LAUNCHING THE NEW YEAR
All Saints’ Chapel
August 30, 2016

We renew this afternoon in somewhat altered form an old Sewanee tradition. Though not strictly speaking an Opening Convocation, today’s gathering of the community reminds us of the start of a new academic year and affords an opportunity to chart our course for the year ahead.

I begin with a simple word of welcome – to our new students, the Class of 2020, to our new faculty and staff colleagues, as well as to those returning students and faculty: welcome back, welcome home. I begin also with a simple, inadequate, word of thanks to our support staff. While many of us enjoyed a slower summer pace, our friends in physical plant, in ITS, in the library, in dining services, and in the many other offices that support our work toiled on. We return to a campus strengthened and made more beautiful by their work, energized by their commitment. Thank you, our staff, for all you do for our University. And tonight, as you go through the serving line at the picnic, take the time to thank the Sewanee Dining worker across the table. They have worked hard this weekend and extended wonderful hospitality.

Over the past twelve months, as anyone who has lived through them will, I think, readily agree, the pace of change has accelerated. A mere listing of all that has happened during that period would take much more time than we have this afternoon.

I would note in particular the work carried out in this, the third of a three-year Campus Infrastructure Renewal Program. Our physical plant is in remarkably improved condition. Ayres Hall is now open and will be dedicated in honor of Bob and Pat Ayres over Homecoming Weekend. Quintard has had a complete renovation. The golf lodge has now opened. The first phase of our new system of campus signage has been completed.

Yet in the midst of change, at a place like Sewanee we are also struck by certain continuities. That something involves, as I said to the Class of 2020 last Sunday afternoon, an awareness of history (look around you in this Chapel); a sensitivity to place (what a blessing to inhabit a 13,000-acre Domain); a respect for the natural order; a commitment to honorable conduct in all that we do; and, not least, a love of the God who created all things. We acknowledge before that
God our own human limitations and imperfections – this University surely knows what it means to inhabit a fallen world.

That said, there are abundant reasons for us to be confident about the year, and years ahead. That confidence has many sources, but arguably the strongest of these can be stated by a few simple, profoundly important facts. The first has to do with a spirit of boldness so clearly present in a series of decisions setting tuition and fees that continues to make the University of the South a true “value proposition” while allowing families, because they know those charges are guaranteed over four years, to plan. What a family pays in year one it will pay in years two, three, and four. This “Sewanee Promise,” unique among liberal arts colleges, represents a commitment to accessibility and affordability that continues to draw attention and, more important, visitors and applicants.

Moreover, such data as might be cited to support or refute my claim tends overwhelmingly to the positive side. Last year’s budget was balanced, and our reserves, which had been drawn down, have been replenished. Our bond rating remains A+. Our endowment performance is strong, and our transition to new endowment managers has been careful and is now complete. Advance commitments during the still “silent phase” of our Capital Campaign now top $168 million. We will go public this fall with a series of “launch” events modeled on our campus launch of last March and intended, over the next two years, to bring the Stronger Truer Sewanee campaign to the Sewanee extended family across the country and around the world.

So there is every reason for optimism on the giving front. I would note in particular an extraordinary bequest received in June, totaling just shy of $8 million and designated entirely for financial aid, thereby bringing us closer to the day when every student’s full need can be met.

Still more encouraging are the indisputable data concerning enrollments. We have, as you know, admitted to the College classes of record size in each of the last five years, and this at no diminution in quality. Indeed this year’s entering class of 518 new students and 13 transfers has been drawn from an applicant pool that matched last year’s record number of 4,500 and with a yield (a figure that is notoriously hard to move) two percentage points ahead of last year. What that means, simply put, is that more young people than ever are applying and, of those offered admission, a higher percentage than ever are choosing to come. And the same is true for the
School of Theology. As much of the Church wrings its hands over the future of theological education (and the rest shrugs its shoulders), the University of the South is preparing the next generation of leadership for a church now more than ever in need of something more than sound-bite theology.

These statistics tell us much that is good and encouraging. But even more important, it seems to me, is our ability, as an institution, to identify, then embrace, then pursue goals that, when achieved, speak to clarity of mission, unity of purpose, and a common commitment to improve our corporate life. We are guided still by our Strategic Plan, developed five years ago in a process of broad consultation, discussion, and debate. That Plan is not gathering dust on a shelf. It contains four broad themes:

1. Creating an exemplary learning environment.
2. Realizing the potential of the Domain.
3. Extending the reach of the University globally and locally.
4. Fostering a diverse, cohesive, and inclusive community.

