

Serving with Passion, Purpose, and Calling
Dr. Gilberto Perez Jr.

Congratulations Class of 2023! What a joyful afternoon!

What joy knowing that you have arrived at your graduation day. A day of celebration and festivities for you, your parents, family, friends, and all of the wonderful administrators, teachers, staff, and volunteers at Bethany Christian Schools. All of these wonderfully made people have guided you, mentored you, and helped you along the way to reach this important milestone in your life. We are here together on this day to celebrate you!

I want to thank Bethany Christian Schools' administration for the kind invitation to serve as your graduation speaker. Thank you for inviting me to share a few words with the graduates and their families. It is truly an honor to stand here. Thank you.

Graduates, before we go any further, we need to thank your parents and grandparents. They have been with you all of these years. Your parents and grandparents whether they are still with you or not have given you so much love and support to get to this point. They have helped you reach your goal of graduating from high school. Join me in giving them applause.

And, this day wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for your teachers, administrators, staff, kitchen staff, grounds staff, IT staff, volunteers, and board of directors of Bethany Christian Schools. They too have been there to guide, mentor, and support you. Join me in giving them applause.

Class of 2023, the title for this graduation speech is Serving with Purpose, Passion, and Calling. The title speaks to the years in which Bethany Christian Schools has held you all of these years.

Bethany Christian Schools is a place where it has prepared you to participate in God's work in the world. It has been a place where your teachers have sought to teach you to have a faith that lives. This has meant striving to model discipleship, peaceable living, and service.

There's more. Bethany Christian Schools has strived to do academic excellence in and outside of the classroom. This has meant that you have been invited to think critically about things you never thought would think about. You have read many books, articles, newspaper articles, and scripture passages that haven't always made sense. You have been stretched to develop morally grounded thinking for lifelong learning.

But wait, there's more. Bethany Christian Schools has strived to teach you what it means to be rooted in community. This, Class of 2023 has meant that your administrators, teachers, staff, and board of directors have strived to model God's love to you by teaching you to enter relationships with respect even when the difference was present.

As I prepared for this speech I thought about a few people that have shown me what purpose and passion mean. These individuals to me are living out their purpose, passion, and calling.

Let me introduce you to Arleth Martinez and Manny Villanueva. Arleth and Manny are students at Goshen College. Arleth is from Goshen and Manny is from Stryker, OH. Both Arleth and Manny have been on a mission to support indigenous children. Their purpose this last year was to learn more about the Indigenous community in Arizona.

Arleth and Manny, through the mentorship and guidance of Sarah Augustine, a Tewa descendant, who lives in White Swan, Washington, have dedicated themselves to learning more about the Indian Child Welfare Act. The Indian Child Welfare Act is in place to protect the best interest of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families by the establishment of minimum Federal standards for the removal of Indian children and placement of such children in homes that will reflect the unique values of Indian culture. In their relationship with Sarah, Arleth, and Manny decided that their purpose for learning about the Indian Child Welfare Act was to help be a voice for indigenous children.

This led Arleth and Manny and their supporters to hold a press conference to talk about the rights of indigenous children. This also led Arleth and Manny to create a group at Goshen College called One Circle. One Circle helps students at Goshen College understand the needs of indigenous children and communities and stand in solidarity with the indigenous community.

For the last two academic years, Emily Brandeberry, a student at Goshen College, has spent every Tuesday night opening a space for students where they can share how things are going and find connections.

Every Tuesday night at 8:00 pm Emily and several of her friends got together at Knitting Club. Yes, knitting club. You might be asking yourself what does a knitting club have to do with purpose, passion, and calling?

A knitting club has everything to do with passion because the knitting club is a way for Emily to live out her passion for being with people and opening a space for people to talk about life, classes, and friends, and be together. Passion for Emily comes in the form of creating a blanket or a sweater with yarn. Passion for Emily comes in the form of being consistent and following through with what you are committed to and inviting others to the space. Spending time together every week to talk about how things are going is filled with moments of being together with others.

This morning I met Samuel Klopfenstein, a fine young man who has a passion for doing triathlons. What is so beautiful about Samuel is that Samuel is following in his father's footsteps. When I asked Samuel about his passion for triathlon competitions a smile quickly

came to his face and he said, “My dad did triathlons.” Samuel talked about his plan for the triathlons and how he has had to find time to run, swim, and ride his bike. For Samuel, his passion for doing triathlons came from his father and he honors his father’s passion by training and being ready to participate in a triathlon. Purpose, passion, and calling for Samuel come in the form of planning and preparing for the hard work that comes with doing a triathlon

For me, Arleth, Manny, Emily, and Samuel represent lives full of purpose, passion, and calling. I imagine that for Arleth, Manny, Emily, and Samuel purpose, passion, and calling have not come easy.

Graduates, I know that these last several years have not always felt like there was a purpose, passion, and calling for being at Bethany. The pandemic kept you away from one another. All of us have been and continue to be impacted by the pandemic and we continue to find ways to strengthen our mental health. I know you have lost loved ones and you are working slowly to fill the void you feel because of them being gone. I know you have lost a fellow classmate Richard Rios. I also know you have lost a dear friend, teacher, and mentor in Peter Shetler.

I too remember being in high school and experiencing the loss of two friends. One of those friends died as a result of gun violence and the other in a car accident. I remember the questions I had at that time: Why now? Why did they have to leave us so young? I am certain that these losses while painful have brought you closer to one another. And I believe that these experiences have made you more resilient. You have experienced the purpose of serving one another with compassion and love even when it didn’t feel like compassion or love. Serving others in these times of loss hasn’t always felt pleasant, but I can only imagine that these losses have been about giving of yourselves to one another.

So you see, in the above examples purpose, passion, and calling were never done alone. And purpose, passion, and calling were experienced in different ways such as at a press conference, in a small room knitting with others, and in the outdoors doing a triathlon with others. In many ways, purpose, passion, and calling for you have always been about being with other people. It happened to Arleth and Manny. They learned from Sarah. It happened to Emily as she learned about knitting from her family. It happened to Samuel. He learned about exercise and being fit from his dad. It is the same for you. You may not know it, but you have found purpose, passion, and calling with your classmates. Your experiences at Bethany have never been about being alone. There was always someone in your path that cared for you, prayed for you, encouraged you, and loved you.

When you leave Bethany Christian Schools continue to find others you trust, admire, and want to be like. There you will begin to learn what interests you and what you are passionate about. The service you will do together with others will teach you about you what you want to follow. The scripture passage I chose for today says that three things are required of you. These three things are: to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. I know for a fact that Arleth, Manny, Emily, and Samuel are doing these very things.

As you leave today go and find the people that want to do justice. Go and find the people that want to show mercy to others. And, go and find the people that want to walk humbly with God. These wonderfully made people will help you find your purpose, passion, and calling.

Congratulations Class of 2023!

Thank you.

Bethany Christian Schools 69th Commencement - May 28, 2023