Speaker's Profile

**Oh, The Places We've Been, The Places We'll Go**
**State of the University Address**

*September 21, 2011*

**Philip W. Eaton, President**

**Welcome to the beginning of another great year at Seattle Pacific University.** I want to thank Pastor Blake Wood, the new senior pastor here at First Free Methodist Church, for leading us in worship this morning. Thanks as well to Dr. Stephen Newby, as always, and to our worship leaders, for leading us in another meaningful, opening worship.

As I seem to say every year, this is the right way to begin the year for a Christian university, gathering as we do — with humility and gratitude and unity — around the Lord's table. What a privilege to work in this place.

Let me say something about Pastor Wood's strong leadership to build new bridges across Third Avenue. It has been a dream of mine for a long time that we renew and invigorate meaningful connections between the church and the university. And I am thrilled with what is going on.

So, thank you Pastor Wood for your energetic leadership and commitment to this new partnership. And thank you, Stephen Newby, for entering into this venture in a big way. Hang on, it should be an exciting time of new beginnings. **I begin my 16th year as the proud President of Seattle Pacific University.** This is the 16th time I have the privilege of trying to help us think about where we are and where we are going. Whatever you may have taken away from these addresses, I have always counted them such a privilege, and such a high responsibility, one of the ways I have been able to lead the University.

*And this will be my last State of the University address.* In fact this will be the *first of the lasts* for Sharon and me as we move through the year. This is not real easy for me. I've never done this before. I am so ambivalent about this decision, on the one hand, so not-ready, so sad. And yet, on the other hand, I am kind of giddy with excitement for what lies ahead for Sharon and me, and what lies ahead for the future of Seattle Pacific. *In so many ways, it is such a good time for this transition.*

**As we go through this year, I hope we can do some deep and appropriate remembering.** Sharon and I will be doing a lot of this, of course, but perhaps we can do some of it together, not to be maudlin about the past, to be sure, not to idealize the way things have been. That's never healthy, of course. I have no desire to get stuck in the past.

But I have this strong conviction that what we do in the present, and how we look toward the future, are built on remembering. That is the biblical way, you know. The Scriptures tell the stories of our history over and over again. Our stories are the building blocks, both for us as individuals, and for the organizations we build, and for the church. It is the stories that shape us.

I will always remember, for example, Professor Rob Wall's beautiful lectures, often in this very room, as he carefully and lovingly opens up another New Testament text. Those lectures are some of the building blocks for the university; they are some of the building blocks for who I am as a person. When Stephen Newby sings "When I Meet My Master Face To Face," I am moved, deeply. I have such joy when we sing together "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," or when our concert choir, under David Anderson's able direction, sings "A Mighty Fortress."

I have been reading Augustine and Aquinas this summer. Who knows where this intense curiosity came from, but I got this idea that maybe they were both examples of engaging disintegrating cultures in their respective ages, the fourth century and the 13th. What could we learn from these two towering figures about engaging our own disintegrating culture?

And so I passed on some of my thinking to Professor Rick Steele, one of the most classically educated among us. And Rick took the time to respond with a long email, so rich and nuanced and thoughtful — and he proceeded, gently and eloquently, to correct my faulty notions. I will remember that exchange with great fondness. What a rich place this is when we can engage each other in such a way.

I will remember all the lunches with Marj Johnson as we tried to map out the strategic tasks for this complex

organization. You cannot imagine how much thought has gone into this university over those tables at Chinooks. I will remember how blessed I am to work with some of the finest leaders in all of Christian higher education — the vice presidents of this university — I am grateful for their good work, their loyalty, the incredible competence, the friendship — they are the best and I love them. They have made me a better leader each step of the way.

I think about all the dinner conversations with Sharon. We always told ourselves we had to get a life, but our talk was always about SPU. What a partner she has been in this work, what a listener, what an encourager, what wise counsel.

I will remember a lecture from David McCullough at the Downtown Business Breakfast on the value of remembering. I will remember the life-shaping influence on me, and so many others, of the great Tom Wright, through his books, of course, but through his presence on our campus — with his big cross and his purple Bishop's shirt.

I remember when a graduating premed student told me she had no fear to bring her science into meaningful encounter with her faith. And I thought, no fear: That's the characteristic of learning in this great Christian university. I remember when Derek Wood told our board that his students were actually changing the world in his lab. I remember sitting with Erin O'Connell and Tom Box in Tampa as Chuck Sekyra led our women's soccer team to a national championship, in overtime, in the pouring Florida rain.

And I will remember, always, sitting at the feet of the great John Perkins in Jackson, Mississippi, with a group of our students, as he opened up the Scriptures and introduced me, in profound new ways, to a gospel of joy and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. John Perkins changed my life. And I believe he has changed the character of this university.

