

Bellaire High School Baccalaureate

June 5, 2016

“Choices. Values. Convictions.”

Luke 6:43-45 (NRSV)

⁴³ “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”

Good evening graduates, family, and friends. My name is Pastor Eric from the Bellaire United Methodist Church. It is a great honor to speak to you today.

Students, I want to give you a great piece of advice today, as you make your future plans. Listen closely. Whatever you do, don't forget to pack fresh underwear. I'm serious. One of the worst mistakes I ever made when I went to school was forgetting my suitcase. I had to wear the same clothes for a week, before I could drive home and get a fresh supply.

But it's OK to make mistakes. As you all know, the phase of life you are now entering is packed full of choices and freedom that you have never experienced in high school. Especially if you are going off to college, you have a million big and little things to decide. What to study. Where to live. What organizations to join.

When I was a college freshman, I was faced with a lot of decisions. Two of the best choices I made were to join the marching band and a musical fraternity. But there were deeper moral decisions I had to face. Would I attend church?

Would I abstain from alcohol? Would I date? Would I remain celibate? Those were not easy decisions, and they were not graded on a curve.

Have you ever thought about how you make decisions? What drives your choices?

Let's go a little geometry. Imagine a pyramid. Your choices – the things people see - are at the top. But underneath those choices is your value system. Your values drive your decisions. For example, if you love the Bellaire Eagles, you value their team above any others. You wear their colors, support them and cheer for them. You buy the big red hand with the “number one” finger and shout, “Go Eagles” at the game.

But values aren't conjured out of thin air. Underneath your values, at the base of the pyramid, are your convictions. How you were raised. What you were taught. Experiences that convinced you that something is true. Your convictions are the foundation of who you are.

I went to school to be an engineer, but I ended up becoming a pastor. Why? Because my convictions led to me to ministry. Students, I want to reassure you right now, if you have a dream, pursue it. But it's OK if that dream changes. Your choices about your career right now don't have to be perfect. You might change. But the decisions you make on what to believe and how to live your life, for good or for ill, will have a lasting impact on your future.

Do any of you like apples? I do. You've probably gone to the grocery store, scanned the aisles, and bought a couple of granny smiths. Or red delicious. You see the apple you like on the shelf, and you buy it.

OK, here's the million dollar question: from what type of tree do we get apples? I know, you students here are so bright, you know the answer. An apple tree.

The truth is, a tree can only produce one type of fruit. An apple tree won't grow pears. A pineapple tree won't make bananas. Sadly, if you plant a coco seed in your freezer, you won't get a chocolate ice cream tree.

Even if you graft branches from one kind to the other, you get weird results. Pears that taste like apples. Strangely shaped fruit.

Jesus said good trees produce good fruit, bad trees produce bad fruit. He was not saying that there are good and bad people. The bible makes it clear enough: none of us are perfect. But he is saying, what's in your heart is the source of what you do. In your heart is where your values and your convictions lie. Your heart is the tree from which your life bears fruit.

When Jesus talks about the heart, he doesn't mean the biological organ that pumps your blood. In the Bible, the heart is the source of your thoughts, actions, emotions, intellect, fears, hopes, attitudes and morals. The heart is the place where God speaks to you. It's the center of your being. It is the base of the pyramid, your source of convictions that drive your life.

The heart is your fruit tree. So, what is in your heart? What do you fill it with? Do you tend to it? Do you water it with compassion, love, and service? Do you ignore it? Jesus said, your heart is your life, the source of who you are.

I have some more great advice from you, and it's not about clean socks. Actually, it's this: be yourself. Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken, anyway. Look at your heart and understand who you are. Know what your values and convictions are.

I'm going to make a prediction. On the day you leave for college or wherever it is you go next, your parents are going to fill you up with last-minute advice. It won't work. I know your parents mean well, but please, Mom and Dad, just be quiet and hug your son or daughter. Hugs are good. And guys, you will let your mom kiss you goodbye. Because here's what your parents will be thinking: "Did I do a good enough job? Are they ready? What happened to the time to make it go so quickly?"

Parents, there is no time for regrets. There is only the moment to enjoy.

Students, what you have learned and put into practice for the last 18 years is going to drive the decisions you make in the future. You don't need more advice to forget. What you need to know is that this community cares for you, will always welcome you home, is praying for you, and wants what is best for you.

We want your tree to be rooted in faith. If you have a relationship with God, that's great. If you don't, that is something you can start immediately. The bibles and gifts we are going to give you today are a way to start.

You see, people who believe the story about Jesus Christ live differently. Throughout history, their values and convictions led them to serve the poor, witness to the truth of Jesus' resurrection, face trials and persecutions, even death. They produced good fruit because of their convictions that Jesus Christ was Lord.

Maybe as you read the Bible, you will reflect on your choices and values. You can ask yourself, what do I really believe? What is at the deepest level of my pyramid? When I get to college/work, with so many distractions and choices, who will I follow? What will drive my decisions? What will be my fruit?

Your convictions will shape your life, for good or for ill. You would do yourself the greatest favor to take a moment and reflect what fruit you are producing from your heart. What words you use. What thoughts you think. What emotions you feel.

Take advice from the Bible itself. Let God, the master gardener, work on your heart.

Psalms 139:23-24 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

May you produce good fruit from a healthy heart. We wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors, and we pray that God blesses you as your future unfolds.