2015 Emory Baccalaureate: Enabling and Ennobling

Scripture text, Matthew 20:1-16, the parable of the workers in the vineyard

James W. Wagner, President, Emory University

Emory’s first Provost, Dr. Billy Frye, will be one of four people receiving an honorary doctoral degree from us tomorrow. While at Emory for fifteen years, from 1986 to 2001, Dr. Frye authored *Choices & Responsibility*, a document that he described as “a set of philosophical, guiding principles for the University’s future.” In that document, Frye wrote that the work of the university is intended to both “enable and ennable.”

We are most familiar and comfortable with the notion of enabling—enabling someone for a career or for graduate or professional school, and so on. It may be the primary reason that you put Emory on your list of candidate schools back in high school. You expected to get knowledge, skills, and maybe even some Emory “brand value,” so that you would be better enabled for success. Enablement is the component of your education that statisticians claim makes college worthwhile—college degree holders, as a group, suffer unemployment at a rate only half that of the overall U.S. population; college degree holders can expect lifetime earnings of $1 million in excess of what they would have made with a high school degree alone. By such measures, universities in general and Emory in particular have been satisfying that first half of Billy Frye’s challenge that we should be enabling. That seems pretty obvious.

On the other hand, ennoblement—the other half of Dr. Frye’s challenge to enable and ennoble—is one of those less-obvious gifts that, if you will recognize it, you might take with you to enjoy and use to good advantage. Being at Emory, you have been given nobility and have given it in return. I want to try to prove that to you and to challenge you to keep up the practice of ennobling after leaving this place and for the rest of your lives.

When assessing the degree to which one is enabled, we use records of achievement and methods of assessment—you know, grades and scores and performance rankings. Those are perfectly appropriate and necessary in classrooms, business settings, athletic competitions, and so on, and there is nothing wrong with meritocracy. In fact meritocracy is important, and in some settings we do not apply it well enough. For example, I wish that I were more certain that Emory itself could ensure that all who merit admission to our university were able to gain access. We could improve (and are improving) our merit-based practices.
But if enabling is understood by our notions of merit, what about ennobling? The dictionary definitions for the verb “ennoble” state that to ennable is to elevate, to lift up and to be lifted up for reasons other than merit.

Better than a dictionary definition may be the insights we can gain from a story of holy origin. The parable of Jesus read today by Dean Nair is one that deals with ennoblement rather than merit. Allow me to recap the story. It is about a landowner (the master of the vineyard) who goes into town to hire workers. He comes first early in the morning and offers a day’s wage to those who will go work in his vineyard. He returns again at about 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m., according to story, each time recruiting additional workers. There is no record of negotiating a wage with any but those he recruited first thing. At the end of the day, the landowner chooses to pay every single worker the same amount—a day’s wage—much to the alarm of those who arrived first on the job. And why not? What the landowner did was unfair/unjust—to give the others more than they merited. The overworked and tired, who one can assume had achieved much more and so merited more, were paid no more than those who had arrived after 5 p.m., after the heat of the day, to work only a short time. All were treated equally by the master. How “anti meritocratic” can you get?!!

But the point of the parable is not to undervalue merit. Instead it is asking us to think and act beyond merit—to recognize that in a perfect world (in the kingdom of God, in this story), people have value beyond what it is that they can achieve and earn. Sure, you will be a success if you apply the abilities that you have, but you are even more valuable than that, just as those around us are more valuable than the sum of their achievements and what they might be able to do for us. It's not such a foreign idea. After all, we value our most elderly and newborns for reasons other than their current abilities.

Here at Emory, you have experienced and practiced ennobling. For example, recall the first days of your freshman year. It will be true for many if not most of you that some of the deepest friendships that you have made at Emory—those destined to last a lifetime; those that pull at your heart strings today as you think about the distance that leaving here will put between you—those friendships were made during those first days and earliest weeks. In fact, it was just Friday evening one week ago while leaving my office that I encountered seven of you (Perhaps you are seated out there right now.) who had arranged for a photographer and even had purchased engraved bracelets to commemorate the freshman friendships that lasted through Commencement, and you hope forever.

What happened during the early days of your freshman year? Using the language of the moment, allow me to suggest the existence of a fleeting phenomenon we will call
“freshman ennoblement.” Being thrown into a strange new living arrangement where expectations of you are high, established friendships are few, when waves of homesickness threatened to crash, and you were not able to bring along any pre-established reputation about which people could judge (and esteem) you, something in you led you to think about yourselves and others differently. In those humbling, circumstances, perhaps you were more likely to encounter each person you met as a potential friend, regardless of merit. “Is it possible that you could be a friend to me?” The a priori assumption was that the other would be worthy of being a friend. You ennobled them in that way, and hoped that they might ennable you with the reciprocal act of accepting your invitation for friendship. These new friendships could not be based on the merits of past accomplishments to be admired. Instead of merit, you operated on a system of ennoblement by expressing implicitly your hope to be worthy of being someone else’s new friend. You lifted the other person up to an ennobled place.

