Kick Off Dinner 1998
Dr. Roger Parrott

1998-99 Verse of the Year
"I will show you the most excellent way"
I Corinthians 12:31

TRANSCRIPT

The latest Internet joke floating through cyber space is "if a man is alone in the woods without his wife -- is he still wrong?" Well, I must have been alone when I selected the verse of the year, for I was dead wrong for choosing I Corinthians 12:31.

First, I have to explain to everyone that the focus of the verse of the year is really I Corinthians 13, for "I will show you the most excellent way" is the introduction for what is known as the love chapter of the Bible, chapter 13. And the most excellent way is to allow the love of God to live through us.

But second, I was wrong because if this is our theme verse, we then need to genuinely apply Christian love to how we work every day. And it may get a bit uncomfortable if tonight we want to seriously talk about showing at work, the love described in I Corinthians 13.

Those of you who have attended the last two Kick-off dinners know that my pattern has been to use this occasion to speak on the verse of the year as it applies to our work at Belhaven. And then in the first chapel, I would preach on that same verse.

Well, the preaching should be easy, for what more wonderful chapter is there in all of scripture than the instruction God gives us as to how we are to love each other as he loves us. And if you can't preach from I Corinthians 13, then like Vincent Van Gogh, you should drop out of seminary and see if there is anything else you're good at doing.

But when I chose this passage as our theme for the year, I must have been thinking that at this Kick off dinner I would relate our work to the nice easy, feel good, applications of I Corinthians 13.

I must have been anticipating that first, I could talk about how we need to love our students -- and do we ever, for so many of them have not seen Christian love modeled, and they need us to show them the most excellent way through our interactions. At Belhaven, I think we do pretty well in responding to students with a loving spirit that honors Christ and demonstrates His love and patience. But most Christian organizations are usually good at showing the love of Christ to those they are seeking to serve.

I probably made a note somewhere that secondly, I could talk about showing our love for God

and each other by trusting God to solve our challenges and by regularly lifting up one another in prayer. And I like how we are a praying community at Belhaven; and maybe one of the most inspiring times I've personally had was at the Campus Conference last year when you so easily broke into small groups for prayer. But most Christian organizations are usually good at coming together to pray about the needs of their organization and their people.

When I selected this verse, I must have thirdly imagined that tonight I would talk about how we integrate the teaching of Christ's love into our academic and student life programs. For 25 years, Christian Colleges have known that they must not simply be good Christians and pray before class, but they must truly integrate faith and learning.

And here at Belhaven, I believe we are the leaders in taking that integration to the level where each discipline is being presented on the foundation of God's Truth and love. But most Christian organizations are usually good at creating a Biblically based model for their work and ministry.

Those were probably the topics I'd anticipated addressing tonight for they are comfortable applications to I Corinthians 13. And I could give us a little speech about them, patting ourselves on the back, and we'd all go home and say, "wasn't the buffet good" and not change much the way we do anything.

But shortly after I announced this verse last spring, God began leading me to deal with this scripture in a different way, and to ask how does it apply to the day-to-day operation and working style of Belhaven College?

Now my problem is, I've never read a thing, or heard a sermon on how to demonstrate love in the workplace of a Christian organization. Sure, there's a lot about how Christians can live out their faith at work so that non-believers will be drawn to Him. But what about those of us who are privileged to work with other Christians in a Christian environment? We never talk about how we do things differently <u>because</u> we are Christian.

And so for months, I've been reading this passage over and over, not in terms of what it tells me about how to love my family, our students, my neighbors, or the world -- although all those are vital.

But rather, the question I've been asking is: what does it mean to work together in Christian love?

And for those of you who have been around a variety of Christian ministries, you know that this is one thing that most Christian organizations <u>don't</u> do very well at all. We are quick to demonstrate the love of Christ to those we serve, or to preach love from our various platforms. But when it comes to running the day-in-and-day-out operation in a way that reflects Christian love -- we most often don't.

In fact, except for being somewhat kinder, a bit more civil, and mostly free from the moral

problems which corrupt some business relationships, the work place of most Christian organizations is not much different from our secular counterparts.

So, tonight I want to share some ideas from this passage that might at least get us thinking and talking about the question: "what does it mean to create a workplace that reflects Christian love."

