

## **EASTERN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**

**Reverend Representative Louise Williams Bishop**

**Honorary Doctor of Laws**

**Saturday, December 13, 2003**

**By Wynne Alexander**

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President Black, honored guests, parents, grandparents, friends and future colleagues:

While I am deeply grateful to God on this day, I must confide to you I am also deeply troubled.

I am grateful for the blessings which have me speaking here, healthy and sufficiently in command of my faculties to address this distinguished group of graduates and getting a degree myself. I am extremely pleased to be connected to a school that forged an historic learning partnership with the Lamberton School and its visionary development of an inner-city- based graduate program in social transformation. I am also very appreciative of that.

But I am troubled with the state of the world today.

I do not understand why we seem no closer to a state of enlightenment than did people living hundreds if not thousands of years ago. I do not understand why in the area of conflict resolution, too often the majority of the movers and shakers in this world bear more resemblance to cavemen and the Pirates of the Barbary Coast. And that is why it is my fervent hope that you really are my future colleagues.

These are very special educations that you and I are receiving. Not just in the classrooms you're now leaving, but the education that is everyday—everywhere evident. The lessons of the world. Lessons from heaven.

Choices are also everywhere. We are all given a chance to make things better or become part of the status quo. We are given a chance to be peace makers. And this world is desperately in need of more peacemakers. Peacemakers should be the rule-not the exception. All of us have the capability really, but so few exercise it. That's one of the most special aspects of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Of course, he's often on my mind and with his birthday coming up and his seminary background, speaking of him here, is a natural. You know, he took his seminary training very seriously; right into his everyday life, there really was no separation. That's why he was able to do his best with no fear. He knew they were gunning for him- but because his principals were truly a part of him, there was no question but that he would continue. The KKK, J. Edgar Hoover even his own fellow Baptists did not wish him success. It didn't matter. His

need to bring people together superceded everything. He followed the lead of Mahatma Gandhi in his adherence to the principals of non-violence. They were constantly challenged and they constantly prevailed. He would not be moved. In fact his conviction had such strength, it made up for the shortness of his life. He showed us 'strong beats long.' Because while you might not have long-when the message is strong-it will last through out the ages. That's how it is.

The status quo attachments of the past did not faze him. Whites-only restaurants, rest rooms, neighborhoods and country clubs did not faze him. He took his vision of the future and ran with it and that's what we have to do. He understood the reality of vested interests. Let's face it, there was a lot of money tied up in keeping black folks down. Very often we see greedy people and self serving social institutions all over the world, keeping all kinds of people in subservient positions just so a few folks, with no vision, can have their way. As peacemakers we have to understand what makes the visionless tick. We must understand that by advocating for the good of the whole, we will inadvertently threaten them. But somehow, with the Grace of God, we must allay their fears. We must show them that allowing everyone to breathe free will not harm them.

We can look through all of history and see one story after another boiling down to this very point. Do you think for one moment that Queen Elizabeth wanted to kill Mary Queen of Scots? Well she didn't. Poor Mary was being used by the enemies of England. She was too naive to stand aside. She continually threatened Elizabeth's existence. Elizabeth: the daughter of a woman who was beheaded. A queen who tried repeatedly to make peace with Mary-only to end up having to kill her because there was no way to bargain in good faith. That was the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. So a little over five hundred years later, we've got kids in high schools being blown away. Why? Because they felt they couldn't bargain in good faith. They were being pestered by a festering wound that no one bothered to investigate. That no one bothered to mediate. That is what we must guard against. Those of us with the patience and calling must rise to the occasion.

When I'm out there working in the community, or at the radio station or in the state house, and people come to me with their problems—I know that to get a good resolution we must serve all the parties' interests. We must serve all the masters in any given situation. That's what the teachings of King Solomon taught me. For example, when I'm working with community groups who seem to have a problem with the police department, one of the first things I do is paint two concise pictures so both sides can clearly see all sides of the issues at hand. Once there is a clear understanding of what all the parties are dealing with, then we can start to mold solutions that address all concerns and do not step too harshly on too many toes. Let's face it-there's been a problem with conflict resolution dating right back to the Garden of Eden. Just look at the fuss that apple kicked up.