By the way, what do you think causes freshman ennoblement to fade? I suspect that when we regain our swagger, we begin to encounter new acquaintances with a different perspective. Instead of asking “Will they welcome me to be their friend?” we begin to ask “Are they good enough to be my friend? Do they merit my friendship?”

But back to ennoblement. It appears that nobility is not something that we can gain for ourselves. We can be respected and even feared through our own efforts, but we cannot seize nobility or assign it to ourselves. It has to be given to us by others. Therefore, the best way to hope to attain it is to be an example of giving it, to contribute to a community ethos in which nobility is the norm.

During the week of spring break, I traveled to East Asia—to Seoul, Bejing, Nanjing, and Shanghai—visiting with four universities, five alumni events, two government agencies, and one NGO. We raised a little money, formed some relationships, and learned from our alumni. A couple of the alumni events were attended also by students who will be freshmen here in just a few months. During a Q&A session following a few remarks about the value of being fully educated in Emory’s liberal arts tradition and the importance of the humanities as an underpinning for professional and non-professional pursuits, a young woman (an incoming first-year student) asked me what I thought it meant to be human. Not having been asked that question before, I found myself saying that beyond biological and anthropological definitions, being human is a status that we bestow on each other. I’m not certain that one can be more than merely biologically human outside of some relationship with another. If that is true, then we have the option to ennable others with humanity and are fully human only at the option of others.
This is the point also of a more modern parable—the author of which, for me anyway, is unknown. It’s the story about the torture of a group of people at a banquet table with their hands bound to impossibly long utensils—a fork and a spoon a fully four feet long. While the people can access the food, there is no way that they can feed themselves with these long utensils, and so they are destined to starve to death in the presence of a table of abundance. The solution to this devious riddle, of course, (or should I say the salvation) comes from that first person who realizes that all can eat if they will first feed someone else. After all, the utensils work perfectly well for giving food to others, just not to oneself. In this story, food, like ennoblement and humanity, can be given only by others.

And just so, you have fed others and been fed by others, ennobling them and being ennobled yourselves, not just through your freshman friendships, but

- When you have cheered your support (even in the face of detractors) when Emory accepted the challenge to care for the first two patients ever treated in the Western hemisphere for Ebola virus disease;
- When you have done something so small as having respectfully listened to someone else, not just patiently waiting for your turn to speak;
- When you have volunteered to serve even those who are not enabled, because it is noble to do so;
- When you have contributed to or administered an opportunity fund or hardship fund;
- When you have reacted with collective indignation and warm support in behalf of those for whom
  - The appearance of swastikas on campus threatened to victimize, and
  - to those who suffer continuing incidents and attitudes of racism and injustice—from overt and intentional to subtle or ignorant—actions and attitudes that threaten to dehumanize; and
- When you have been forgiving of those repentant of unmeritorious action, restoring their nobility.

You have done all of this in the understanding that when anyone is threatened or diminished, all risk being diminished, and none are ennobled. And when others are lifted up—just like the diners with the long spoons, just like all of those called to the vineyard by the master—all have the potential to be lifted up.

I conclude with this thought. The commitment of people like us, enabled and even privileged with intellect and opportunity, to work intentionally to lift others to nobility is an ethical response to our privilege. To care deliberately about people as people—the
imperfect, incomplete, different, those who oppose us—will be the only way to counter our domestic culture of criticism and global cultures that confuse uniformity with unity.

Culture of criticism ...? As we have taught you to be critical thinkers concerning ideas, perhaps we have unknowingly encouraged you to be critics of people. The result is that all of us fear, more than we should, the opportunity to take risks, to be creative and expressive—fear that we too may become the target of personal criticism. Ideas should do battle, not people. We have seen the confusion of merit and nobility during recent election seasons when negative advertising helps people to learn more about who they are voting against and why than who they are voting for and why.

And globally ... ? Failure to ennoble others has resulted in political entities, even terrorist entities—that envision peace coming only to a world in which all must be the same—one culture, one religion, one government, one state.

The “culture of criticism” is a recipe for divisiveness and oppression of spirit and ideas. Confusing uniformity with unity is a recipe for oppression at best, but also likely for war. Can there ever be peace if we are unable to see the nobility of others? So the stakes for acting nobly and for ennobling others are very high.

It is easy to sit here this morning and say, “Yes, I hear what you’re saying, and I recall having received this lesson.” But the benefits of the lesson could be easily lost unless we are deliberate to think about it as we are doing today and to keep it in mind after leaving here—even in situations when it is unfashionable to do so. Let us strive to practice our Emory-enabled ability to give and receive and give this gift of nobility.

I understand that ennobling others is not a requirement for you to succeed in competition or business. But as the master of the vineyard asserts, achievement alone is insufficient to gauge the value of a person, and I assert that ennobling others as you are able is essential in order for you truly to feel successful—to enjoy fully whatever gain the rest of the world associates with success.

So my prayer for you is that you will take from Emory your heightened abilities and nobility, using them to continue to experience the deep satisfaction and joy of lifting others. May God bless you in that and in all of your noble endeavors.

Amen