Graduates, Relatives and Friends of the Graduates, Faculty:

When I was an impressionable boy of about 10 years old, I got hold of a comic book, which, in very short retrospect, I probably should not have been reading. It was a horror comic book, nothing particularly comic about it, with a title similar to “Tales from the Crypt” or some such heading. The visuals crawled with people being buried alive and waking up to see worms penetrating their coffins, it never occurring to my ten-year-old imagination that underground there was really no way of seeing what was happening around me. The book contained images of fangs and foot-long claws belonging to creatures that didn’t die but were still alive when the narrative ended, ready to materialize from underneath the sharp-thorned barberry bushes that my dad had me weed along the front of the house the next day. No happy endings here. For a week I couldn’t sleep; for a week the front garden, the back field, even church wore a darkened cloak, something like a shroud, hiding unconquerable monstrosities that were destroying the world from underneath. My mom, seeing how distraught I was, suggested other more uplifting reading, like say Psalm 27: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” At the time, it didn’t seem to help very much, but her impulses were good: try to neutralize the imprint that a worldview of horror, however fictional, had burned into me.

I don’t know that those kinds of images, real life or fictional, can ever be completely neutralized, and certainly not erased, do you? We all have memories of images that have unsettled us: twin towers, a National Geographic picture of a young woman refugee from Afghanistan, terror and suspicion etched in her eyes, tsunami waves crashing over the patio railings of a Thailand resort. Literary theorist Wayne Booth in his book about the communities of reading entitled *The Company We Keep*, said of such images that they “have colonized our minds” (294). Our memories are imprinted by them; they may even shape our character. For Elie Wiesel, the 1986 Nobel Peace prize recipient and a teen-aged victim of the holocaust, it was the image of a Jewish child hanged by the Nazis. The image stays with him to the present moment 66 years later, and the effects on his religious life were devastating. The image of the hanging child became the image of a god whose existence disappeared for Wiesel that day: “the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly discovers absolute evil,” as Francois Mauriac, a Christian French novelist, puts it.

But the images that insinuate themselves into our souls are, thank God, not all horrific. If we are observant, if we read carefully, if we are sensitive to the life and the people around us, our character is also shaped by positive images impressing themselves into our subconscious. And sometimes the most beautiful images are the grace-filled ones, the ones that show up in the middle of what looks like devastation. And they are very often images tied to a community of some sort. I have one such set of grace-filled images of community that I want to share with you, the story of Denver’s birth in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. And to that I would like to add another: a glass of water.

Toni Morrison is a black-American novelist who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1993. Her novel *Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a black slave on a small plantation in Kentucky,
ironically called Sweet Home. Sethe shares the work with five other slaves, all male, one of whom becomes her husband. She is a mother of three more slaves, aged two, four, and five, and there’s a fourth one on the way. The one on the way, Denver, Sethe’s 18-year-old daughter at the time of the novel’s telling, loves to hear her mother tell her the story of Denver’s birth—because the story helps give the socially reticent Denver a sense of who she is—like the stories our parents and grand-parents tell about us. In telling us their stories, our parents give us a story that includes a place for us. The story of Denver’s birth has its dark moments, of course, shadowed as it is by the history of slavery in America. The slaves of Sweet Home make plans to escape but on the night of the flight, complications develop: Sethe cannot find her husband, and she has to send her three children ahead. Pregnant, 19 years old, Sethe is whipped by the foreman, her husband never shows up, the other men are caught and lynched. But with bloodied back and bare feet, prodded by the waiting-to-be-born infant within her, she finds her way off the plantation, into the wooded hills bordering the Ohio River on her dangerous, painful way to Cincinnati.

The images evoked by Sethe’s story-telling colonize Denver’s mind to such an extent that Denver, though only an infant in her mother’s womb when the story was happening, is able to live herself into her own story and imagine all the details that her mother does not include. When Denver retells the story to Beloved, her older sister, the two of them form a community that shapes the story and fills it out. That’s the strength of oral story-telling: it remembers and creates at the same time, and it is able to do it more comprehensively if it has an eager, empathetic story-listener. “Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened” (78).