And I pray that Belhaven College will be a place which not only teaches the most excellent way of I Corinthians 13, but lives it out in our daily work as well. And if there is an institution in the country that really could live out this model of Biblical love, I believe it is Belhaven College.

First, this passage tells us that OUR LOVE *comes before* OUR ACTION.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but do not love, I gain nothing.

The first third of this chapter calls us to see what is most essential in our work, for it is then that our actions will become meaningful. The scripture is very clear here -- even the God honoring actions listed are nothing if not centered in Christian love.

Love before action is a life changing way to work.

But with the pressure to do quality work, the demands of our individual responsibilities, and the stress of managing job and family, it is not surprising we forget to keep out eyes focused on what is most important -- our love, rather than on our responsibilities.

This summer I had a most unusual experience. Joe Martin, who is one of the kindest people God ever created, knows I love to fly fish. And so he has been concerned that in Mississippi, there is not a single trout to be found, and especially not one that will rise to a dry fly on a cool summer evening.

But Joe, being the resourceful missionary that he is, invited me to go fishing one morning in June. And it was a day I will *never* forget!

First, Joe picked me up at 4:45 in the morning and we drove to Wynn Kenyon's house where we parked the car, because the other neighbors don't appreciate fishermen parking in front of their houses. Why is it that so much of what happens of significance *begins* at Wynn Kenyon's house?

Well, there we meet up with Stewart Edwards and Don Hubele, and knowing where they were going, they set out in the dark with me tagging along behind. We walked down to I-20, and with the huge trucks rumbling above, went under the highway, and through a hole someone had

cut in the fence, where we came face to face with a sign that said: "it is unlawful to go past this sign." Those three guys didn't even look up as we walked past it into the woods, and past the city of Jackson sewage treatment plant.

As they lead me down abandoned railroad tracks, Joe began telling me about the fishing place where we were headed. I had envisioned a nice farm pond, and maybe stopping first for a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs and pancakes at the farmer's house. But no -- we were headed to the Pearl River to fish!

As we walked along Joe told me about the keys to catching these big strippers in the river, but told me to watch out for the snakes while we fish. And Stewart, who had been marching like a man with a mission, slowed down enough to tell me about the day they were fishing when a water moccasin came floating along and tried to grab onto his leg, thinking it was the closest tree trunk, and he had to fight it off with his fishing rod.

And then Don told about the snake they saw swimming across the top of the water, with a catfish it had caught in his mouth. Obviously, this zoology lesson was getting my attention, but Joe said the snakes live in the rocks under the water, and since we were going to be fishing for huge fish, I figured we wouldn't be near rocks, so any snakes that might come my way I could see long before they found me.

About that time we got to the abandoned train trestle that crosses the Pearl River, and walking on the railroad ties, 40 feet above the muddy water is a great way to get your adrenalin pumping in the morning. Finally to the other side, we head down an embankment through the forest of high grass and rusted car bodies left over from the great Pearl River flood.

Well, I had about had all the excitement I needed for one day when we finally arrived at the spillway, where the sewage treatment plant water flows back into the Pearl River. And as we looked at the fast moving water which was coming over the 8 foot high dam just a few feet in front of us, Joe said, "at least we don't get many alligators in this part of the river." That was the last bit of information I needed to make for a perfect day.

Being a fabulous host, Joe had brought flies for me, and even helped me rig up my line, before he started to make his way out on a long jetty of the slipperiest submerged rocks you've ever tried to walk on. The noise of the water coming over the spillway was so loud he couldn't hear when it finally dawned on me -- it's in the rocks where the snakes live, and now we are supposed to walk out on them to fish!

Needless to say this was a challenging fishing trip for me. For the other guys it seemed easy -- see, Joe has been a missionary, so he can do anything. Stewart works in student life and well, say no more. And Don, well, he's an English professor, so he's not all that in touch with reality anyway.

But having come this far, I put on my chest high waders (the others just went in the water in

shorts and tennis shoes) and very gingerly walked out into the rocks to fish. Well, once I got there, I'll admit it was great. I hooked several very big fish that fought as hard as any Canadian steel head. And for a while, I *almost* forgot where I was, as I got focused on the fish.

