

**“Loved More Than You Can Imagine”  
Jefferson City High School Baccalaureate Sermon  
Thursday, May 25, 2006  
Rev. Melissa Hatfield**

At 5:30 am on a cold January 2 morning, two carts of miners were making their way into the depths of the Sago Coal Mine, in Sago, West Virginia. The first cart pulled out about 5:30 and the second cart followed about 10 minutes later. The men were just beginning their early morning shift after celebrating the New Year holiday weekend. A day earlier they reflected on what had been 2005 and dared to dream about what 2006 would hold for them. Now, with bleary eyes, they were back to work.

An hour later, at 6:30 am a small explosion occurred in the coal mine. Fourteen men on the second cart escaped the initial explosion. But the thirteen men in the first cart were on the other side of the point where the explosion occurred. Some of the men in the second cart tried to make their way down to the trapped miners but soon their air quality detectors indicated there was too much carbon monoxide to proceed. On the other side of the explosion, thirteen miners were struggling to get their bearings. The mine filled quickly with fumes and thick smoke making breathing conditions nearly unbearable. Four of the emergency oxygen packs failed to work and the thirteen men began sharing the remaining nine with one another. They looked for a way to escape but the bad air prevented it. So the miners returned to the wall of the mine and hung a curtain creating a 35-foot area where they would wait it out. Over the next several hours, they took turns beating on the mine bolts and plates to signal their location. But they never heard a response.

Exhausted, they laid still and low to the ground trying to avoid the heavy fumes that were filling their curtained tomb. And they prayed. In the dark of that mine, one of the men suggested

they each write letters to their loved ones. So with whatever scraps of debris they could find in their lunch pails, in their pockets and on the ground around them, these thirteen men wrote final words to their families. Nearly two days after the explosion when rescue workers finally located the miners, twelve of the thirteen miners were dead.

A day later, on January 5, notes from the deceased miners were given to their family members.

- Miner Jim Bennett left a note which wasn't shared with the media. His daughter, Ann Meredith, said that in addition to expressions of love for his wife and children, Bennett's note contained a timeline of the ten hours duration. Later on down the note, he said that it was getting dark. It was getting smoky. They were losing air."
- Miner George Junior Hamner's note, written eight hours after the explosion said, "We don't hear any attempts at drilling or rescue. . . The section is full of smoke and fumes, so we can't escape . . . Be strong, and I hope no one else has to show you this note. I'm in no pain, but don't know how long the air will last."
- Miner Martin Toler Jr.'s note said: "Tell all I'll see them on the other side. It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. I love you. Jr."

There are certain moments and circumstances in our life that move us to stop and reflect. There are circumstances of great tragedy and sorrow like the one I've just shared. There are also circumstances and moments of joy that lead us to reflect on where we've been and where we hope to go. On what is important and what is not.

Graduation is one of those life moments. Graduation invites us to sit down at the table and to reflect on where we have been and where we are going. To think about what is important and what is not.

Parents and family members sitting here tonight are on a journey of memories. They wonder if they've done a good job. They worry about whether they have equipped you well enough to make it in the world. They rejoice and marvel at the individual you have become. They pull their hair out or what is left of it as you practice your independence. They fight the urge to rush in and save you when things get a little tough. They are learning to bite their tongues when their advice is not needed or asked for. And I imagine they reflect on the one thing that they hope you know about all things. And I'm going to guess that that one thing doesn't deal with the piles of dirty laundry, the open door behind you that lets the heat out or the empty milk jug left in the refrigerator for the next unsuspecting family member.

Your teachers go through the same journey. As important as differential equations and hanging participles are to your success in the world, your teachers have a larger agenda. To guide you to become life-long learners.

When I was invited to share with you tonight, I began praying and asking God to share through me the one thing that He would want you to hear tonight. The one word that God hopes you take with you no matter where you go in life. The most important thing from Your Creator's heart to yours.

But tonight, I would like to own something first. I would like to confess that based on how many of us Christians behave and what the Church appears to focus on, I imagine many of you expect God's word to you tonight to be about a rule that you shouldn't break or a way you should live or not live. And I want to apologize to each of you tonight from the depths

of my heart that we tend to preach that message by our actions and by our words because I truly believe that is not at all what is most important to God. What God would want you to hear above all other things.

I believe, without a doubt, that God would want this to be the promise you take with you from this place. A love note He penned in a different way, in a different tomb over 2000 years ago.

You are loved more than you can imagine.

You are loved no matter what. No matter what choices you make; what mistakes you do; good deeds you accomplish; pain you cause; lives you save; hearts you break; lies you tell; prayers you say . . . you are loved.

- Whether you listen to country, pop, emo or Barry Manilow, you are loved.
- Whether you passed AP Psychology or failed Dance PE, you are loved more than you can imagine.
- No matter your race, gender or sexual orientation, you are loved.
- No matter if you love God, hate God or don't believe in God . . . you are loved more than you can imagine.

That is a hard thing to swallow for some of us. In a world where we are taught that nothing is free, we are frustrated by undeserved love. It makes us uncomfortable, feeling like we owe something.

I still struggle with the idea that I am loved and there is nothing I can do about it. I know that sounds weird. Like a total stranger walking up to me on the street and giving me the keys to his brand new Porsche Cayman for FREE, no strings attached and my response being, "No, thank you. I don't deserve it." You'd think I was crazy. I'd think I was crazy. Some of us

would accept the car and then insist on making small payments for the rest of our lives just so we don't feel like charity.

God's love is infinitely greater than a new sports car, God gives it to us freely, no strings attached, no debt to be paid, no fine print or hidden loop-holes. And yet, it is hard for us to just receive God's love. It seems wrong not to have to pay for our sin, not to feel guilty about it or kick ourselves around for the rest of our lives.

Listen to this letter that a guy named Paul wrote to some of his friends in the city of Rome. And remember that Paul is a guy who spent a lot of his life trying to earn God's love before he finally realized he didn't have to. "We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his doors to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand – out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory; standing tall and shouting our praise. . . . Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him."

When I was in college and poor (trust me – you'll understand soon enough), I remember that there was a concert I really wanted to attend but I didn't have the money. I don't remember complaining about it much to my friends but I'm sure I whined a little about it. The week before the concert I opened my dorm mailbox and discovered a white envelope with my name typed on the front of it. Inside was the exact amount of the concert ticket in cash. No name, no

handwriting. Had CSI been on TV then I might have thought about fingerprints or saliva but I didn't. To this day I still do not know who gave me that money. And I don't think I'll ever forget it for two reasons – 1) I can't believe anyone was so generous as to give me the money AND not want credit for it; and 2) There is a part of me that still wants to repay them so I'm not in debt to anyone. I still struggle to receive a gift for what it was – a gift.

There was nothing I could do. It had been taken care of. I couldn't return it or insist on paying it back because I didn't know who to pay. All I could do was trust that what my friend did was what they wanted to do and then live with it. Which meant going to the concert and enjoying the gift.

This is our invitation. To trust that we don't owe anything. To trust that something is already true about us, something has already been done, something has been there all along.

Graduates – no matter where you go, no matter what you do, no matter if you accept it or not - You are loved by God. Deal with it.

Congratulations Class of 2006.