

Chung Sik Yong's Unification Theological Seminary Commencement Address

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Congratulations to the UTS class of 2021, and congratulations to our Unification Theological Seminary on its 45th commencement ceremony. It is my honor to recognize this year's graduating class on behalf of Dr. Sun Myung Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the Seminary's co-founders.

The world is still suffering through the global pandemic due to COVID-19 and for the second straight year UTS is forced to conduct a virtual graduation. I offer my appreciation and admiration to the Seminary's faculty, staff, administration and especially students for persevering under these circumstances. You have adapted magnificently to the challenges through distance education, zoom-classes, break-out groups, online chapel services, online Faculty roundtables and even online theologians' conferences. You have continued to build community, foster learning and nurture spiritual growth. One of our Seminary founders' mottos is "Utmost sincerity moves Heaven." In Korean, we call that jeongseong. UTS has demonstrated jeongseong this past year. That's why we are here today.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of discerning the signs of the times. A year ago, the United States and New York City, the home of UTS, was the global epicenter of the pandemic. It was a time of tribulation. However, the time of tribulation passed and was followed by a period of exile. People fled the city, business closed, and schools shut their doors. It's been more than a year since UTS students have been able to meet one another in person and take classes on campus. Now it appears that the time of exile may be coming to an end. Infection rates are down, vaccines are available, the city is stirring to life and UTS intends to open its doors next semester. But we cannot be sure.

God's word to the Israelites in the Book of Jeremiah, speaks to this. Jeremiah was one of the major prophets of the Hebrew Bible. He is especially remembered for proclaiming Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. Because of his prophecy, he was persecuted and scholars refer to him as "the weeping prophet." Interestingly, when the temple was destroyed and Israelites were taken into captivity, Jeremiah was left behind. Jeremiah 29 is the text of a letter he sent from Jerusalem to those carried into exile in Babylon. In this sense, Jeremiah 29 is an example of distance education. Jeremiah was a distance education pioneer!

According to Jeremiah, the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, had several words of advice. First, he said, the people should "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce." In other words, they should sow seeds for the future. Second, they should "Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and

daughters." In other words, they should fulfill God's blessing to increase and multiply. God's third word of advice was that they should "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." That must have been difficult to follow. In other words, they should pray for Babylon. They should pray for their enemy.

I believe this is relevant advice for our graduates in a time of exile or any time. We should sow seeds for the future; we should support marriage blessings and families; and we should pray for our enemies, including those who oppress us. The power to do so comes from God's word. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most frequently cited passages in Scripture. It reads, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." The Lord also declared, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Ministry is not a simple matter. There are many aspects. One aspect I emphasize is the ministry of the key word. It is important to have a key word as a foundation for daily, weekly, monthly or even yearly activities. The key word for this time and for this graduation, I believe, is hope. Here, I take inspiration from the Seminary's co-founder, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, known as the "Mother of Peace." Mother Moon leads a global ministry. In August 2020, at the height of the global pandemic, she launched the first "Rally of Hope." It was a world-level, virtual event that reached millions of people. Five Rallies of Hope followed, the most recent on May 9th, less than three weeks ago. The rallies featured world-level leaders, such as former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, three former U.S. Vice-Presidents, sitting heads of state and Nobel Prize laureates. All of them delivered messages of hope based on principles of interdependence, mutual prosperity and universally shared values. At the most recent rally, Mother Moon launched "Think Tank 2020." It comprises more than 2,000 experts from a wide range of fields dedicated to the collaborative search for solutions to the world's most critical challenges.

Mother Moon is clearly planting seeds. Rallies of Hope are accompanied by marriage blessings. They also include prayers for peace by world-level religious leaders. The next rally on June 5th focuses on U.S. clergy. I hope you will log on.

In closing, I'd like to point out that "21" is an auspicious number symbolizing maturity and perfection. Our graduation is occurring on the 21st year of the 21st century. It is also the Seminary's 21st year in New York City and the 21st year since the founding of the American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLC) which is closely related to UTS. May the convergence of these 21's be a source of inspiration and hope. Again, I offer my congratulations to our graduates. I wish you every blessing in your lives and work.