A Constellation of Vital Phenomena

President’s Address
La Sierra University Academic Convocation
September 26, 2013

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

This summer I read a wonderful book by a young author named Anthony Marra who is currently a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. In fact, the title of this thought-provoking book is the title of my address today: A Constellation of Vital Phenomena.

Now I have to admit, and my family will confirm, that I have bought many a book on the strength of its title. Certainly, along with the positive reviews that I read, the title was a big reason why I wanted to read this book.

Set in Chechnya during the Civil War, the author invites us into the lives of three unlikely companions whose worlds collide, revealing an intricate pattern of connections that weave together their pasts and decide their fate. It is a story of loss, the transcendent power of love, and the unexpected ties that bind us together.

The title, A Constellation of Vital Phenomena, is not explained till near the end of the book. Sonja, a medical doctor, too tired to sleep, opens the Medical Dictionary of the Union of Soviet Physicians. Glancing through the huge book, she notices, on page 1,332, a definition, circled in red ink:


Two weeks ago, one of our illustrious alumni, Ivan Rybken, who is now a third-year medical student at Loma Linda University, was in our home. Over the years, Ivan and I have talked about what it was like to grow up in Russia, and I asked him if he was aware of this medical definition. Ivan spent a bit of time with this definition of life and declared: “I don’t know. But it certainly sounds Russian!”

As I think about this definition—“Life: a constellation of vital phenomena—organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation,” I think about us this morning. I think about our La Sierra constellation—this organization we belong to,
the way we react to each other, how we move in and out of groups. And I think of each person who makes it so very vital.

What does it mean to live in community? This is always a significant question—but especially so when one thinks of the rich diversity of our La Sierra University family. This year you as students come from 32 states and 38 different countries, you represent even more language groups, and you self-identify as members of 37 different denominations and religions.

Classrooms enriched by the diverse experience of students are today widely recognized for the contribution this brings to students’ learning and preparation for leadership upon graduation. As one of our nation’s most diverse universities, La Sierra is amazingly blessed.

Yet how will we make the most of this gift, this year? How will we live and learn together so that the advantages of our diversity are truly experienced by all of us?

How will we daily live out the promise of those three small words that we find on the university’s seal: “From Diversity, Community”?

This year it is my hope, and my commitment, that our learning community will engage in a long and thoughtful conversation about the value of our diversity—and of what it means to be a part of the La Sierra University family. The quotations on the banners that adorn the campus, some of which were read this morning by the Deans, focus our attention on the power of a diverse community.

Students, I ask you to help each of us to remember that there are far more things that unite us than separate us. Faculty and staff, let us work together in order to embody this reality so that our students see that this, indeed, is our commitment.

When people look at us, what will they see this year? How will we reveal our determination to truly embody our commitment to live in the La Sierra community? How will we embody life as a constellation of vital phenomena?

In an essay entitled The Paradox and Promise of Community, Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers challenge us to believe that “All of us can reach entirely new levels of possibility together, .... We are capable of creating wonderful and vibrant communities when we discover what dreams of possibility we share. And always, these dreams become much greater than anything that was ever available when we were isolated from each other.”

As members of a Christian university, we have a wonderful resource in the Bible. In fact, one of the passages that was read earlier, Micah 6:8, speaks to us of God’s greatest desire for us. It is a desire rooted in His love, and it speaks of how we are to live in
community with one another.

In this passage, the prophet Micah asks the question: What does God want from us? What does God require?

The answer that Micah provides is altogether unexpected and overwhelmingly radical. While Israel had become accustomed to bringing an offering, Micah makes it clear that God wants not what we have but WHO we are—God wants us—and nothing else.

It is, without a doubt, one of Scripture’s clearest pictures of what God desires. Listen to the passage, from Eugene Peterson’s translation, The Message:

“But God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love. And don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.”

Here, in this short verse, we find the answer to what is important to God. It is disarmingly simple, even universal—and it clearly does not require the trappings of formal religion to understand. In fact, here, in this verse, with all of our human concepts of religious belief and practice removed, we are able to glimpse the very heart of God.

