

Articles

Here We Stand; Here We Go!

Patrick T. Ferry

Abstract

In this commencement address delivered at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, on May 20, 2022,¹ Rev. Dr. Patrick Ferry compares the preparation at seminary to the foundation of our faith that Paul speaks about in Romans 5:1–2. He uses the analogy of preparing to run a race, by which we are “on our marks” and have been securely “set.” But now it’s time to “go!” He calls on seminary graduates—and all the church—to go, to go forward, to go forward into the mission field of today’s world.

Members of the Board of Regents, esteemed President Egger, distinguished faculty, honored guests, beloved family and friends, and especially to you graduates of this wonderful seminary, good evening! Congratulations, graduates, as you receive your degree from this remarkable institution whose reputation and recognition has few peers and is known, as it is, near and far for such excellence in theological education, spiritual formation, and vocational preparation. I commend you, and it is a singular privilege for me to be here and part of this auspicious occasion. Thank you.

Thanks, too, for the honor conferred upon me this day.² I heard it told that one of my much-loved predecessors at Concordia Milwaukee, the bow-tied and buoyant Walter Stuenkel, received an honorary doctorate from the seminary around the same time that he completed his PhD at Marquette University. He noted that the degree from the Jesuit institution was awarded on the basis of his good works, while the one from the Lutheran institution was pure grace. Now I know how he felt—undeserving but truly grateful. I am humbled by your generous gesture.

Now, you are probably aware that I have been to a few commencements through the twenty-four years that I served as president of Concordia University Wisconsin and later also including Ann Arbor (one more year than Walter Stuenkel was “Prexy”



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at Concordia Milwaukee, but who is counting?). In any event, quite long enough to harbor no delusions regarding the role that I play in this event. If pressed, I could probably name many of the speakers and maybe recall snatches of one commencement address or another, but not much. However, I do remember the opening remarks of my boyhood hero, the legendary Henry Aaron, when he addressed our graduates at Concordia Wisconsin in 2008. “Hammering” Hank Aaron was an icon in Milwaukee, having played for the Braves and helping Milwaukee to its only World Series championship in 1957 and then finishing his career as a player with the Milwaukee Brewers. His statue stands outside the Brewers’ American Family Field. His glory years were behind him when Hank Aaron came to our campus as an old man.

He told us this story of two old men, two old friends, sitting quietly on a park bench together as they often did. After a period of some silence, one rather sheepishly turned to the other and said, “I am so sorry, and I am embarrassed to ask, but would you please remind me? What is your name?” The other turned toward his friend, looked him in the eye, and after another rather long pause replied, “How soon do you need to know?” So, I won’t feel bad if you forget me or what I say; we will still be friends—even if you are St. Louis Cardinals fans.

My theme for what follows is based on Romans 5:1–2, and I have titled this commencement message, “Here We Stand, Here We Go.” Saint Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (NIV).

“On your marks.” The principle marks of the Church according to *Augustana* Article VII: “The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.” “Get set.” Concerning Saint Peter’s confession of faith, Jesus said, “. . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). We are set on the Church’s one and only rock-solid foundation—Jesus Christ, our Lord. We are on our marks. We are set.

On your marks, graduates—the incomparable Gospel treasure, the present and eternal promise of God’s unchanging and unfailing love for each one of us, still dripping with baptismal blessing, still satisfying our deepest hunger and thirst in, with, and under bread and wine, still ringing in our ears and touching our hearts through the sharing of the powerful Word drawing us over and again to the Word made flesh. He is the One who was crucified in that flesh at Calvary, raised in that flesh on the third day so that with Job we say, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him . . . How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25–27, NIV).

Get set, graduates. We are all set because “neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:38–39). Nothing. Never. Ever. “I know [my sheep],” says the Good Shepherd, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch

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them out of my hand” (Jn 10:27–29). No one. Never. Ever. On your marks, graduates. Get set, graduates. And now what?