I remember all the meals by Loida, lovingly prepared; the exquisitely planted flowers by Jeff Daley. I will always be grateful for Karen Jacobson's patience with me, her strong orderliness, her steady calling to serve. I remember the time our security officers saved me from a feral cat. I will remember always the servant's hearts of Dave Church, Wayne Elling, Sunny Chot, and so many others.

**These are the kinds of memories that have shaped my life, and Sharon's life, over these 16 years.** But most importantly, this is the kind of remembering that shapes the Christian community we are trying to build in this place. Remembering gives us meaning for what we do and who we are and where we are headed.

**Out of all of this we find the threads of the state of the university this morning.**

**But it is not just remembering I am doing right now.** I am anticipating the future, for me and for the university, with great excitement. And so I want to talk about the future.

**Let me say a few personal things to begin with.** For 16 years I have carried that big high-ceremony medallion around my neck. I am so proud to be able to wear that thing, representing all of you as president of this great place. I was just in Boston on Friday for the inauguration of a new president at Gordon College, and I wore that medallion, for one of the last times, representing all of you, and I was so proud of Seattle Pacific.

Sometimes, though, that medallion gets really heavy, and every day it is there. For 16 years I have gotten up each morning, with a spring in my step, to be sure, but with a heavy weight of responsibility on my shoulders. It is never not there.

So let me tell you what I am thinking this morning: Come next year at this time, I will hang that medallion over someone else's neck, and I will step back and watch with pride and excitement as the future unfolds under exciting new leadership. And I will be able to say "hey, it's all yours now, baby. I am right beside you, cheering you on, but the medallion is around your neck."

That makes me happy and excited both for my future and the future of this great place.

**I remember coming home from defending my dissertation.** I was already a professor at Whitworth, ABD, for two years while I finished writing. I went back for that final ceremonial grilling called the defense of dissertation. As we began gathering with my committee for the defense, I remember my dissertation advisor motioning me into his office. He closed the door and pulled out a flask and offered me a shot of scotch. I am not sure what my defense would have been like if I had accepted, but it was an affirming part of the ritual.

In any case, the time was summer, and I came home and put on some shorts and took off my shoes and went into the backyard. I remember the feel of the warm grass on my feet.

And I sat down under a tree, and I opened a book — but this time it was a book that I had chosen. And I thought: No more assignments. No more specialized reading for a while. I could actually make my own choices of what I wanted to read, and of course my list was long.

I realized this was the opening of a new chapter, and I was giddy then too about the choices I could make. That's kind of what I feel like as I open a new chapter in our lives today. The choices about how to use my time will be mine for the first time in my life come next summer.

**What this next chapter holds for Sharon and me has a lot of exciting uncertainty about it.** I want you to know I am very healthy. I have more energy right now than I know what to do with, surprising energy, and a wonderful gladness about being alive. And my main goal going forward is to be helpful in some way to others. I want to serve in a way that is uplifting, a building up, for others.

I have devoted almost all of my working life to Christian higher education. I know something about this work and believe in it so wholeheartedly. I have served in leadership roles for many years, and I have served on all kinds of boards. I've spent endless hours in my study — reading and reflecting and writing. I have thought long and hard about how Christians must engage our post-modern, post-Christian culture.

Maybe out of all of this, there will be something uplifting and helpful for others. I may have something to say about leadership, about how boards should work, and about crafting vision for an organization. Whatever form it takes, that's exciting to me.

**But here's what I want to say about the state of this great university this morning.** This is the theme I want to strike in these opening days.

When I came here 16 years ago, what I found was a university with so much potential, and with so many good people, with such an important urban setting for a Christian university, and with such deep and rich roots.

As I began to engage in those early conversations, I sensed we were also a group of people who did not believe in ourselves, and that seemed so sad to me. There seemed to be a lot of focus on the politics of university life, some real tension at the core of things, and there was this persistent self-criticism, a kind of diffidence, a consistent tendency to rag on ourselves.

And I began to say, no, no, we've got it all wrong. Let's believe in ourselves, and let's build something together for God's glory. I tried out the language of premier, and that didn't sit well with some of you. Too prideful, arrogant, presumptuous. I get that, but I felt so strongly we would not flourish if we did not believe in ourselves.

**In part that's what I have tried to do in all these years: to help us believe in ourselves so that we might flourish.** But as you know, I must quickly say, my goal was always bigger than just our own flourishing. I believed also that we had to share a vision of human flourishing with our students, to bring that vision into our community, and into the world. So that we might change the world!

**Can we believe in ourselves in this way going forward?**

**What if we make this bold assertion this morning: Seattle Pacific University is clearly one of the leading Christian universities in the country.** I'd like to make that claim, because it is true.

**But here's the challenge for us:** What kind of paradigm of leadership should frame that assertion? What kind of leadership does the world need from a leading Christian university? How should we try to shape the lives of our students to be leaders for such a time as this?

*This is where I have been doing some fresh thinking.*

For the 600th anniversary of the University of St. Andrews, Tom Wright delivered a stunningly beautiful sermon this summer, on the role of the university to lead society out of the morass in which we find ourselves.

