
ET SPIRITUS
EZEKIEL 37:1-14; ACTS 2:1-12
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON CENTENNIAL FOUNDERS SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2024
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It's been 100 years so there's a lot to say but you'll be glad to know that I won't try to say it all this morning! Today we remember and celebrate the founders of Duke University. There are many names who are influential founders of this university as we heard in the earlier litany. But in particular, the three Dukes who are laid to rest in the Memorial Chapel—Washington Duke, Benjamin Duke, and James B. Duke—are key founders.

We not only remember and thank God for them, but we celebrate that they founded this institution with faith and in faith. Washington Duke was a devout and active Methodist. His eldest brother, William James, was a lay preacher and he was known as “Uncle Billy of the Old Ship” because he loved singing his favorite hymn “The Old Ship of Zion.” Uncle Billy was a farmer and a preacher constantly on call. There's a picture of Uncle Billy hanging in the hallway at the Washington Duke Inn and I can confirm, he looks like a preacher! Uncle Billy was a mentor of Washington Duke, and so faith was important to him thus shaping the lives of his sons and the contour of Duke University to this day.

The 1924 Indenture of Trust—which I'm told takes 45 minutes or so to read aloud and is a good team building exercise especially for trustees—created The Duke Endowment. In it, Mr. James B. Duke says, “I have selected Duke University as one of the principal objects of this trust because I recognize that education, when conducted along sane and practical, as opposed to dogmatic and theoretical, lines, is, next to religion, the greatest civilizing influence.” Education and religion. But notice the priority religion has. Then further on, he says, “And I advise that the courses at this institution be arranged, first, with special reference to the training of preachers, teachers, lawyers and physicians, ... and second, to instruction in chemistry, economics, and history ...” (I offer my deepest apologies to the engineers in the room!), Notice that the training of preachers is first; that's some serious job security for me! (thank you Mr. Duke!) You may also know that the first professional school at Duke to be established was the Divinity School.

Education *and* religion. This is the historical beating heart of Duke University, which is why in April 1925 when Mr. James B. Duke was walking through a forest with his friend and president of Trinity College, William Preston Few, he paused at the highest point of the land and decided that the chapel should stand here at the center of the university's new campus. He said, “I want the central building to be a great towering church which will dominate all of the surrounding buildings, because such an edifice would be bound to have a profound influence on the spiritual life of the young men and women who come here.” At one point in history, it even influenced a visiting five-year-old child to ask, “Did you build it so tall that a giant can say his prayers too?”

At the heart, the center, of the university is a towering chapel, symbolic of faith and the spiritual life, alongside a school of divinity; together we could be called the God quad. It shouldn't be a surprise then that the historic motto of Duke is the Latin, *eruditio et religio*, knowledge and religion. Some are inspired by the poetry of Maya Angelou or the music of Beethoven or Ed Sheeran or a piece of Shakespeare literature or Picasso art, but recently I've been inspired by the Duke University bylaws! I promise it's good bedtime reading. In the current university bylaws, “Article I: Aims,” the very first stated aim of Duke University is “to foster a lively relationship between knowledge and faith.” That's *eruditio et religio*.

The importance and primacy of faith at Duke historically reveals that Duke has flourished and become a world-class, research I university, not *despite* faith but *because* of faith. Like the spires of this neo-gothic Chapel, faith leads one to aspire beyond what we know or see, beyond ourselves and even beyond our imagination. And so faith, religion, has sowed the seeds of Duke's future, one in which education and knowledge are conjoined with faith and religion.

In so many ways, I'm suggesting that the seeds of Duke's future are in the past, not to reify the past because we know it's imperfect as Duke historians will show, but to acknowledge the deep religious roots that fuel a flourishing future.

Every time we turn to Scripture too, we turn back to the ancient wisdom of the past to discover how to live in the present and walk forward into the future.

Today you might be wondering, what does the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel in a low valley have to do with disciples in an upper room? I'm glad you asked. There are words in both and lots of languages, especially in Acts. There are body parts—bones and tongues. There is community—very many dry bones and a diverse cross-cultural collection of individuals. But there is also the Spirit in these stories. Breath or wind or Spirit is in both locales, the heights of ecstasy and lows of mortality. The psalms remind us that there is no where we can go from the Spirit of God even if we land in foreign Carolina Tarheel country where they are mourning in sackcloth and ashes after their loss in football yesterday.

In Ezekiel, you may be struck by the stark and prominent images of death in the valley of dry bones—and want to start singing ‘dem bones dem bones...’ But just as prominent as the signs of death is the language of breath, which in Hebrew is the same word for spirit or wind. Think of the creation in Genesis where we hear the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. That same Spirit is in the valley of bones and is the source of life. The Spirit or breath is mentioned ten times. Repeatedly, we hear “I will put my breath in you.” That is, I will put my spirit in you.

And the majority of the time when Ezekiel mentions ‘breath’ or ‘spirit,’ he follows it by saying, they lived. For where there is breath, there is life. In the Spirit, this life is nothing less than resurrection. And eventually in this biblical scene, God breathes life back into the community and raises it from its graves. It's a reenactment of the primal act of creation, when God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). The very many dry bones were “lying in the valley” (v. 2), but because the breath of God came into them, the “vast multitude” eventually “stood on their feet” (v. 10).

It's the Spirit that has caused Duke to rise over the years to become what it is today, to grow as an institution of higher learning where research, teaching, and service are taken seriously. Remember what President Few said in his first baccalaureate address at commencement in the first service held in this Chapel in 1932. He said, the chapel symbolizes “the significance of the spiritual” in human life. We are reminded today of the significance of faith and the Spirit in the flourishing of Duke University because if there is no breath, there is only death and therefore there would be no Duke.