In recent years, at this event, I have presented a series of institutional goals, usually numbering four or five that, derived from the Strategic Plan, would constitute operational mileposts for the coming year. I have discovered that in many cases, those goals did not tidily fit into the cycle of the academic year. Pursuing them is necessarily the work of many years, marked by clearly identifiable tactical mileposts along the way. And so what I would like to do this year is to reaffirm these four broad strategic themes and discuss, under those rubrics, what has been accomplished over the last twelve months, and what specific tasks lie before us in the year ahead.

We might begin with ongoing efforts to recruit the strongest possible students, faculty, and staff. The admissions numbers speak for themselves, and campus visits thus far are running ahead of last year. In the wake of some fifty plus faculty and staff retirements, we have managed to attract outstanding new colleagues. Last year I commented specifically on the challenges we would face in finding new leadership for the Sewanee Review and the University Choir. We have met those challenges and, in Adam Ross and Geoffrey Ward, made two truly distinguished appointments. Watch for the first issue of the new Review in January. Come and hear the choir (or if you are a
student singer, come and sing), which has an ambitious repertoire planned as well as a touring schedule.

The University has launched an employee development pilot project. Our Center for Teaching has been reinvigorated. After a thorough study, compensation has improved in areas where we were below the market rate, and the starting wage has been increased. We continue to make steady progress toward our faculty compensation goals. The Employee Advisory Committee has taken ownership of the agenda for open staff meetings and increased its involvement as a source for feedback and communications. Keeping in mind that a vibrant Sewanee downtown will play an important role in drawing people here, we have engaged a town planner and begun work on a downtown master plan. Jointly with the Community Council and the Sewanee Civic Association, we have completed renovations to Elliott Park. Finally, after two years of operation, the Sewanee Inn has been an enormous success, operating with occupancy rates higher than projected, realizing revenues that exceed costs, and rated by Trip Advisor as tops among all hotels in the state of Tennessee. The Inn has truly been, to use an overworked term, a “game changer.” The completion of the golf lodge completes a major initiative to extend hospitality, an effort through which, as last Sunday’s scripture lesson reminded us, we entertain angels unawares.

Not to be overlooked is our successful navigation of two important reaccreditation events, a comprehensive review of the School of Theology by the Association of Theological Schools, and the decennial review of the College by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Thanks to the good work of Professors Jim Turrell and Nancy Berner, we came through these two reviews with remarkably few concerns. Though final SACS reaffirmation awaits a final decision by that agency in December, we are confident that we shall pass that final milestone with ease. Perhaps most significant was the fact that the Quality Enhancement program (QEP) of “speaking across the curriculum” received high marks, the only concern being that we not attempt to do too much too quickly. This is highly unusual – generally the QEP is where an institution is most likely to encounter concerns – and yet another source of confidence about our future path.

An exemplary learning environment includes not only what takes place in the classroom but also what contributes to a learning experience that is complete and distinctive. For example, our Wellness Center has experienced significant and measurable improvement in patient
effectiveness and patient satisfaction. Prevention initiatives have taken a more focused approach. Our students are able to get the help they need in Health Services. Moreover, we have revised and expanded the student Code of Conduct and made abundantly clear that use, purchase, or sale of drugs will be dealt with swiftly and summarily.

But arguably what matters most are outcomes. Here again the news is encouraging. The University continues to attract and graduate a high percentage of Pell-eligible students. Our 2012-16 POSSE class celebrated a 100 percent graduation rate last May. The integration of the outreach and community engagement offices has created a seamless and extensive approach to our efforts on the Plateau and beyond. I dare say that the University’s relationships with our neighbors on the Plateau have never been more extensive, robust, or congenial.

In addition our advisory board for pre-health programs has been strengthened. Our Career and Leadership Development Office worked with over 95 percent of the Class of 2016, while 97.5 percent of the Class of 2015 are either employed or continuing their education (or both).

All of these accomplishments are important and worthy of note. But at the core of an exemplary learning environment is our faculty and the work that goes on in our classrooms and laboratories. I continue to be inspired by the quality of that work and the energy and commitment that sustain it. To take but one example of many: each year at the end of April we celebrate Scholarship Sewanee, a full day of presentations by students in every discipline of the work they have done, in collaboration with faculty. I wish that every candidate for admission could be here on that day, for they would see what rigorous and sustained and collaborative scholarship means. They would see the pride that comes from hard work and a job well done. They would see what they too could become in such an exceptional place.

