

“Don’t Hide Your Light”
June 14, 2026

Matthew 5:13-16

I came across a commencement speech this week, which seems fitting for this morning’s occasion when we recognize our Wapping Community Church graduating high school seniors. Most commencement speeches are fairly routine and not particularly memorable once the event is over. But the speech I’m referring to was outstanding, not only for its content, but for what it took the speaker to create the speech.

The commencement address I read this week is a speech by Elizabeth Bonker, who was one of the valedictorians at Rollins College in Florida when she spoke to her classmates on graduation day in 2022. Her speech was titled, “Be the Light” and you will see why in a few moments. But before I highlight a few parts of the speech itself, it is worth noting that Elizabeth Bonker has lived from the age of fifteen months old with a nonverbal form of autism.

It’s estimated that thirty percent of the people in this world who have autism are nonverbal. In addition to being unable to speak out loud, Elizabeth cannot tie her own shoes or button a shirt without assistance. The only way she could write the commencement speech was to type each word letter by letter using one finger...and only then while someone held the keyboard for her. As Elizabeth mentions in her opening words, learning how to type gave her the opportunity to unlock her mind from its silence...thereby allowing her to communicate freely.

I would have loved to be in the audience the day Elizabeth delivered her commencement address. I picture her words on a large screen scrolling line by line in such a way that the faculty, fellow students and various family members and guests could read them at a manageable pace. What is truly insightful, however, are the words she delivered.

“During my freshman year,” Elizabeth began, “I remember hearing a story about our favorite alumnus, Mister Rogers. (yes, the television Mister Rogers) When he died, a handwritten note was found in his wallet. It said, ‘Life is for service.’ You have probably seen it on the plaque by Strong Hall. Life is for service. So simple, yet so profound.

Dear classmates, today we commence together. But from here, we will choose our own ways. For me, I have a dream. Yes, just like Martin Luther King, Jr., I have a dream; communication for all. There are thirty-one million non-speakers with autism in the world who are locked in a silent cage. My life will be dedicated to relieving them from suffering in silence and to giving them voices to choose their own way.

What is your dream? How will you use your Rollins education to fulfill your mission. How will you rise up to meet the unprecedented challenges of our time?

Whatever our life choices, each and every one of us can live a life of service---to our families, to our communities and to the world. And the world can't wait to see our light shine.

So my call to action today is simple. Tear off a small piece from your commencement program and write, 'Life is for service' on it. Yes. We gave you the pens to really do it. Let's start a new tradition. Take a photo and post it on social media. Then put it in your wallet or some other safe place, just as Mr. Rogers did.

We are all called to serve as an everyday act of humility, as a habit of mind. To see the worth in every person we serve. For to whom much is given, much is expected.

God gave you a voice. Use it. And no, the irony of a non-speaking autistic encouraging you to use your voice is not lost on me. Because if you see the worth in me, then you see the worth in everyone you meet.

My fellow classmates, I leave you today with a quote from Alan Turing, who broke the Nazi encryption code to help win World War II. 'Sometimes, it is the people no one imagines anything of who do the things no one can imagine.'

Be those people. Be the light! Thank you."

I don't know the details of Elizabeth Bonker's faith life. Yet there are so many parts of her speech that read more like a sermon than a commencement address. It starts with the quote from Mr. Rogers. After he graduated from Rollins College, Fred Rogers went on to become an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian denomination. He never chose to lead a church, but many would consider his long-running television show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, with all the morals and values he taught children along the way, to be its own form of ministry.

"Life is for service", Mister Rogers once said. Given his religious background, no doubt Fred Rogers knew that his lifelong call to service was rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus who once laid out his own life mission clearly and succinctly in the Gospel of Matthew. "I came not to be served, but to serve." (Matthew 20:28)

Maybe we should take the words of Jesus and the suggestion of Fred Rogers and Elizabeth Bonker to heart this morning by taking a pen and writing four words on a corner of this morning's worship bulletin... life is for service. So we can then tear off that piece and tuck it in our wallets or purses for safekeeping.

Soon after Elizabeth Bonker references Mister Rogers, she quotes directly from the Gospel of Luke. "For to whom much is given, much is expected." (Luke 12:48) Which serves as another short set of words we could write down and keep with us. Whether we are graduating from high school or at any other point in our lives, the mandate from Jesus applies. The more we have been given in our lives, the more God urges us to give back to the world and to those around us...

Also in her speech, Elizabeth Bonker gives voice to a dream that mirrors the dream Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned in August of 1963 when he spoke to tens of thousands of people gathered around the Reflecting Pool in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. Whether the dream was King's dream about civil rights and equality for people of all races or Elizabeth Bonker's dream about communication for all thirty-one million nonverbal autistic people in the world, both dreams are rooted in the dream of Jesus Christ. A Savior who long ago dreamed of a day when the captives would be released and the blind would be able to see and the oppressed would go free.

The final injunction in Elizabeth Bonker's speech may be the most striking. "God gave you a voice. Use it." Spoken by a young woman who cannot use her own voice to speak aloud. Still, she uses the voice God did give her to speak boldly and courageously about a world where people can use their God given gifts to make an impact.

This part of Elizabeth's speech might sound self-deprecating were it not offered with such deep seeded conviction. "And no, the irony of a non-speaking autistic encouraging you to use your voice is not lost on me. Because if you can see the worth in me, then you can see the worth in everyone you meet." Those are words so profound I imagine they called everyone in the commencement audience up short.

From the very beginning of the Bible way back in the Book of Genesis, we learn about a God who created every single human being in God's own image. Whether we are verbal or non-verbal or neurodivergent. If we are gay or straight or non-binary. No matter the color of our skin or the ethnic heritage we claim as our own. Regardless of our economic status...our religious tradition...our gender identity. There is excellence, value, holiness in all of us...

And we are all empowered to live a life of service. To give back to others aware of how much we have been given. To dream big on behalf of justice and opportunity and freedom and communication and then to do the hard work that makes dreams happen. And to see the worth in every person we encounter...

Elizabeth ended her speech where this sermon began...with a nod to the Gospel of Matthew. Don't hide your light under the bushel basket. Put your light on the lampstand instead. Then be the light in the world. Amen.