Unable to go any further, “behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably,” her feet shredded, her back so numb that she has no idea of its condition, her child kicking in her belly, Sethe lies down in the weeds off the path wondering, What does God have in mind? And into her life, like grace from God, walks Amy Denver, a common white girl, also escaping from an abusive situation. Amy encourages Sethe to crawl to an abandoned lean-to, massages her torn and swollen feet back to painful life, collects spider webs to rub into the cuts on her back, makes shoes for her out of Sethe’s shawl filled with leaves, sings her own mother’s lullaby to her, and, most importantly, helps deliver the infant Denver in the bottom of a leaky boat on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River with free Ohio impossibly across the water. White girl Amy becomes black girl Sethe’s midwife, guided by God and blessed with the bluefern spores full of the promise of life that float in the air over the banks of the river. That promising image of the floating, bluefern spores is the image from the novel that colonizes my mind now and hopefully forever. White girl plus black girl plus God plus God’s creation, a quartet, working for the good of each other.

Sethe gives her new black daughter the white girl’s surname, Denver, black and white sharing an identity because they shared their womanly humanity. And because it is hers, this is the story that Denver loves, the story that she helps create. But true to the oral tradition and true to her common humanity, she also needs other people to help her create it and to tell it, because her story is not hers alone. Your story is never yours alone.

I have little idea of what Trinity Christian College has impressed on your consciousness or on your subconscious; I have no idea what images of Trinity have colonized or will colonize your mind. A figurative birth experience of sorts? A partial discovery of what indeed God had in mind? An identity experience—a character-building experience: Ah! So that’s who I am or—I never knew that I could do that! Maybe. Maybe not. Whatever, but at the very least, I trust, some kind of experience of community has been imprinted on you: a class community, a classroom community, a dorm community, a cohort, a choir, a group of thespians. Community is a
collection of midwives helping you discover who you are, what God has in mind; never alone, your story is created and delivered in conjunction with theirs. Why? Because God is a communal God, a Trinity of persons working out the story of creation, redemption, recreation together. God is a social God, and God has created us in his image: “‘Let us,’” God said. “‘Let us make humankind in our image.’ So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.” “It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a helper as his partner.” The social God creates us as social human beings, helping each other to bring each other’s stories into the light.

Trinity is first and foremost a Christian academic institution. If nothing else, I trust your imaginations have been colonized by the sense of your experience at Trinity as a participation in an academic community. Trinity, as a Christianly educating institution, would be remiss in its mission if it did not impress upon you a sense of your being part of the Christian academic community, helping you to find your way through a universe of ideas.

In the midst of all the images that this education has been shaping your mind with, here is one more—a glass of water. What is a glass of water? Well, it depends on the refraction of your academic spectacles, I guess. To measure that refraction, I carefully concocted a highly refined scientific experience and e-mailed the question to my faculty colleagues. I got back 46 definitions. I picked out a few that were generated in the disciplines that many of you are graduating in. Here are some.

This from an educational psychologist—Dr. Colosimo:
One of my favorite developmental theorists is Jean Piaget who used a glass or beaker of water to determine whether children could understand conservation of liquid. So, in developmental psychology, a glass of water is an experimental medium.—Well, good; clairvoyant. That’s exactly what we are doing here, conducting an experiment.

Accounting—Dr. Spellman-White:
From an accountant’s point of view it depends on what you intend to do with this glass of water. If you are in the business of selling glasses of water, then it is an item of inventory. If you plan to use this glass of water in the near future to help you run your business, then it is a supply. If you plan to hang on to this glass of water because you believe it will appreciate, then it is an investment.

Biology—Dr. Hensley:
A glass of water is a potential habitat for several thousand individual organisms representing all 6 kingdoms of living things. If it is chlorinated tap water, then it is an example of habitat destruction and biodiversity devastation by humans. –Leave it to a biologist to think of a glass of water in terms of the organisms living in it—or dying in it.

Psychology—Dr. DeVries:
In psychoanalytic terms a glass of water is sometimes just a glass of water, but it can be also many other things depending on the subjective state of desire of the person perceiving the glass of water. A glass of water is something different to a man dying of thirst in the desert as opposed to a yuppie who may ask if the water is tap water or water taken from an Artesian spring and carefully filtered to eliminate all contaminants. As a dream symbol water is often a representation of the feminine, especially lakes and pools, but I suppose a glass of water might do as well. It may represent the softness and receptivity [of the feminine] or the hostility of the feminine in its stormy, dangerous and drowning properties—not that one is likely to drown in a glass of water but in dreams anything is possible.