On a much more serious note - look at the conflict in Iraq.

Former President Clinton spent the last months he had in office trying to head this thing off at the pass. He was shuttling all over. The next administration comes in and for months prior to 9-11, they said we had no place in the Middle East. 'Not our problem.' A complete reversal of the Clinton posture. And just when they were finished wiping the Middle Eastern dust from their palms- BOOM-- 9/11 smacked 'em right in the face. Proving definitively, the Middle East *is* our problem.

I believe you must step up and face problems head on. Very few problems ever went away because they were ignored.

Rosa Parks did not ignore the whites-only policies of this country. But plenty of people did.

"Don't rock the boat," they said. "Don't rush."

Well she very carefully and methodically stepped to that issue. She had to be careful because sometimes you can get very hurt doing the right thing.

But God's in heaven and right then, the world needed a stand up woman. Albeit, one willing to keep her seat. Someone willing to sacrifice, unafraid to go to jail and be handled by some of the wrongest-headed (sic) people in Alabama, someone of supreme courage and integrity. That someone was Rosa Parks.

And so, on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, in a racially hostile Montgomery, Alabama, she simply refused to get up and move to the back of the bus. And for that, she was arrested.

She was arrested for sitting where she pleased. The struggle she sparked brought a young Martin Luther King Jr. to national prominence as he spearheaded what became the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Later, Dr. King marked the historic step, saying the Montgomery Boycott led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

And I'm here to tell you, Rosa Parks taking a stand and saying 'I'll sit anywhere I please' is responsible for me sitting in the Pennsylvania Legislature. And remember for years, Rosa Parks was the lone female image in a sea of male leadership. And that transcends race. All the women who serve in the Pennsylvania state house and senate, both federal houses of congress, regardless of color, all the women serving in cabinets across this country, all the female judges in the land, all of us who no longer clean houses and fetch coffee are sisters and our mother is Rosa Parks.

She helped resolve a centuries-old conflict by taking a very bold step that gave birth to thousands of similar steps. So many steps, that the only place you see a 'whites-only' sign is on exhibit in a history museum.

Everyone here has the knowledge and ability to step up during a time of need. To be brave with the certainty of God in a time of crisis. We know how to assess what Caesar needs to be satisfied, or how to work between the egos and the greed to get something for one, even if another thinks it's his. The wisdom to know when to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Or the wisdom and strength to say "Caesar you've had enough".

And you must remember something, and this is very important. Don't be embarrassed by your learning. Don't be embarrassed by your righteousness.

I hope with all my heart you are my future colleagues. The peacemakers. 'For Blessed are the peacemakers,' say it with me, 'for they shall be called the children of God.' I am reminded here of one of the greatest treatises ever written on the civil rights movement. The author was a very young Dr. King. The occasion was his incarceration in a jail cell, in Alabama. And not only were his captors on his mind, but his own Baptist brethren were on his mind because many of them were against his ideas on how the civil rights movement should progress. Yes, they were *against* him. And in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," he writes brilliantly of all levels and kinds of conflict resolutions. I am reminded of his last paragraph because he could be writing of today's troubles not just here, but in the Middle East, Korea, India, Pakistan- anywhere people are failing to see their common goodness. Anywhere people would rather die for their differences.

"I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of...prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

[signed]

Martin Luther King, Jr."

'Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood.'

Each of us has a responsibility to do the right thing in the eyes of the creator. And to fail there-is to fail in our responsibility to God.

'Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood.'

That's why I do what I do.

And I'm hoping the people and Spirit that brought me on board will speak to your hearts, not just today, but throughout your lives, on large and even small occasions. Calling you to use all your skills and all of your being in the cause of peace and brotherhood.

Thank you and God Bless You.

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