when I dropped

the tablets, exhausted and exasperated. And there have been times when I hurled them to the ground out of frustration, disappointment, and righteous (or self-righteous) indignation.

And lest these musings linger as a hazy abstraction, permit me to share a notable episode. I was serving as the chaplain across the street at the Gilman School in my fourth year as an ordained minister. I had signed up for a conference on the Holocaust and made my way to Philadelphia with Charlie and Peggy Obrecht. During a formal luncheon, I found myself seated next to an elderly woman. I remember her dark and penetrating eyes, her capacious curiosity. She wanted to know what brought me to this gathering, why I would step into a land riddled with so much anguish and pockmarked with heartbreaking memories. Her manner was so soft-spoken, open, and generous. I was therefore shocked when I noticed the tattoo on her arm and discovered that she was a death camp survivor. The break-out sessions resumed, but the two of us lingered, unraveling tangled family histories; and, as sometimes happens when strangers meet, there emerged a surprising trust and intimacy. She was fascinated that I had embarked on a course of study that had pulled me out of my familiar environs and landed me in the field of Jewish studies. And then, without the slightest trace of accusation, with absolutely no hint of rancor or grievance, she spoke the following words: "You know I cannot help but wonder if my people would have been much better off if Christianity had never existed. Knowing what you know of this anguished legacy, how is it that you remain a Christian?"

The tablets handed to me from on high slipped from my grip, and they shattered. I was rendered mute, uncertain, dogmatically unanchored, and left to rummage among the broken fragments of the cherished heritage bequeathed to me by my parents, my teachers, my mentors, my friends and colleagues. The question was bigger than any answer I could muster, and truth be told, I still hear the echo of her voice.

Yet I also discovered that I could no more give up on my tradition than I could give up on my family or become detached from my shadow. However flawed, however fraudulent, however incoherent, I am inseparably, indissolubly bound to this community and this tradition.

And however reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that the time when your community needs your love the most is when it is most unlovable.

And this, too. I realized that the broken fragments were still sacred. Indeed, I discovered that the Word was broken for us; that this Word was not and is not dead, but living; that we must set about the business of putting the pieces back together; that, with the grace of God, we are called to rediscover that new life emerges from the ruins; that beauty and wisdom can rise again to challenge the moral complacency and the idolatrous enchantments of our world.

And if you are anything like me, you may discover that your best allies in gathering up the sacred shards include individuals who stand outside your own religious enclaves. In my case I found indispensable insights from my Jewish colleagues, but, just as importantly, I was guided by Roman Catholic friends anchored in a tradition with the courage and the faith to confront the Shoah. These devoted members of a global communion were honestly and rigorously contending with the spiritual and ethical breakdown of Christendom. It was my Jewish and Roman Catholic associates who helped me retrieve aspects of my own religious inheritance that I would otherwise have overlooked. And, trust me, to see the errors of your ways and the possibilities of new life, you'll need help from whatever source it comes, divine and human.

So much for brevity! In view of the hour, I will delete my exhortations to floss before bed and to rotate your tires. There is no time to review the Heimlich maneuver, however essential this information may be for life after graduation. Suffice it say, "Congratulations!" You have climbed theological peaks and been bequeathed with an awesome educational gift. Walk boldly and pay attention to where you put your feet. From time to time you may lose your balance and your grip. It happens. Make sure to stop, look down, and accept a helping hand as you retrieve the sacred bits and pieces at your feet. These fragments need to be gathered up, assembled and reassembled, passed on and shared with those who hunger, with those who are desperate for shelter, and with those who yearn for a place to call home.