History—Dr. Brodnax:
The ability to work with glass is considered a major step forward in the development of various civilizations around the world since it requires technical and artistic skill, but the rise of modern technology has made this skill somewhat unnecessary except in the creation of artistic pieces.

Mathematics—Dr. Klanderman:
A glass of water is a 3-dimensional container, typically cylindrical, holding a finite volume of a liquid. There are relatively simple formulas to compute the volume of the glass and the mass of the liquid (assuming that it is water or some other liquid with known density).

English literature—Dr. VanderWeele:
It is both a thing in itself—a clear, wet, life-sustaining substance contained—and open to becoming an image, for life, for the new life of baptism, for (“given in my [Christ’s] name”) eternal life.

To the economist it’s “a resource”; to the literary critic it’s “a floating signifier”; to the sociologist it’s the “life of the planet”; to the artist it is “a lens gathering both light and darkness and intensifying them”; to the retired biologist it’s “something you need every 5 holes on a Florida golf course in November.”

And this from the Education department—Professor Boerman-Cornell:
A glass of water is a language concept defined by the society in which one lives and the experience and perceptions of the person experiencing the glass of water.

—Well, leave it to someone from the Education department to accommodate all the disciplines: So, the associations we give to a glass of water depend on what we have studied. Each of us graduating in a discipline has become a specialist. Presumably, we go out of here knowing our specialty’s definition of the glass of water cold. But as the glass of water also illustrates, no single perspective has the whole story: the glass of water is the composite of all of our associations. Like the story-teller, it needs a community, it needs the company we keep, it needs a Christian company that is hospitable to the exchange of ideas. The glass of water, as a communications faculty member writes, is “a nonverbal message of hospitality” (Sherry Barnes). Or, as a theologian puts it, “a glass of water is [the] care, love, and attention we are called to give to our brothers and sisters. This glass of water matters to God”—the cup of cold water given in Christ’s name (Matt 25:40, Yuhda Thianto). Hospitality matters in academic and vocational company, too. We need respect for each other’s work because everything we do is an allusion to a higher perception. Since we are together created in the image of God, everything that we together have done and everything that we together will do has reference to a higher work and a higher worker.

And what are we as an intellectual community and as a vocational community working together at? Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners, was pleased to discover that students at a Christian college where he recently led a chapel service were recognizing that, in addition to the bellwether issues of abortion and gay marriage, issues of poverty, global warming, sex trafficking, human rights, genocide in Darfur, and the ethics of war in Iraq were important.

That’s what we as a graduating academic community are working together at. There are people in this world—embattled in Iraq, genocidally being eliminated in Darfur, starving in the Sahara—that live horrific experiences every day. Their imaginations are rarely imprinted with positive images; they can not think in terms of a promise for the future that Toni Morrison imaged in the spores of bluefern drifting in the air over the banks of a river, on the other side of which is freedom. Planting positive images stemming from positive influences, wherever we do that, however we do that, with our money, with our expertise, with our concern, with our insight—
is what we are working together at. Imprinting the minds of our colleagues, of our students, of our children, of our clients, of all the company we keep, with the image of God, positively, imaginatively, creatively, analytically—that’s what we as a graduating academic community are together working at. In chapter 60 Isaiah the prophet draws us a picture of what that new world that we are working towards will be like: all the products of human cultures will be part of that shalom, but they will be transformed from their pagan uses to kingdom of God uses and God will give them the imprint of Peace: “Instead of bronze,” God says, “I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster.” That is what we as a graduating academic community are together and together with God and God’s creation working at.

I trust that imprinted on your consciousness will be a positive image of the academic community at Trinity in all its manifestations, in the academic and cultural diversity that reflects the diversity of all that God has made. Positively imprinted on the apostle Paul’s consciousness was the image of the Philippian church that helped shape his own character. The church at Philippi was one of his favorite churches, a teacher’s pet, so to speak. His letter to that church contains a mutually shared glass of water: Paul’s sharing of the gospel with them and their sharing of the gospel with him. Here is his prayer for them; it is also Trinity’s prayer for you. Notice the thematic words: “remember,” “sharing,” “bring to completion,” and two phrases that particularly reverberate in an academic community: “knowledge and insight,” and “determine what is best.”

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. . . . And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

A toast for the graduates: God bless you together in all of your futures.