



Commencement Speech

Dr. Brian McGee, President, Quincy University
September 5, 2020

Friars, parents, family, friends, honored guests, in the 160th year of this great university, and on behalf of the Quincy University Board of Trustees and the faculty, staff, and administration of the University, I welcome you again to these Spring Commencement exercises honoring the Class of 2020.

These students have known a year like no other; a year of anxiety, sickness, separation, suffering; a year in which living in Garner, Willer, or Padua sometimes seemed like ancient history; a year when it seemed all they had worked for would be overshadowed by events beyond their control.

Today, though, as unusual as this setting might be, as distant as we might seem from one another in our respective seats, in a month far removed from spring, today ours is not a story about pandemic or displacement or recession. For this day, ours is a story about the triumph of these students who are now graduates. Each had a struggle. Each bore a burden. Each had some measure of heartbreak. Each graduate today is here because hard work overcame difficulty, because burdens were lifted, because courage triumphed over despair, because God provided the opportunity to finish the race.

Today does not belong to powers or principalities. Today belongs to these graduates and the people who love them.

So take a moment, graduates, to celebrate those you love. Each of you has someone in this crowd who loves and is loved by you, who has cared for you, hugged you, held you as you cried. Take a moment, stand up, put aside whatever reservations you have, look at your family, your friends, wave, smile, blow them a kiss if you like, and give them a shout-out. You have presidential permission to yell out loud. Yes, don't be shy. This moment is yours to acknowledge their love and your own.

Please be seated, and thank you.

My topic for you today, Class of 2020, you now might guess. My topic is not ambition or achievement or giving back or advice for the future, though all of those topics are appropriate to a commencement speech. Today, Class of 2020, I want to talk about love.

Now, some of you studied love in a serious and scholarly way during your time at Quincy University. You may have reflected on the biology of love, the sociology of love, the philosophy of love, the history of love, the theology of love, the literature celebrating love, or how to communicate love.

You may have considered specific types of love, such as the romantic love Edgar Lee Masters, a beloved poet of this state, called “the power of unison between souls.”

At this Catholic and Franciscan university, you might have been reminded at some time of First Corinthians Chapter 13, and those famous verses recited at so many weddings. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous. Of faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these is love.

But today, graduates, I want to spend time with you on a different book of the Christian New Testament. Instead of First Corinthians, I ask you to reflect with me on verses that will be read tomorrow at Catholic masses throughout the world, drawn from Romans Chapter 8, with powerful inspiration from the Jewish tradition and the Old Testament Book of Leviticus:

The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments are summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

In this time of civil unrest, in this time of suspicion based on race, in this time of contempt for others who do not look or speak as we do, in this time of disdain for those who do not share our political beliefs, love seems to have disappeared from public life.

You have earned a degree from a Catholic university in the 800-year-old traditions of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare of Assisi. Their example is now yours for the remainder of what I pray will be your long and happy, healthy, joyous life. Class of 2020, the example of St. Francis and St. Clare is one of self-denial, of joy-filled sacrifice for the good of others. Their example of poverty and service is all about loving others. They loved their neighbors more than they loved themselves, and their example endures, 800 years later.

So, graduates, who will bring love to places where love seems long absent? Who will love God or love nation enough to extend that love not just to family and friends, but to strangers or enemies?

You will.

You will bring that love, Class of 2020. I have faith in your ability to love. Yours will be the generation fulfilling the law and loving others. You will love your neighbor as yourself. You will be and must be the ones who break the cycles of hate and cynicism and seething contempt in which our politics is mired, with our politicians and parties stuck in the mud and the muck.

I say all of this as a Catholic Christian, as a believer, as a Franciscan university president. But one does not need to be Catholic, or Christian, or a person who believes in God to understand that love is the basis for community, for trust, for compassion, for our ability, as Abraham

Lincoln famously said, to bind up the nation's wounds. And our nation is now grievously wounded, with an injury to the soul that only love can heal.

Graduate, if you are here and receiving a bachelor's degree from Quincy University, you fulfilled a service requirement designed to teach you what love looks like. As you walk across Friars' Field, I pray that you always remember what it is to serve as St. Francis served, to love as St. Francis loved, to love not for personal gain but because love is what makes us fully human, what makes us worthy to rise above that which would drag us down, what allows to, in the famous words of the poet, slip the surly bonds of Earth and touch the face of God.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. You shall bind up the nation's wounds, with one relentless and committed act of love, and another, and then another, so that love will be your generation's enduring legacy, a restoration of our national greatness, a legacy that can last another 800 years.

For we are not primarily members of a race, a religion, a club, or a region. We are not primarily members of a political party.

First, foremost, always, primarily, and forever, we are neighbors.

We must love as neighbors. This is the summary of the whole law. This is the summary of God's law. And this is the sum of everything you have ever learned at Quincy University. All that you are and will be that is good and right and will matter to you at life's end is love.

Love one another as you love yourselves, Class of 2020. Love people who are hard to love. Love people who do not love you back. Love those who stubbornly refuse to love anyone at all. Love saints but, especially, love sinners. Love Republicans. Love Democrats.

Love even and especially when it hurts, because, as St. Clare of Assisi said, "love that cannot suffer is not worthy of that name." Love for as long as you live. Love as you die.

Love. Always, love, even when you don't want to. This is a hard teaching, but it is the one that matters most.

Congratulations on your day, newest and much-loved graduates of Quincy University. Your faculty, staff, and I love you. This audience loves you. God loves you, perfectly and completely.

Go forth and live lives of meaning and purpose and achievement and passion. But, most importantly, most of all, live lives full to bursting of love.

Thank you, and may God bless you and keep you, today and always, in perfect love.