And because this Spirit comes from the resurrected Jesus as we heard in the Gospel of John where he breathes on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” this Spirit ushers in life, resurrection, and Easter joy. This is why I've called today's service, Easter in September.'

Even in Acts, it's the day of Pentecost and the feast of Pentecost is the celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of life on the early church, and the culmination of the Easter season in the Christian liturgical calendar. That means that the Spirit of Pentecost, the Breath or Wind of God, that is blown to the ends of the earth by the risen Christ, is the Spirit of the resurrection and Easter hope. The same breath that raised Jesus is the same breath that is blowing at Pentecost and in the world today.

But in particular, at Pentecost, we see how the Spirit expands the Christian gospel globally through the igniting of multiple multiethnic multicultural languages. People were amazed and astonished and asked, “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.” The global expansion and multilingual and multiethnic growth of Duke is a

movement of the Spirit of Pentecost. The Spirit cannot be confined but grows like dynamite all over the world in new ventures and new institutes and new collaborations.

And as the Spirit breathes, she not only is a source of life internationally, but a spring of hope existentially. The people in Ezekiel said that their hope was lost but God opened their graves and restored their hope when breath came into them. We may see the heightened scrutiny of higher education or piercing polarization or deadly divisions or crushing conflicts in our time as a hopeless situation, but the Spirit is the source of any hope we may have for our future or the future of Duke University.

During Duke's 50th anniversary in 1974, there was a little book by Alice Phillips, published with the title "Spire and Spirit." It was a book about the Chapel—the place, the people, and the presence. In the foreword, then Minister to the University, Robert Young, noted that 'the presence' was "the Spirit of God as this Spirit has brought joy to the sorrowing, comfort to the lonely, hope to the despairing, and light to brighten the way for all." To inspire or to be inspired or to aspire, one needs to be in-spirited, in-breathed.

I stress the Spirit, I stress breath, because we need to breathe in order to live. In 2021, Archer Boyette received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Experimental and Documentary Arts from Duke. She created a multimedia installation that connects analog, digital, sculptural and sonic elements to celebrate plant life and build what she called "a space of environmental reverence." All of the plant life was from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. What drew my attention to this installation was her title for it which was, "we breathe each other in and out of existence." She said: "On the surface, we breathe each other in and out of existence seems like a grandiose or lofty statement, but it's really just fundamentally true. It's a fact, our interdependence with plants and our connectedness. We literally facilitate each other's breath."

This is why the Spirit, the breath of God, is vital for our existence because we first inspire from God before we expire to one another. This makes us stewards of breath, stewards of spirit, within community in order to be a reservoir of resurrection hope at a time when it may seem as if all there is, is a valley of dry bones.

There's a cautionary reminder for us as well. At one point, in Ezekiel we hear "there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. He looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them." No spirit in them. So you can have flesh, sinews, skin, bones, and still be dead. A hollow shell with no life. This is what I call the zombie zone. It happens to people. It happens to community nonprofits. It happens to churches. It can happen to universities. You can have values, well-structured programs and centers, policies and procedures and protocols in place, and everything look pristine on the outside, but there can still be no breath! That *is* the question—is there breath in us? are we truly alive? The spires of the Chapel remind us not only of a higher calling but of our need to be inspired, inspirited, in order to truly live into the future God has for us.

This is why I say *eruditio et religio et spiritus*. And spirit. Not to change the university motto but to remind us of the wisdom of the prophets of old when they said—"not by might nor by power but my spirit, says the Lord" (Zechariah 4). It's a reminder that the Spirit is the presence and power of God that propels the motto forward and without the Spirit, without breath, there is only death and no Duke University. Without the Spirit, there is no knowledge and faith. John Wesley, the historic leader of the Methodist movement, asserted that every good gift is from God and given to us by Holy Spirit and the Spirit (and I quote) "gives us to know what we did not know before."

This is the Holy Spirit, so please don't post any fake news on Instagram as if I'm talking about drinking 'spirits' at a faculty meeting. *Et Spiritus*, not as an afterthought but a 'through-thought,' a throughline, a necessary additive for resurrection life and hope. It doesn't mean we will fully comprehend everything that has happened in the past or will happen in the future; we will still have questions just as questions are raised in the stories about the valley and the upper room. But embracing the Spirit, who is a wind that blows where it wills, means there will be surprises ahead that call Duke to be fluid and flexible and nimble, not locked in limestone or Duke stone. The

wisdom of President Few from many years ago can be a guide when he said, “Our goal must be to keep the good that has come to us out of the past and adjust it to the conditions and needs of the present.”

So, as we move into the future God has for this institution, who ya gonna call? Hopefully not ghostbusters but the Holy Ghost! The school of the Spirit is like no other. Law, business, environment, arts and sciences, engineering, nursing, medicine, divinity, public policy, are all worthy and good schools. But there is only one Paraclete Professor who can inspire hope for the future.

Historian Robert Durden tells us that President Few wrote these words to Benjamin Duke on December 13, 1924, after the Indenture of Trust was established— “Then after all, my dream and your dream is to be realized in full” “Isn’t it glorious?” It has been, it is, and it will be glorious because of God.

‘Let’s go Duke!’ is a common chant at sporting events. I hope for the next 100 years, with the same enthusiasm, the Duke community will also have a common prayer too – come, Holy Spirit!