Well, after a couple hours another huge fish had broken off my line, and exhausted from walking back and forth on the rocks several times, I sat on the edge of the shore to rest. I was watching Joe, Don, and Stewart catch fish.....watching the styrofoam cups and garbage float over the spillway.....watching the rocks for any snakes that were late sleepers....and I was sitting there thinking: "I love the smell of the Pearl river in the morning."

About that time, the sister of one of the other guys fishing near there sat down, and I mumbled something about her being a real trooper for coming out to such a rough place just to be with her brother.

"Oh," she said, "but don't you think it's beautiful out here? Look at the sunrise over there.....and look how the trees are so majestic on the shoreline.....and look how the water shines when the sun bounces off the sewage plant and lights up the river.....and look how intricate the train trestle over the river is constructed."

And I'll admit she was right.....but I hadn't seen it at all, for I was far too focused on the immediate challenges which were more than consuming to me.

Well, in the same way, it is difficult to see that God wants us to be people of love first, while the demands to excel in our job and grow in our profession is always before us. It is difficult to see that God wants us to treat others with the same love that He has for them, when the accrediting bodies, the bankers, the constituency, and the churches all want us to produce visible results.

It is difficult to keep our eyes focused on love's high calling, when the stress of working in the 1990s downsized world has our to-do lists growing while there are fewer people to turn to for help. And so most often, we become focused on the action of the job.

But the scripture here is very clear. Yes, of course, we have important work to do. After all, the Bible often talks about the vital importance of work, and the previous chapter in I Corinthians was all about using the remarkable skills God has given each one of us.

The work we do does not lead us to the most excellent way, unless we do it in a spirit of Christian love.

<u>Now, let's get specific. What are we talking about here when we apply love to the work place</u>?

Does it mean we all have to be best friends, or look totally past one another's faults? Does it mean we need to create unlimited trust with no accountability, or just develop that warm fuzzy feeling of acceptance? Does it mean that no one ever gets fired?

Does it mean that the standard of excellence isn't all that important? Does it mean that we all have to agree about every issue? Does it mean we will never misunderstand one another?

Does it mean that our process is so perfect that no one ever feels left out? Does it mean that there will never be another employee that we just don't enjoy working with?

No, these things will always be part of any job.

But look at what Jesus said Christian love was all about, for I think this is what Christ has in mind when He wants us to share His love in the workplace. He showed us:

sacrificial love -- going the extra mile
tender love -- being the Sheppard of the one sheep who is lost
patient love -- enduring the immature jockeying for position of James and John
humble love -- turning the other cheek
tough love -- not pulling any punches when correcting the disciples
attentive love -- feeling a need when one woman in a crowd touched his coat
visionary love -- having the confidence in which Peter could become
forgiving love -- welcoming home the prodigal son

How do we operate Belhaven College in Christian love? We need to SEE our work as Christ sees it -- not simply as a tangle of talents and responsibilities. You and I must allow love to come before our action, so that the spirit of Christian love becomes infectious and becomes the norm for how we do our work.

Did you know that in a study of Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities' students, including Belhaven, over 60% of students said they "*sensed* the lack of self-confidence in their adult mentors?" If they can sense a lack of self-confidence, I'm glad the questionnaire didn't ask if they can sense a spirit of love. For on most Christian College campuses, there is very little genuine Christian love when it comes to the day-to-day operation of the place.

But Belhaven already is and must be different from the rest. We have all the right components which will allow us to create a campus style that expresses genuine Christian love in the way that we work. And when we do, the scripture says it will make us immeasurably more effective in using the skills we bring to our task.

After all, who would you leave your toddler with -- a professional nanny who was highly trained in child care, or a spoiling grandmother who you knew loved them totally and would sacrifice everything for them?

But you know if we will put the love and the skills together, then we are headed down the road of the most excellent way. And this is the "way" we owe our students and each other.

It has often been said, that if in the 1950s the railroads had known they were in the transportation business instead of the railroad business, more of them would still be IN business. And we too,

see in this scripture that we are not in the teaching business, the coaching business, the physical plant business, the constituency relationships business, the student support business, the financial management business ... no, we are in the Christian love business.

Now that sounds good, but I'm not naive -- working day-to-day with a spirit of love is much more difficult than working to create a College that teaches God's love.