Here we stand? This is truly a special evening, and it is quite a thrill for me to be here with you. It is not every day that you get to do something like this. Here in the lovely quad, on this iconic campus, just a stone’s throw away from that statue of Martin Luther (not that anybody here would want to throw a stone at the statue)—this is a moment to savor. As a Lutheran for nearly four decades (confirmed following my freshman year in college in 1978), as a Lutheran pastor for almost three decades (ordained in March, 1988), as a Reformation historian and Lutheran university professor for thirty years, including almost a quarter century as a Lutheran university president; the legacy of Luther and the history and heritage of our Lutheran faith does matter a whole lot to me. Obviously, it means a lot to all of you, too. Together, we celebrate our history and heritage. History, and Reformation history in particular, is great stuff! Indeed, it is perfectly fine for us to stand here for a while and look back, ponder, savor.

Graduates, you have received a first-rate theological education from a truly world-class seminary faculty. I am sure that you appreciate this already, and I am certain that you will continue to reflect with gratitude as time goes by. Together, looking back over our shoulders, we realize that we stand on the strong and broad shoulders of giants as we hearken to the still-resonant echo of their resolute voices. Women and men who, like Luther—who stood before the most powerful ruler of his day, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms, yet would not flinch or compromise his confession of the Gospel truth: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!” Especially in this day and age, this time and place, when our Christian faith and religious freedoms are so often undermined and threatened by an inimical and antithetical culture and post-Christian world, we must show some spine and stand straight and tall and prove true when tried about what we believe, teach, and confess. Yes, do stand! And here we stand—on our marks—the pure, powerful Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Here we stand, all set—the unshakable promise of Jesus never to leave or forsake us. Never. Ever. By all means, stand! But, don’t just stand all statuesque—on your marks, and get set to go!

I started running for exercise over thirty-five years ago when Tammy and I began dating. She was a runner. I had to chase her in order to court her. Now I run every day and have done so for nearly ten years. A few days off three years ago when I was hospitalized with a bad flu has been the only exception to this practice. Last October I ran the Chicago Marathon. It was not my best race. A niggling hamstring is my excuse. After that race I ran a few more half marathons—Nashville in November, San Antonio in December, and Austin in January when I should have been resting a little and nursing my hamstring. Suddenly, the hamstring problem became doubly difficult when my previously fine left one became worse than the right one. Overcompensation. Still, I persisted with the streak. A friend of mine suggested that if I wanted to keep my daily practice in play, I might try running backwards—easier on my backsides. I tried it—once. I am not sure if the hamstrings hurt any less, but I can tell you everything else hurt a lot more!

Hamstrung! On your marks, get set . . . Can you imagine what would happen if nothing came next, if all that we ever did was just stand in place like a statue? We could boast to one another about our great training. We could revel among others about our readiness for come what may. We could stand on our record and previous results. But, “on our marks” and “all set” is merely the prelude to the best part. Perhaps the hardest part—nobody promised it would be easy. Maybe the riskiest part—lots of potholes and possible problems ahead. Whether hard or risky, when you are on your marks, and you are set, it is time to go.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1-2, NIV).

The evangelical inspiration for Martin Luther from passages like this one changed his life and, indeed, changed the world. Summarized succinctly, the Gospel message from this passage of Saint Paul as you stand at this milestone moment (Is it a finish line? A starting line? Yes!), the message as you prepare to “commence,” is rather simple: “Relax!” There is more than enough in this verse to allow us to relax as we “run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” as Hebrews describes our journey (Heb 12:1, NIV). Learning to relax even as we run our race is the aim of our text.

We are justified by faith in the saving work of Jesus. Relax! He has taken care of everything already. His burden is light, His yoke is easy. Your salvation and the assurance of your eternal life is not up for grabs. Nothing is left to doubt. Relax! Come, all who are weak and heavy laden, and He will give you rest. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Breathe easy! God’s love for you is not open to any question. Exhale! There are no strings attached. The light trouble of this moment, whatever it may be, is preparing us for an everlasting weight of glory. Calm yourself! Through Jesus’s blood and merit we now stand before the throne, not of Charles V, the mere Holy Roman Emperor, but of the holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, without sin or fault or blemish or blame and with complete open, unfettered access to Him. By grace through faith, we have peace; we have hope. We need to learn to relax even as we run. But, run we must, and it is time to move forward—go time!

Here we stand—on the shoulders of others, but on our marks of Word and Sacrament and set upon the promises of God, the Church of our time and place cannot, must not, merely stand in place, or worse, just look backward. For such a time as this we are called to “go” forward.