And what, Micah asks, does God require? The answer is as eloquent as it is understandable:

- God requires justice.
- God requires a love for kindness.
- And, knowing our inability to do these things on our own, God requires that we walk, with Him, in humbleness.

For the early hearers of this message, this first requirement, justice, mishpat in the Hebrew, was wrapped up with their understanding of judgment. There are some 13 aspects of this one word in the Old Testament, and here, in this passage, it is revealed to be rooted in God’s character. Micah’s listeners would have understood it to be an attribute of humanity in general and of judicial processes among people. The wise speak of it and God requires it and righteous magistrates employ it.

Here at La Sierra, we care deeply about justice. One of the reasons we have focused so many institutional resources on service learning—and one of the reasons this university this year was awarded the highest educational service award the President of the United States can give—is due to our commitment that every member of our La Sierra family be learning and serving locally and around the world. We genuinely believe that when we serve, we are extending justice.
The second requirement, hesed in the Hebrew, means mercy, kindness, love. These early hearers would have understood it to identify one’s loyalty to God’s covenant. Hesed is an ethically binding relationship between people—freely given, and often, most unexpected.

Every day when I arrive on campus I am reminded of the unexpectedness of love when I see the Glory of God’s Grace sculpture. When I see the father—arms outstretched, captured in the motion of welcoming his long-lost son home, the child—kneeling in front of his father, repentant, hopeful that he might be allowed to join his father’s workers in the field—I am grateful that this is the centerpiece of our campus—telling every student, every visitor, that our arms—just like God’s arms—are open and welcoming. Mercy, kindness, love, hesed. This is an integral part of our La Sierra community.

Our third requirement, Sanah in the Hebrew, translated as humble, modest—is found only this one time in all of the Old Testament. Here it is used in relationship to our walk with God—a humble walk, a modest walk, is what is desired.

This commitment to live with humility is particularly important for an academic community. We are here to learn, and we are blessed to have an incredibly gifted faculty who are highly knowledgeable and can speak with authority about their particular discipline. Likewise, as students, you are here to hone your study and research skills, your writing and communication skills, and, you, too, will grow in your understanding and knowledge of all that you are studying.

Yet no matter our commitment or our background or our academic pedigree, there is one thing we all know: The more we learn, the more we realize how little we truly know. Knowledge is continually expanding, and we must approach our studies here at La Sierra with a healthy dose of humility. As we grow in wisdom and in knowledge, it is imperative that we also grow in humility.

Living in a community as diverse as ours is not always easy. We have to take good care of each other, listening carefully before we act or before we jump to conclusions. It is important that we value the differences—and as we do, we will find that there is far more that we share in common than we might have first imagined. And like that definition of life found in that Russian medical dictionary, we, too, will find that our common life is filled with its fair share of organization, of movement and friction, of adaptation and growth.

Yet, isn’t that the very purpose of why we are here? To study, to learn, to try on and test new ideas, to think more broadly, to worship and serve with greater purpose, to imagine a future in which we truly contribute to the greater good of the new communities we will belong to?
I love looking up into the night sky and finding a group of stars that form a recognizable pattern. Like these constellations that fill our night sky, our La Sierra University constellation reveals an intricate pattern of connections that provide a sense of direction and stability for each of us. Occasionally a bright and fiery meteor will shoot across the sky—and this is true for our community as well. People come, people stay for awhile, people leave... yet our constellation of vital phenomena—of life, of unexpected surprises and difficult challenges, of grace, remains.

This year, may our walk with God—and with each other—be one that embodies our commitment to extend justice. May our walk with God—and with each other—be one that is ennobled by the manner in which we embrace one another in mercy. May our walk with God—and with each other—be one that is humble, never forgetting that God alone is all knowing and we are not.

God has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Randal Wisbey
President
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3 Eugene Peterson, The Message, Micah 6:8
4 Sources utilized for the background of Micah 6:8 were the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Volumes 1 and 2, and James D. Newsome, Jr., *The Hebrew Prophets*. 