My kids, who are 6 and 4, had a good week this summer at Bible School at 1st Presbyterian. And the kids must have listened carefully, for about a week later MaryLou saw them in the family room playing with legos; and when she asked what they were building, they held up a cross and said, "we are building the cross upon which Jesus died."

I believe the greatest temptation to those of us who work in a Christian organization is to allow our focus to become building replicas of the cross -- in other words, doing Christian work -- and permitting our labor to become the substitute for living out the love that the cross represents.

Because if what we bring to work every day is <u>only</u> our ability to teach, coach, fix plumbing, raise money, recruit students, run computers, answer phones and type letters, or make speeches . . . then the scripture tells us we are making a hollow contribution. Rather, to work in God's way, there is no doubt that our love must come before our action.

<u>Second, this passage tells us that LIFTING UP *comes before* SPEAKING OUT.</u>

This second section of the chapter gets into the nitty gritty of how Godly love is actually lived out. So now might be the best time for you to turn to a co-worker sitting near you, and say, "you *really* need this."

We've all studied this passage carefully when it comes to getting along with our spouses, family, and friends. But in a Christian work setting, I believe the core issue is that our lifting up must come before our speaking out.

Verses 6 & 7 tell us to be eager to lift up each other...*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* And verses 4 & 5 instruct us to be slow to speak out...*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

This simple principle, applied in a Christian work setting, might just make our work more productive and our relationships stronger and more enjoyable.

What if ... just what if, every time we wanted to speak out in criticism, we were not allowed to do so until we had first lifted up that person in some tangible way? Would we speak less, and build up more? What if we had to summarize all the strengths of someone before we could second guess them?

What if we had to say something encouraging before we were allowed to address something negative? What if, when we get in one of those circumstances where we feel we've been mistreated, and we walk into a co-worker's office and shut the door to let off steam, the venting session began with prayer for the person who offended before we start to analyze and embellish all their shortcomings?

I am totally convinced that today, the primary threat to Christian Colleges is not from the outside. It is not lack of money, government interference, accrediting association control. No, our schools are being destroyed from within, because the academic world is one that is quick to speak out and extremely slow to lift up. And some of you came to Belhaven just to get away from a school like that.

Let's do it differently shall we? We don't have to let the cynicism of the American higher education set for us the pattern of how we interact with each other. If we will simply lift up before we begin speaking out, we will heal divisions that could develop.

We would about eliminate gossip, for we can't gossip while lifting up, and then we can put more energy into the work God has given us, rather than the complexities we create. We would find that complaining will diminish for it's hard to whine when we're asking God's best for those who grate on us.

As I've pondered this scripture this summer, I've been asking why is it that we sometimes have our most severe conflicts in life with co-workers. Well, the obvious answer is that we didn't always select them -- unlike all our other relationships. But, it is a number of other issues as well.

First, being linked together by an employment contract pushes us to see each other's faults more than strengths, for after all, "if those other people would just do their jobs better, mine wouldn't be so difficult." And besides in a Christian organization our individual financial success and job satisfaction are very closely linked together, and so it is easy to become critical of anyone who doesn't do what we believe is best to lift us all higher.

Second, I think we have different expectations about what a work relationship should be. Some feel like they don't have a real work relationship unless they have time to talk every day and know all about you, and others just want to do their job and not share anything. Neither is totally right, but the clash of all the different expectations we bring to our work creates conflicts. Scott Peck defines four levels of relationships, and without going into it in detail, the level that characterizes most work relationships he defines as "chaos." Fairly accurate sometimes.

And third, because of the structural issues of an organization, when conflicts arise, we often wind up talking to everyone BUT the person with whom we are in conflict. And that pattern not only doesn't solve the problem, but poisons all the innocent bystanders as well.

Obviously, the enemy has more than enough built in opportunities through the core nature of business relationships to sidetrack us from accomplishing God's goals for the College. So to overcome these obstacles, we need to be serious about implementing I Corinthians 13 at work.

I think all of this comes down to understanding how we apply **forgiveness**. Now that may sound like a simple answer, for after all we are supposed to be people of forgiveness.

But in a work setting, there is a level of accountability that is important for the good of the group and that standard of accountability is necessary if we are to achieve the goals God has given us. Thus, we can't forgive poor performance that keeps us from being effective, if we are to be true to God's standards of excellence.

