FIRST YEAR INDUCTION CEREMONY
Elizabethtown College
Carl J. Strikwerda, President
Sunday, August 23, 2015

“THESE HANDS”

Greetings to the terrific, impressive, nervous, but awesome, Class of 2019. This is one of the most exciting moments of your lives. Maybe your hands are a little sweaty. You finally squeezed everything in your room that, for some reason, you were absolutely sure you’d need in college. And, you’ve made at least your first run to K-Mart in order to lug back all those things that you forgot or never realized you’d need. More importantly, you’ve put your high school years behind you. Your parents—finally—have said goodbye. You’re here to learn new things, have new experiences, and make new friends. You have new choices. You’re free to do great things, and free to make big mistakes. In other words, your future is in your hands, as sweaty as they might be. You can use your hands to grow and learn, or to hurt yourself, or hurt others, or you can sit on your hands, and not grow.

Hands are remarkable for the good that they can do, and the wrong. Karl Josef Friedrich was a German pastor and activist who opposed the Nazis and whose writings I admire very much—check out “Daily Dig”, from Plough on the web, which often posts his words. Friedrich once wrote, “The human hand – this bundle of bones, flesh, and nerves – think of all it can do. It can bless or curse. It can draw blood or bind a wound. It is gentle, agitated, vicious; supplicating, ardent, tender. It can weld an iron bridge or caress a child's head. It possesses the power to both harm and heal.”

One of my favorite singers, the Canadian guitarist Dave Gunning, put it well in one of his most famous songs, asking, “What Shall I Do With These Hands of Mine?” Check him out on YouTube, by the way.

“Some hands have held the world together. Some hands have fought in wars forever. Some hands have blessed a million people. Some hands have helped free the world from evil. Some hands can stop a life from dying. Some hands comfort a baby crying. Some hands give voice to a nation. Some hands wrote 'The Times They Are A'Changing'. What shall I do with these hands of mine?”

Every one of you has, at your fingertips, an IPhone or laptop. Think of the incredible power that you hold there. You can choose which sites you visit, which posts, links, or messages you forward to friends. You can decide what you tweet, what you comment upon on Facebook,
which photos you send on Instagram. What you spend your time with, shapes you. And you hold in your hand a powerful tool to shape others. You can use your hands to text or call someone who you know is lonely, or simply needs to have another person to have dinner with at the Marketplace. When a roommate, classmate, or friend is depressed, fearful, or hurting, you can use your hands to find help for them and guide them to Counseling or Student Health Services, or even just send a message to the RA in your residence hall to say that the person needs help. When you see bigoted or hateful messages, you can laugh, you could forward them, you could do nothing. Or you could push back, and use your hands to type that these messages are hurtful and wrong. If you know that the messages came from on campus, you could use your hands to contact your RA or Campus Security. You can post and text and forward so much that’s fun and fascinating and you can do the opposite.

One of the saddest parts of my job is dealing with young people who’ve wasted too much of their time here; there are lots of things that you can pick up in your hands that you should not put into your bodies. Please respect yourself. Please don’t burden your families and friends with the consequences of handling drugs and alcohol foolishly. You can use your hands to drive your car to take someone to the hospital for the help that they need. You can use those same hands to drive your car recklessly with terrible consequences.

One of the joys of this job is seeing the incredible things that E-town students can touch and change. Some of you will do marvelous work in discovering new things in laboratories, shooting films, doing survey research, carrying out engineering projects, writing news stories and blogs, perfecting exquisite performances of pieces of music, helping children learn, and crafting computer programs.

Some of you, many of you, actually, I hope ALL of you, will touch the lives of others around the campus, in the community, in Lancaster, Harrisburg, and even farther afield. One thing that every E-town student, every E-town alumnus or alumna, knows is the motto of the College. Some of you know it already: what is it? “Educate for Service.” If you’re a business student, you can be part of VITA, Volunteers in Tax Assistance, and you’ll use your hands and minds to help low income senior citizens save thousands of dollars every year in taxes. All of you can participate in “Into the Streets” on Saturday, October 24 when hundreds of Elizabethtown College students demonstrate “Educate for service” by using their hands and hearts all over Lancaster County to help people in need.

There’s a whole world available to you on this campus. Reach out with your hands to search on the web for a club, organization, or cause on campus that stretches you, teaches you, and helps you develop. Check out the opportunities for doing research with a faculty member, getting an internship, going on a spring break service trip, or studying abroad. I don’t think, in all my 40 years at colleges and universities, that I have ever met a student who did an internship, or research, or a service trip, or study abroad who didn’t say that these were some of the most life changing experiences that they had ever had.

Don’t be afraid to use your hands to open books in High Library that are unfamiliar or strange; don’t be afraid to check out courses or subjects on the web that pull you out of your comfort zone. Remember that some of the most important lessons you will learn here are not the latest things, but ancient ones. “The things we love tell us who we are.” Who said that?
Saint Thomas Aquinas, over seven hundred years ago. The pace of technological change is breathtaking. The ways that humans change, not very much. Victor Hugo put it well, “Revolution changes everything, except the human heart.” There are so many people like Aquinas, Hugo, and a host of others whom you should read. Check out the courses on Hinduism, developmental psychology, Shakespeare, ethnomusicology, poetry, Chinese history, ethics, anthropology, German literature, and a host of other subjects. You will learn a great deal about yourself, while learning things about the world that you will treasure for the rest of your lives.

Karl Friedrich said the human hand “can bless or curse. It can draw blood or bind a wound. It can weld an iron bridge or caress a child’s head. It possesses the power to both harm and heal.” Dave Gunning asked the question that all of us, and especially you and I tonight, should ask: “What shall I do with these hands of mine?”

Thank you.