Or another example, our First Year Program, “Finding Your Place.” Interest and enrollment continue to grow. I urged last year, and I repeat this year, that it is time for the faculty to take this program off probationary status. It is not a competitor for resources or time. Nor is it an imposition on any faculty member or student who chooses not to participate. But it IS something that few if any other institution could mount; it IS something that introduces students to the joy of learning; it IS something that reminds us that at an academic institution academics come first; and it IS something that forges early and strong bonds among students and between students and
faculty. My deepest thanks to those faculty, among our best, who have helped to build this program, and a special thanks to Professor Deborah McGrath for her leadership. There can be no more effective a way to realize the potential of the Domain, as our Strategic Plan commits us to do.

In the area of facilities planning, we have also made much progress in the past year. Let me risk a bit of repetition in the interest of clarity and transparency. If you go back to the Strategic Plan, you will discover that much attention is paid to the School of Theology and its future. Included in that consideration is the desire to bring the School and the College into closer relationship.

Some background here is necessary. The version of the move of the School of Theology that I have been told is not so much that the School desired to move but rather that, after the closing of the Sewanee Military Academy in the early 1980s, something needed to occupy Hamilton Hall, and the SoT was a prime candidate. Certainly faculty who were here in that time have told me that, though not entirely involuntary, the move was not one undertaken with great enthusiasm. St. Luke’s Hall, of course, needed renovation. The cost of doing that for instructional purposes seemed prohibitive, and additional College residential space was needed. The teaching spaces at Hamilton were clearly superior – at least 30 years ago they were.

In the 30 years since, Hamilton Hall has become increasingly problematic. It is not energy-efficient. Its spaces no longer suffice for offices and classrooms. And the Program Center, now known, thanks to a generous gift, as the Beecken Center, along with the study carrels, were deemed by several of our Regents who recently toured them as, simply, an embarrassment. With these concerns in mind, we developed a space program and discussed with our campus master planners how that space might be accommodated within Hamilton and the Beecken Center. The response was that the existing space was simply not salvageable, and that the cost of building anew plus refurbishing Hamilton would be quite high.

It was at that moment that the idea of returning to central campus arose. I will not belabor the details, but the findings were pretty clear: that more and better space could be secured, at considerably less cost, by, essentially, wrapping a new School of Theology around a never-very-successful Bishop’s Common (and incorporating into that space a much-needed 250-seat auditorium, something less likely to be used if placed on Tennessee Avenue but quite likely to be
used by the entire University if sited on central campus). Furthermore, St. Luke’s Chapel remains consecrated space. Its capacity is sufficient for the daily use of the seminary. Larger events could be accommodated in All Saints’. We will always have one chapel more than we may need. All living donors to the Chapel of the Apostles have been contacted and are comfortable with the decision to relocate – none are opposed.

So – for perhaps $10 million less, we get a whole lot more. And we reaffirm our historic relationship with the Church and place the School of Theology on a site of far greater visibility. There is of course a risk. But if we mean to be not just a survivor among a dwindling number of seminaries but in fact a leader, we would have a hard time sustaining that claim if we were to remain in the Tennessee Avenue facilities.

I am encouraged by our planning and our fundraising efforts to date. The Regents will, I hope, in December, approve a final budget and detailed plans for the School, which will occupy the Bishop’s Common site. Construction probably lies at least two or three years out, which gives us ample time to line up the “space dominoes” for an orderly relocation of the present BC occupants. But I strongly believe this project will happen and that the Stronger Truer Sewanee campaign will produce the needed financial support.

We have made similar progress, albeit via a much more circuitous route, in planning for the University Commons. The Commons remains a major space priority. But as we considered the size of a single building required to accommodate the desired program on a particular site, we eventually concluded that no site, including the Thompson Union, could accommodate a building of that size and footprint. Furthermore, we could not begin work on such a building until we had raised significant sums of money. So, rather than delay indefinitely, we – by which I mean the Commons Planning Committee and the Board of Regents – determined to develop instead what we have called a “distributed” Commons, which will occupy various proximate sites. In doing this, we can begin, soon, to construct Phase One of what will likely be a multi-phase project and begin to address our most pressing needs. Planning is now well along to place this Phase One in, and possibly also around or beside, the University Book and Supply Store. We have given it the name “Wellness Commons” and plan for it to house the Outing Program, fitness and workout space as an alternative to the Fowler Center, the Wellness Center, and perhaps spaces for food and convenience items. The precise footprint is not yet determined, nor has the budget been set.
But an architect has begun work on a design that we expect the Regents will approve in December. This of course will mean finding a new, probably temporary, location for the book and supply store, and conversations on various options to meet that need are now under way.