But in Christian organizations, we've gotten forgiveness all mixed up with accountability, and so we wind up not doing either one very well. But after spending more time thinking about this than I ever thought I would, I am convinced it's the balance of both that is critical. Forgiveness and accountability have to work together to make for an effective work-place.

So the day-in-day-out question becomes, what falls into the forgiveness basket and what into the accountability basket? Essentially, I'd suggest to you that it is the personal that needs to be forgiven, and the organizational that needs accountability.

Let me explain that a bit. So often, it's our personal working styles that are the root of conflicts in an organization. It's not the work itself that creates hurtful divisions. It's not the work itself that taints every new action in terms of some hurt of the past. It's not the work itself that keeps some from even working together with certain people.

It is usually a personal style issue that becomes the focus of a conflict rather than the work itself -- they didn't treat me with respect....they didn't ask for my input....they forgot to invite me to the committee meeting....they were short with me....they didn't even speak to me when I passed them in the hall....they cut me off before I could even get my idea out in the meeting...

Those are personal style things. So it seems to me, that if we are to live out I Corinthians 13 in a Christian organization, those are the things that have to be overlooked or forgiven. And what is left is the organizational and for that we need to be held accountable to each other.

I think it kind of works like this . . .

Let's forgive the absent minded.
Let's forgive the tired.
Let's forgive the narrowly focused.
Let's forgive the overwhelmed.
Let's forgive the fast.
Let's forgive the preoccupied.
Let's forgive the discouraged.
Let's forgive the aloof.
Let's forgive the abrupt.
Let's forgive the creative spirit.
Let's forgive the no nonsense approach.

But then let's hold each other accountable and not forgive those things that impact the outcome of our work.

See, I think we shouldn't forgive the lazy.
We shouldn't forgive cutting corners.
We shouldn't forgive mean spirited actions.
We shouldn't forgive missing deadlines.
We shouldn't forgive poor quality.
We shouldn't forgive not fulfilling our mission.
We shouldn't forgive being purposefully destructive and negative.
We shouldn't forgive less than a full effort.
We shouldn't forgive not working within the policies that help us all succeed.

Let's be people who lift up before speaking out. If we will first forgive all the personal things that bug us about each other, and instead, lift each other up in spite of those personal traits that might frustrate us -- then, we can speak out to hold each other to a level of accountability that will make us grow and become more successful in our work and for God's Kingdom.

Finally, this passage tells us that THE ETERNAL *comes before* THE IMMEDIATE.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Each Belhaven employee in this room has wonderful and unique gifts that you bring to the College. Our faculty have prepared for many years for their positions and they are first quality.

Others have special skills that they have acquired through sacrificial effort.

Others bring a breadth of experience or learning of hard knocks that makes them particularly effective in their jobs. We have great people in this room -- professionals who know what they are doing.

But all we accomplish, the scripture tells us, doesn't matter if we allow that immediate work to become more important than our eternal goals. If we had the viewpoint of God's eternity, rather than seeing from a child-like view of the immediate, then we would find it much easier to express Godly love in all we do.

If we had the vision of eternity where we can see with face-to-face clarity rather than through a poor quality mirror, then we would find it easy to forgive each other and hold accountable with the right balance. When we have the knowledge we will gain in eternity rather than only the small snippets we understand now, then we could easily lift up before speaking out.

But, most of us don't live with that eternal view even when we try. I have a print in my office that I keep on the other side of the table from where I sit so I can see it during every meeting. And it reads, "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove...but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child."

But posters from a catalog are lots easier to hang on the wall than to implement. Especially when it comes to conflicts in the work-place.

MaryLou and I sat in that same conference room a while ago with some long-time friends who were here visiting. We'd gone to dinner and then came back to the office to pick up some papers and began talking and talked until about midnight. For they told us the story of our friends working situation, where for 20 years he had done all the right things, had been supportive and loyal, had sacrificed so much for the organization, but still was terribly hurt by his boss.

And without revealing to you the story, the wounds were so deep and severe I finally asked through my own tears, how in the world they could even cope with the anger of being betrayed in that way.

But he gave me an answer which I'll never forget. He said, "oh, I've forgiven him and we are still good friends for I figure if I'm going to spend eternity with him anyway, I'd better get along with him now." If we had that type focus on eternity, it would be much easier to live out Godly love in the immediate. For as the tee shirts don't say, but should: "Life is faith....all the rest is just details."

