

Joseph:

Maya Angelou once said, “LOVE... IS... LIBERATING.” “Love is liberating.” Whether your vocation is to marriage, the single life, or religious life, we all belong to some form of family or another, and ultimately we belong to God’s family. This love is the same energy that brings us all together - here today. It is within this spirit of love, family, and unity that we are continually discovering the value that each of us adds to one another and how we can, as community, add value to the Church and to the larger world.

Toni:

One of my most profound stories of this type of love was recorded in my personal journal. It is something my son said to me that I would *never* forget: It was right after Easter and Joseph had been involved in the Good Friday Liturgy of “the Passion of Christ”. Jacob, our youngest son was about 5 or 6 years old at the time and we were praying in his room before bedtime. He kept staring at the crucifix hanging over the door. Jacob then turns to me and says, “Mom, why did Jesus die for us?” I thought for a moment and answered, “Because he loves us.” “But...how does that show us love?” These were deep questions and I tried to explain at a level he might be able to understand so I said, “God *loves us* so much that he wants us to *be together*, like our family is together. But sin takes us *away* from God... Jesus died to take away our sins, so we can live with God forever.” He looked at me without saying much, and I could see the wheels turning... so I continued, “Honey, it’s kind of like this...YOU know I *love* you ... with *all* my heart ... right?” He smiles at and nods, yes. “Well... if I knew the only way I could save you -- was to die -- I would DIE for you! *That’s* how much I love you... and *that’s* how much... **God loves us!** My son then looked intently at me and said, “Mom, *I* would die for you, too!” ...

Whoa...I never saw that coming...Here, I thought I was teaching my child a lesson that night, but I was the one who experienced the liberating message of the Gospel in that moment!

Joseph:

One of the things I've learned in life is that if you want to experience a liberating love and create unity there must be a cooperative driven-purpose to work together. That's what Toni and I have been able to - get from - and give to - each other. One of the unintended blessings of this program that we did not expect was that it helped us to improve our relationship with one another. We studied together, we debated and discussed issues, and we looked at each other's projects and thesis work. To be able to depend on each other was truly a blessing...and *that* my dear family and friends proved to be invaluable to us!

Toni:

Joseph and I took six years to complete this master's degree. *But* that's one of the things we appreciate about this program - the *flexibility* that enabled us to spend valuable time with our *immediate* family so we could prepare for our *spiritual* family, but more importantly for our *human* family - even those who are not members of our church. So today, we not only celebrate accomplishing a goal... but the deepening of relationships as we collectively prepare to help the church deepen its relationship with Jesus Christ.

Joseph:

One of the fascinating things for me as a man is that I saw my wife thriving in her pursuit of faith seeking understanding. It is within this context that I saw her passion in the pursuit of theological discourse. Toni is no stranger to supportive roles as a deacon's wife, but in this program, she embraced the challenges, and exceeded expectations, finding herself able to say,

“I AM GOD’S SERVANT EQUALLY PREPARED TO EMBRIDGE THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.” She found her voice and her passion in a profound way.

Toni:

There were many break-through moments in this program for me, but Dr. Judith Todd and Dr. Megan McKenna were definitely my bookends. Imagine this... It is our first class of the program and Joseph and I are fresh out of the diaconate program and we are *eager* to learn and to become more proficient and competent Catholics...and **bam** they give us a female professor who is a Protestant REVEREND -- a FEMALE PREACHER! Oh my goodness! What a great role model, mentor, and thesis director Judith turned out to be!

Now, Dr. Megan McKenna came *thundering* into the picture at the end of the program for me. She too, is highly educated, and she is *amazing* to say the least! Megan has this gift of proclaiming the Gospel - bringing *life* to the stories of Jesus in a very *powerful* way. Just as Jesus told stories of the parables to reveal great spiritual truths, Megan follows as a disciple in a similar way. She was also my inspiration behind my passion for liberation theology, which focuses on social justice for the poor and the oppressed.

Joseph:

Although Toni and I were asked to speak about our personal experience of the program, we also asked our fellow graduates to name a professor in this program whom they wanted to recognize as someone who helped them through a break-through moment.

