Delano Prayer Breakfast
May 5, 2016

Good morning Delano. I am honored to join great partners and friends of Bakersfield College in prayer this morning.

When I was invited to speak at the Delano Prayer Breakfast, I was surprised not knowing what I, as a teacher first and then an educator more broadly, could share at this spiritual event that could be of value. I decided to stick to what I know and believe and that is education is the great equalizer of society. Here in America, Horace Mann, the public educational reformist of the mid-1800s has shaped my thinking about education and its transformative power – believing that education fundamentally is a public good and developing the concept of universal access to education. Community colleges, that unique American innovation, extended the idea of universal access beyond high school to higher education.

Over the past decade the realization has grown that just providing access to college may be providing access to failure, the all-too-predictable failure of the academically underprepared, a majority of whom come from families with lower economic standing—in other words, a significant predictor of completing a college degree is the families socio-economic status.

We, in this room, may be of different faiths, but we have a common belief that “whatsoever you do unto the least of my brethren you do unto me”. Does the “least of my “brethren” have the same opportunity for success as the rest?

So you see, in the educational realm, there is much to be done. Do we have the ability to “see” each and every student, In the movie Avatar we are introduced to the Na’vi concept of “To see” – I see you is to open the mind and heart to the present and embrace it as if encountering it for the first time with all of your senses. Did you love the scene with Neytiri and Jake when he tells her “I see you?” So, do we see each of our students and understand their circumstances and respond… respond quickly. No waiting…. “Waiting” to respond is to be lulled by the status quo. Martin Luther King in 1963 in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” wrote:

    For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" ...... This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

So friends, the work to be done in education is about “seeing the other” and “responding” – not being indifferent, and particularly not the indifference of inaction.
Earlier this semester, I attended a memorial service where what was said has stayed with me, and I suspect will continue to stay with me for a long time. The service was held in a beautiful hilly area. There was a strong breeze that rustled thought the tent-like pavilion as a story emerged of the woman who had passed. It was a story of courage, love, beauty, resilience, commitment and action - not one of indifference.

One of the speakers introduced the Old Testament story of Esther, a complex story of intrigue, power, betrayal and mass murder, but that also has allegorical, or symbolic meaning. Curiously, Esther is the only book of the Bible where God is not mentioned, which perhaps heightens the focus of our human relations to one another.

The memorial service speaker asked of us to consider the question of who is the real villain of the story. The obvious response to this question is Haman, who guilty of genocide. However, symbolically some make the case that the “indifferent” King Ahasuerus was more of a villain than Haman, because faced with harm the collective damage of indifference is the greater evil.

(This reminds me of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” where he says that “Lukewarm acceptance is more bewildering than outright rejection” of racism.)

The speaker used the retelling of an ancient story as a backdrop for the present-day life story of the woman who had passed – I am going to call her Em. This woman was the antithesis of indifferent King Ahasuerus. She lived her life fully in action, overcoming difficulties, and fighting for the right thing.

As we are in prayer together today, it is the cautionary tale of King Ahaseurus, and the inspirational life of Em that move us to action when tempted by indifference. What does the story of Em mean to you?

For me, personally, the story of Em brings to mind another individual who passed away, in 2006, my dad, a kind man, with a big laugh, always lifting others. The best way I can describe my dad is that he was always “true to the other.”

I suspect we all share the experience of having struggled with being honest with the other – a family member, a friend or a co-worker. Do I share what I know, what I think or feel, do I risk causing hurt – or do I not? Do I decide on my own that an issue is not someone’s concern, so withhold information, keep others from having a vote?
My father was as wise as he was kind. He helped me understand that this sort of turmoil is a waste of energy; and is at its core a kind of self-protective instinct. Not that self-protection is bad – it’s essential – but approaching life primarily from a defensive stance is limiting. Rather, the question is how each of us cultivate a sense of being “true to the other” so that the focus is on “the other” rather than self.....An “I see you” approach.

As I’ve grown older, I have come to understand my father’s uncanny ability of being “true to the other”. He was not a man who spoke much, not one for dissecting feelings or getting entangled in the dramas of the community or extended family. Remember, I grew up in a catholic family in a small coastal community at the southern tip of India where everyone was in everyone else’s business. My dad was very much part of this community very present, staying true to family, loved ones, colleagues and the community and yet with a mysterious ability to not be caught up with the dramas that ensue from a close community. I have started to understand the essence of his attitude in three principles: Know yourself; Keep it simple; See the other. He epitomized the sentiment expressed in a W.H. Auden couplet that a friend introduced me to:

If equal affection cannot be
Let the more loving one be me

Like Em who passed away, my dad was not an indifferent “Ahasuerus”. He was resilient and had an endurance to keep doing good work to benefit others. Always being the “more loving one.”

So, many of us in our jobs spend countless hours analyzing issues, setting up systems with the intent of improving our surroundings. I know in education, we have shifted from the universal access to higher education phenomenon to student success where we take students from their point of entry through to completion. And yet there is more to do. We must bring in the heart, the spiritual domain, with its recognition and sensitivity to be “true to all students” not to some, to see all students and not some. This spiritual recognition and understanding should be the basis to approach the next iteration of changes in educational policy and practice; the next wave of educational reform.

Thank you Delano for inviting me. My first introduction to you was when I wrote an Eisenhower grant as a rookie math faculty right out of graduate school. It was to expand STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, particularly math, to the community in Delano. I fell in love with Delano then and now as President of the best community college in the nation, we continue to build our ties with you. We are part of you.
The community of Delano is not “indifferent”.

I have attended the Delano community alliance meetings. This group has service clubs, business and industry leaders, community leaders, the school district, BC, chambers etc. Have you attended their meetings? No indifference of King Ahasuerus there. Just action.

When the hurricane hit in the Philippines on November 8, 2014, the Delano community was no indifferent King Ahasuerus. You moved to action.

These stories of Em not being an indifferent Ahaseurus, or an impatient Martin Luther King who says “This wait always means never“ or the story of my father Paul who lived Auden’s wish to be true to the other and to be “the more loving one“ – these are all stories that are timeless.

So today, let us pray together that we will take care of the least of our brethren.

Today, let us pray together to not be indifferent.

And today, let us pray together to “let the more loving one be me.”