If we would let eternity come before the immediate, I believe we would be people who naturally love, lift up, and forgive. In other words, we would give to others the grace that God

gives to us, for grace is the doorway to eternity.

And to help us all understand what grace means in our lives, I came very close to buying for every employee a book to have at your place tonight. I'm usually very slow to recommend books to anyone, but everywhere I've gone within the Christian world the last six months people have been talking about Philip Yancy's book, "What's so Amazing about Grace?" And so I got it and read it, and if you will too, I guarantee it will be life changing.

It will give you a vision of Grace that will change the way we relate to God and to others. Page 62 alone is worth the cost of the book, when he defines Grace saying, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more ... and grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less . . . Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love."

So I want to make you this deal. I've asked Chris to get some copies of the book the bookstore, and if you'd like one, then stop by the bookstore and get one, and if you read it within 30 days, then you don't have to pay for it. But if you don't read it, then you have to come back and pay for it. But I'll warn you to start reading it the day you get it, for it is so rich and helpful, you'll need 30 days to finish it.

Well, as I've been reading about grace, and looking carefully at I Corinthians 13, God gave me this challenge: How would our campus be different if we could focus more on the eternal by setting a goal in the immediate to do one act of grace each month as God opens the door? Do one act that expresses God's grace to someone who is totally deserving of our immediate wrath instead.

I think that is a doable goal. But I'll caution you, it's not easy. In fact, I already did mine for August and I hated it!!! My immediate said to let 'em have it. But grace said to let it go into God's hands.

Get the books ... set the goal for each month ... and let's see what it does for us. And remember, if you do set that goal, I like that quote that says, "commitment is the ability to carry out a resolution long after the mood has passed."

One final thought before I close -- I had one other very unusual experience this summer. A faculty member made an appointment on my calendar, and I knew he was coming in with a boat load of problems and issues that really did need to be addressed, but to which there were not any easy solutions.

The appointment came on a day after I'd just had some tough things to deal with. I was worn out, I had some overwhelming deadlines pressing, and to tell you the truth, the last thing I wanted to do that day was to deal with his problems when I had so many of my own.

But the time of the appointment came, I took a deep breath, and got ready for what I assumed

was going to be a meeting that was most likely to end in frustration for all.

Well, he came in ... we did the "how are you" ... and got ready for the agenda. But then he said and did the most remarkable thing. He said, "when I made this appointment, I had a long list of things I needed to work on with you. And we still need to do that sometime. But today the Lord told me to lay aside the agenda, and instead to come and wash your feet."

Now, I've been a college president for ten years, and I've never had a faculty member buy me lunch, much less wash my feet. And well, that's really okay, for to be perfectly blunt, I'm not the foot washing kind...nor do I clap during choruses, or raise even one hand during a time in praise.

But what do you do when someone has you captive in your own office, and asks to wash your feet? Well, I stumbled around a bit to think how I could get out of this, and realizing I couldn't, I said, "well, I've never done this before, but okay."

So he went out the door, and came back in with a basin of water, and towel....I took off my shoes and socks....and he told me he hoped he was doing this right, for he'd never done it before either.....but began to wash my feet and pray for me.

And like the flick of a light switch the immediate didn't any longer matter. The financial pressure was put in perspective. The huge challenges became small. The difficult conflict of the previous day evaporated ... for life became focused on the eternal, not the immediate.

And I realized how few times eternity rather than the immediate is the agenda in the president's office -- or for any of us coping with the pressures we all face to fulfill our responsibilities and accomplish our goals.

Now, I'm still not too comfortable with foot washing services. But at least that day, God sent an angel to me in the form of a faculty member to tell me that the eternal always must come before the immediate.

The most excellent way is found when we discover the love of Jesus that allows us to love each other in a way that binds us together in Him and keeps us focused on eternity.

And, so to close our evening, I would ask you to stand together and to sing that hymn what has become our tradition at this occasion. Dr. Stillwell is going to lead us, in Bless Be the Tie that Binds our Hearts in Christian Love ... and then our Dean of the Chapel, Dr. Jim Baird is going to come and offer a prayer for this new school year.