Joseph Sandoval said that Dr. Lynn Bridgers, brought him into the program and demonstrated more of an academic approach. She demonstrated that the study of theology is about faith, but also an intellectual pursuit. Another professor Joseph mentioned is Dr. Kay

Huggins because of her influence on him in the ecumenical movement, which has become a key part of his spirituality.

Toni:

Brother James Owens also pays tribute to Dr. Kay Huggins. He says and I quote, “I felt *ecumenism* was a real *reach* for me. I felt very much that *faith* was an interior matter between God and myself. I was in a challenging transition in my life and Kay told me it was okay to stumble some.”

James says, “I spent the last two years walking and thinking each morning trying *desperately* to make sense of faith. I was also discerning a life of professional ministry. Jacob wrestled for one night with a 94-lb angel. I wrestled and shadow boxed for 32 credits for four years! ... and Kay said You *know* it will be worth it!”

Joseph:

Like Toni, Dr. Megan McKenna has also left a lasting impression on me. I consider her one of the most prophetic voices of our time. She challenges us with the truth of the Gospel whether it’s through Scriptural interpretation or storytelling to look at our lives honestly and see where we need to change. She is a constant reminder that every time we read the Scripture it should lead us to conversion. Her influence has forever changed the way I think about my role in ministry.

Dr. Frank Yates is a Presbyterian pastor, preacher, and educator...and I hear he’s a pretty decent softball player too. He has many gifts but one of the most pronounced for me is his ability to make very complex theological concepts and principles easy to understand – which is invaluable in effective ministry because that’s what we do; we break things down so that

everyone has a clear understanding of the most important aspects of our faith as Christians. He has brought theology to life for me and helped me through many break-through moments, which I will never forget.

Toni:

These educators along with *all* the other professors of this program continually fuel the fire and cause their students to search deeper. For me personally, they turned my world *upside-down* in a most wonderful and beneficial way! *Thank you to all* the professors - for adding value - not only to our educational pursuits - but also to our ministries and spirituality.

Joseph:

Dr. Kathy Dolan is the associate director for the MTS program here in New Mexico. We asked Kathy what is one unique thing about us graduates and she said, “It says a lot about the program that you all cooperated with one another and were so conscious of supporting each other through the thesis process.” Kathy, thank you for instilling that sense of “Communio,” the spirit and tradition of St. Norbert College; the place where we have learned that the foundation of collaborative ministry begins and ends with people committed to the life of the church by sharing their gifts and charisms for the good of the community.

Toni:

Abbot Joel has had a profound impact on the MTS program overall. But most importantly for us he encouraged Joseph and me to consider this program after completing the diaconate formation. He is a lifesaver as well, especially after throwing me a lifeline during the thesis process.

Brother James describes Abbot Joel as “one of the most selfless visionaries” he knows. I have to agree. Abbot Joel, thank you for your support ...and by the way, “Happy Birthday!”

We would also be remiss if we didn’t mention the loving support of our dear family, friends, and this Norbertine community. God bless you all and thank you for sharing this day with us!

Joseph:

Finally, as Dr. McKenna would say... "all stories are true, and some of them actually happened. When I say once upon a time, this story happens to you:" This is a story of a Jewish Rabbi who had many followers and one day another Rabbi approached him and said, “Rabbi, you have so many followers and I want to know...are you going to pass on your wisdom to just one of them as your number one disciple?” He said “oh no, I’m *not* going to do that at all.” Then he said, “Well, do you have a group of them that you are going to pass your wisdom on to?” And he said, “No, no...I’m not going to do that either.” Then he said, “Do you at least have someone who is writing down your stories so they won’t get lost and people can share them?” And he said, “no, I’m not doing that either.” Then he said, “Well, what are you doing Rabbi so that your message gets passed on and it doesn’t get lost in your generation?” The Rabbi said, “*Look* at my disciples. *They* are my message!” Family and friends, we are the disciples of Christ Jesus – we are community and unity and family! Together - we can and will be the message of a love that’s liberating!