Thank you Dean Papillon, Chancellor Howard and Vice-Chancellor McCardell, thank you. To the faculty, administrators, students, families and friends: what an honor to be at Sewanee, the University of the South. What a beautiful campus, what a magnificent chapel. I want to pause another moment and soak it in. And what glorious music: thank you to your choir and organist. Congratulations to fellow honorees George Core, Jeanie Nelson and Sam Pickering and to all of you being gowned today.

How special to be paying my first visit here on this Founders’ Day – celebrating the 158 year history of this school, which came into being to celebrate and preserve the American South – and which today attracts students from all but a few of the 50 states, and from a couple of dozen countries.

I’ve been in Sewanee only since last night but I’m already learning who the angels are, what the Domain means, and I’m already a Tiger fan! It’s clear this is a special place.

It’s special because you’ve stayed true to your traditions – among them, your roots in the South, and in a rigorous liberal arts education. And you’ve grown and expanded, absorbing the lessons of generations of professors, students and administrators who raised your sights to new ideas and new ways of looking at old problems.

Along the way, you’ve ensured your future by producing some of this region’s, and the country’s, most gifted poets and writers.

I went to a school started by the Methodists, Duke; my husband to a school started by the Baptists, Wake Forest. But we are Episcopalians, so it was impossible to turn down this generous invitation to speak at the only university in America governed by the Episcopal Church.
I appreciate so much of what you’ve accomplished: the enormous respect you command in higher education circles; your global reach, your prominent alumni including 26 Rhodes Scholars and distinguished journalists/historians like Jon Meacham.

At the risk of losing you before I start, I am going to talk to you this afternoon about politics. It's often seen as a four letter word, but it's what I have spent more than 40 years covering. If, however, you listen to some of the public rhetoric today, Americans want to elect politicians who hate politics and have never been dirtied by it.

Well, let me ask you. Do you really want the prestigious Sewanee Writers’ Conference to be run by people with no experience in writing? I know the Sewanee Tigers are off to a rough start -- it'll get better when you beat Washington tomorrow -- but the panacea isn't a football coach with no background in football. And when Fed Ex has to replace CEO Fred Smith, the board won't look for someone with no business experience.

Politics, and government, profoundly affected what kind of society we live in what kind of future you face. The size and shape of government is a very legitimate, and important, issue; there should be no place for a know-nothing or nihilistic approach.

One of my heroes in American politics is a graduate of Sewanee, the late Harry McPherson, Class of 1949. When Harry graduated, probably inspired by the beauty of this place, he wanted to be a poet.

But after a stint in the Air Force, he was horrified by the Joe McCarthy anti-Communist witch-hunts and disdain for civil liberties. So he went to law school and then to Washington, where he got a job as junior staffer to the then-U.S. Senator from Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson.

Harry later became President Johnson's counsel and chief speechwriter; he was a passionate champion of civil rights and equal employment opportunities and was one of those advisers who ultimately persuaded LBJ that the Vietnam War was unwinnable.

In 1972 he wrote the book, "A Political Education," still considered one of the best works on Washington, and American politics. I recommend it to everyone here who hasn't read it.
In his wise way, Harry's insights transcend different eras.

One, he praises the profession of politics, not all the practitioners but the business.

Two, he warned that too often politics and the public are immune to history, they ignore what came before them. That, he worried, led to the tragedy in Vietnam.

The McPherson wisdom should be injected into our political psyche today as we struggle with America's role in a dangerous world, and a political dysfunction that often paralyzes Washington.

New Jersey Governor and Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie is an engaging politician. But the other day, referring to the disagreement among Republicans over who’ll be their leader in Congress, he declared that Americans don’t care who is the next Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Well, we should. We should care who is the next President.

And we should care even more about restoring a body politic that cherishes both principles and compromise in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln forming a government in America's toughest moment with his former rivals; of Franklin Roosevelt as World War II approached, reaching out to prominent Republicans, including the man he defeated in the 1940 election, to help lead the nation in this perilous cause; or Ronald Reagan and the late Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neill fighting ferociously during the day and then having a drink together in the evening, paving the way for rescuing Social Security, enacting historic tax reform, and a detente with the-then Evil Empire.

Why does it matter whether politicians in Washington or our state capitals, get along? Because the challenges that demand our attention are huge right now and don't show any sign of disappearing. First, as the world has prospered and we've seen more people educated, fed, staying healthy - not just in the U.S. but around the planet - there's also growing inequality. The new wealth has mainly gone to a few at the top - while those near the bottom have fallen farther behind.
We have to pay attention to those in our society who are struggling -- to find a job, finding decent housing, getting a good education or getting access to good health. All of us are diminished if any of us are hurting. We can't address these problems if our leaders don't work together and work for solutions.

We can't address racial, economic or any inequality with leaders who believe it's my way or the highway.

And we can't be prepared to face threats that confront us externally -- terrorism or cybertheft to name two - if our leaders have contempt for one another Nor can we go about helping our allies who face threats - in the Middle East, or Europe - as they do now - unless we're willing to have open, healthy debates about the right course of action, rather than a volley of invective, insulting each other's character, questioning the other person's motives.

Unfortunately, that's what too much of our political debate sounds like.

This is at the very moment we need to understand the rest of the world better than ever, taking our places as informed citizens.

I just returned last month from a 2 week trip to China, which has a booming economy (even as it undergoes a re-set) and 100's of millions of well-educated and ambitious young people who cherish their families, want to take care of their parents as well as their children.

But for all their advantages, and by some measurements, they have surpassed the U.S. as the world's largest economy -- they lack the thing we too often take for granted - freedom.

Freedom of speech, of assembly, religion and the press.

Let's dedicate ourselves to all those things and borrow a little Chinese philosophy, of putting family first.
The final thing I'll say is about the press. We are so fortunate to have a free press in the United States. But we need to demand it serve us well, to hold its feet to the fire - demand it be accurate, fair, not a circus, seeking out and celebrating fights -- and that it inform us. That it not assume we can't handle news about important issues like budgets and taxes -- education policy - international news - that we demand more than celebrity and food fights. It should give us the information we need - on all sides - not just one - and we should go to the trouble to stay informed. Our lives and our livelihood depend on it; our nation and the next generation depends on it.

That's our philosophy at the NewsHour. In fact one good guide for my co-anchor Gwen Ifill and me every night, and for all of you...is the legacy of that great son of Sewanee, Harry McPherson, who urged us to respect the profession of politics and to not ignore the lessons of history.

In closing, I'd like to quote something from your Baccalaureate speaker 2 years ago, someone I know well, New York Times columnist and regular NewsHour news analyst David Brooks - who appears every Friday night along with Mark Shields.

He urged Sewanee graduates of 2013 to pursue their career dreams - but also not to forget to live in the moment. To love and spend time with family - to read the great books - including at this school founded by the Episcopal Church -- the Bible, the Torah, the Koran or the writings of Buddha - to engage in a life-long pursuit of bettering their characters. I know Sewanee views its job as doing just that - at the same time it offers the intellectually rich education that has made it what it is today.

On this Founders Day, celebrate the values that brought you to where you are today - 158 years later - and rededicate yourselves to the tasks of staying at the center of the debates that matter and helping everyone who comes to this beautiful campus, to embark on that life-long pursuit of a better character.

Thank you and congratulations.