And here's the key: What if we were to lead, Wright asks, with an "upside-down vision of human flourishing," a vision that is grounded on the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ? I felt like he was describing Seattle Pacific.
"A University will thrive and flourish," Wright says, "and a society led by its graduates will thrive and flourish, when . . . [an] upside-down vision of human flourishing takes effect: when people realise that humility and meekness before the evidence and before one's peers are the marks of real academic strength; when they recognize that a hunger for justice and a love of mercy form the elusive center of healthy societies. . . ." And healthy universities.

In Colossians, Paul says "Put on the garments that suit God's chosen and beloved people: *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience*." This is the upside-down way of leading. This is the new paradigm we are looking for among leaders. This will be the way for us to call ourselves a leading Christian university.

**We are so strong right now as a university.** That's what gives me such confidence about leaving at this time. Our numbers are absolutely fantastic. We will welcome over a thousand new students tomorrow evening, the biggest ever, and we will welcome back the largest overall enrollment in our history, some 4,200 students.

Our image and reputation are so strong across the nation. Our vision of engaging the culture and changing the world is known and respected and copied everywhere. Our Christian identity is certain and unwavering, something that has been hugely important to me over the years. We are financially strong and healthy, even in these difficult times. We have added 42 new faculty FTE over my years. We've built lots of buildings. We have done something remarkable in the sciences: over 20 percent of our incoming students want to major in the sciences. We have built one of the finest programs in theology anywhere in the country. And most importantly, we do indeed model grace-filled community in this place.

Of course we have a new University Center to build, a project that will take us to new levels. We have new residence halls to build, new classrooms, more faculty to add. We know that. And we have more money to raise — we need to ratchet up our goals and focus our efforts in more sophisticated ways to raise at least twice the amount we are raising each year. Of course we need more endowment.

We need to move to the semester system, leading the way for our region that is stuck in an old model, out of sync with the rest of the nation.

**All of this describes the state of the university, the state of a leading Christian university.**

**Let me end with a beautiful, complex little poem I discovered this summer.** It comes from Psalms 137. I was in Pasadena when I ran into this poem in the course of my daily study, and I immediately called Stephen Newby. I said "Listen to this, Stephen. This is what we are trying to do at Seattle Pacific. This is what you are trying to do through your music and through our worship, isn't it?"

I don't know Hebrew, though I wish I did, and I am probably taking a few liberties with my reading, but from all the versions I've read, I think I have it basically right. Dr. Koenig and Dr. Spina will have to correct me if they object. And by the way, the end of Psalm 137 is troubling and enigmatic to me. Someone needs to explain that to me.

**But here is the poem that stopped me in my tracks this summer**.

And here is the heart of the matter for all I have tried to do over these 16 years.

Listen to this poem.

> By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept
> as we remembered Zion.
> On the willow trees there we hung up our [harps],
> [but]there those who had carried us captive
> asked us to sing them a song,
> our captors called on us to be joyful:
> 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'
> How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Psalms 137: 1-4, REB).

As we look around us we find ourselves as Christians in exile. We find ourselves in our own land of Babylon. We are in exile. I've tried to write about this in my book and elsewhere, but as Christians, and as a Christian university, in our post-Christian world, we find ourselves on the margins. That's not where a leading university should be.

And we are often tempted to sit down and weep "by the rivers of Babylon"; we are tempted to hang up our harps, remembering another time, when our song was strong and beautiful to our culture.

But, ironically, if I am reading this passage right, the culture calls on us to sing them a song out of our great story of human flourishing, a powerful song, a beautiful song of joy. I believe the culture has grown weary and exhausted, as Pope John Paul II used to say. And the culture sees that we can be joyful, and the culture is calling on us to sing them a song of joy, to sing them "one of the songs of Zion."

**But then the poet asks this critical question.** This is the question I have asked almost every day in my sixteen years: "How [can] we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" How can we bring into our weary and exhausted world a song of joy, the song of Zion, the song of Jesus, a song that powerfully calls our world to patience and kindness and humility and love?

*I will be trying to answer that question the rest of my life.* It has been the driving question of my leadership here at SPU. I think it is the question for all Christians of our day. I think it is the question for a leading Christian university — how, indeed, can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

I trust this will be the question for the future of this great university, as a new leader puts on the medallion I have worn with such pride for these many years.

**Well, God bless each one of you for a great year ahead.** This will be quite a year for Sharon and me as we take this new *journey of leaving and remembering*. May God bless us all as we look to the future and anticipate wonderful new beginnings for this great University.

Through it all, let's learn better all the time, no matter the discipline in which we work, no matter the department in which we work, to sing the song of Zion, to name the name of Jesus, to lead with an upside-down vision of human flourishing, so that the world can be a better place for all God's children.

God bless each one of you. God bless our year ahead. And God bless the future of this leading Christian university.

I love you all.

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