

A Peddler of Hope

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” -Romans 8:28

The start of a new school year always awakens a quiet stirring within my soul, a sense of God’s hand at work. It is a feeling that resonates far beyond the crisp scent of a new notebook and the promise of a blank page. It is the palpable sense of possibility that hangs in the August air on a college campus. Like the turning of the leaves, students arrive, each with their own unique story unfolding. There is a beautiful mystery in the connections waiting to be made, the lives about to intersect.

When I first arrived at Mercer University in the fall of 1998, I was struck by something President Kirby Godsey said at a faculty meeting. He reminded us that a “professor is a peddler of hope.” That resonated deeply. It is a sentiment echoed in his quote near the fountain in nearby Tattall Square Park: “We are here to give people hope, to bear light amidst the shadows, to teach, to live out grace.” These words are not just about academics; they are about a calling, a ministry.

The very words “college” and “university” speak to this higher purpose. “College” comes from the Latin *collegium*, meaning “partnership,” and “university” from *universium*, meaning “everything.” And a “professor,” at its root, is one who “professes a faith” – a faith in knowledge, in learning, and ultimately, in the potential of each student. It is a sacred trust, a true partnership in growth. This ideal is perhaps best captured by Chaucer's description of the clerk: “And gladly shall he learn and teach.”

So, how do we make the most of our precious time with students? I often share with them the advice I once read in the *New York Times*: “Widen the circle of human beings who know you and care about you.” It echoes the wisdom of Fred Rogers: “Always look for the helpers.” I also remind students about cultivating genuine connections, learning to truly listen, asking meaningful questions, and seeking the joy that God places within each of us. As Parker Palmer suggests, “I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about,” allowing God to guide our path.

In my First-Year Experience course, I enjoy demonstrating a simple illustration: “The Jar of Life.” A translucent mason jar filled first with golf balls (faith, family, friends, freedoms, and health) seems full, yet pebbles (job, house, car) fit in around them. Even sand (the small stresses of life) finds its place. And finally, there is room for two cups of coffee – a reminder to cherish those moments of fellowship, those deep connections that nourish the soul. It is also a reminder to prioritize what truly matters, to center our lives on Christ and His love.

Teaching is more than a job for me; it is a vocation, a calling from God. It is the only path I have ever envisioned. Growing up in North Carolina, watching my parents teach, I knew this was my purpose. I treat each day as a chance to discover something new, to draw closer to

God through understanding His creation. This is why I love being a professor, mentoring students, and witnessing their intellectual and personal growth. At its heart, true teaching is about nurturing relationships, fostering those cherished conversations beyond the classroom where students can freely share their beliefs and perspectives.

As graduation nears, seniors will often seek guidance on what they *ought* to do next. Their faith becomes a key source of direction. Many want to connect their spiritual beliefs with their dreams, hoping to use their talents to serve God. It is a privilege to help them discern their calling and step into God's plan for their lives. Our true success as educators is not measured at graduation, but later, by how our students have used their hands and voices to make a difference in the lives of others.

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