If we are honest, we have to admit that this is not easy for us. A church like ours, rooted as we are in our confessional identity, mindful of the struggles we have endured to preserve as well as proclaim the truth, justifiably proud of our tradition and heritage, wary of fads and gimmicks—a church like ours will not only stand on the shoulders of others, but we are also apt constantly to be looking back over our shoulder as we run our own race. In other words, forward is not our forte.

You don’t have to know much about running to be aware that looking back over your shoulder is usually a detrimental strategy. Even worse, imagine trying to go forward by going backward. Hamstrung! Consider this: Once, I competed in a

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marathon in which another athlete ran the entire 26.2 miles backward. He had only a little mirror attached to his glasses to give him indication of where he was heading. Crazy, right? That got me thinking, and I discovered that the record fastest time for completing a full marathon while running backward is 3:38:27, about 8:30 per mile. That is not too shabby, and I was surprised by his quick pace. What didn't surprise me, however, is that the runner, Markus Jurgens, set the record in Hannover in his native Germany. I am guessing that Jurgens was not only German but also Lutheran because German Lutherans are astonishingly agile and demonstrate defying degrees of dexterity moving forward while constantly looking back. Imagine what he might have managed barreling forward without constantly looking over his shoulder. Imagine what the future might hold for us if while honoring the past we avoid being hamstrung by the past. Yes, this from an historian—of *Reformationsgeschichte*, no less. On your marks, get set, go! Run relaxed—but go forward!

Indeed, I believe that in our German Lutheran DNA there yet remains that original spirit of Reformation which recognizes that the Church is ever reforming. On your marks—the Word and Sacraments are ever the same, and the Gospel remains relevant. Get set—the Church's one foundation is absolutely unmovable. Many traditions and practices are meet, right, and salutary—and Luther and the Lutherans preserved those that were. But, when the reformers believed the Church was hamstrung by tradition or traditions, their Gospel freedom moved them to cast off whatever impeded or hindered the message of salvation by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, as taught in Scripture alone. For them, moving meant some things had to go if the Church was going to go forward. “And to the true unity of the Church,” Article VII of the Augsburg Confession holds, “it is enough (*satis est*) to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: ‘One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all . . .’” It is enough.

We may spend some time arguing over exactly what this means, as we are apt to do. We may go back to the sixteenth century when the Reformation began, or the nineteenth century when our Synod was formed, or the twentieth century when we split and revisit the controversies, and refight the old battles, and reexamine our footsteps to make sure that we are still on the right path—moving forward, running backward—exhausting, painful—a pain in the . . . hamstring! Or maybe we can say, “Enough is enough. It is enough already.” There are better ways to spend our energy. Ours is a world that desperately needs Jesus. The faith, the grace, the peace, the hope that Paul promises in our text brings us such comfort. Relax! But for most folks those concepts are foreign language and almost unintelligible. The world still needs reformation—maybe more than ever. When it comes to our lost neighbor's need there must be a sense of urgency—no time to relax.

On your marks, get set, it is time to go. Look around. We may not agree on everything, but certainly we can agree on this: people around us are in trouble. I heard President Harrison once say that this old world is falling off its hinges, and it appears to be so. Of course, throughout human history this has appeared to be so. But we did not live in other eras. God has seen fit to have us live in this time and this place so that at this moment we would figure out ways to bring to others—struggling, suffering,

sinking—that faith, that grace, that peace, that hope of the glory of God that Paul preaches; that Word, those Sacraments, that Gospel that marks the Lord’s Church. Forward! Luther surely had his moment, and thank the Lord he seized the day. We are all blessed because of the Reformation. But Luther’s moment is not ours. Walther’s moment is not our moment. Ours is now, and it is time to go. Might be hard, might be risky. But this is precisely what you are prepared do—what you are called to do. Let’s do this. Let’s go. God bless you, graduates, and thanks again.

ENDNOTES

¹ Several members of the *Lutheran Mission Matters* editorial committee were in the original audience and immediately thereafter recommended its inclusion in the issue, as it addresses the important relationship of seminary formation to mission leadership for today’s context.

² At this same occasion, Concordia Seminary conferred the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree to Rev. Dr. Ferry.