This is, as I have said, Phase One. There will be additional phases. Where those phases will be sited, and what they will comprise, are topics we will in time take up. But to take them up now is to be unnecessarily distracted from the task at hand, the completion of which will, I am confident, make our decisions about subsequent phases far more informed.

Finally, let me say a word or two about the fourth element of our Strategic Plan, fostering a diverse, cohesive, and inclusive community. The Strategic Planning Committee chose these words carefully and ordered them appropriately. All are important. “Cohesive” may well be the most challenging. This community needs to know how much has already been planned for the year ahead, much of which is drawn from ten – yes, ten – task force reports submitted at the end of last academic year to a University Committee on Diversity, Cohesion, and Inclusion. As a result, the Center for Teaching has held workshops for faculty on “creating an inclusive classroom environment” and “strategic social issue framing,” led by accomplished professionals. The College faculty devoted half a day of its retreat to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book, *Between the World and Me*, a book assigned not just to new students but made a “common book” for discussion by the entire University community, including trustees and regents over the course of the coming year. In mid-September the University will host a symposium commemorating the 150th anniversary of Tennessee’s ratification of the 14th amendment, the first Confederate state to do so, and a milestone in Southern history. This amendment of course defined citizenship and its rights. Panels of distinguished historians and legal scholars will gather here to discuss the significance of the amendment and its legacy.

Terrell Strayhorn, from Ohio State University, will speak, also in mid-September, on diversity and inclusion. Bob Herbert, noted *New York Times* columnist, will be here to speak at the end of September. Sewanee will join Pomona and Middlebury as sites for a POSSE workshop for student leaders and faculty, also at the end of September. Our Founders’ Day Convocation speaker in October will be former Charleston Mayor Joe Riley. Harvard Professor Jennifer Hoschschild, president of the American Political Science Association and an expert on race, ethnicity, and immigration, will be this year’s Phi Beta Kappa lecturer.
The University has joined Universities Studying Slavery, a consortium of universities begun by the University of Virginia’s President’s Commission on Slavery and the University. Through this consortium faculty and students will have opportunities to engage in scholarship on the history of the University.

In other words, there is plenty to do, plenty of ways to learn more and to get engaged and involved. I urge all of us to use whatever time we might otherwise have given over to lamenting or protesting or criticizing to instead participating in one or more of these events. Or, as I wrote to the campus community this summer, to do what we can to help mend a weakened social fabric, by stepping away from the keyboard, putting down the pen, laying aside the placard, and making a commitment to act.

Diversity, cohesion, and inclusiveness are most likely to be attained in a culture of mutual respect. And so here I want to repeat an admonition I offered to new students and their parents last Sunday in this Chapel:

I believe, and my colleagues believe, that you chose to come here in defiance of any particular stereotype. The Sewanee angel brought you to this University because you prefer community to anonymity, because you want to serve, because you do want to learn to exemplify civic engagement, because you seek both responsibility and accountability, and, most of all, because you will make your own decisions and not let someone else – whether a classmate, a friend, or even a faculty or staff member – make them for you. Do not believe everything you hear about “hookups” or “binges,” to cite but two examples of what you may well be told is the culture to which you must adapt. Have the courage of your own convictions, be guided by your own moral compass. Before you put yourself, or your reputation, or someone else, at risk, try to remember that each of you is the child of a loving parent, who conceived you and brought you into this world and rejoiced at the moment of your birth, and continues to love you. That young man you are with, and that young woman, is some loving parent’s child. Think, twice and hard, before doing something that might be hurtful. Do not seek, and do not be held back by or allow yourselves to be satisfied by, conformity with things of this world. Seek something higher and nobler. Be transformed, as St. Paul writes, by the renewing of your mind.
Of all the issues facing us this year, this one is likely to be the most challenging, especially since events that happen far from the Domain will inevitably have a resonance here. But I am confident that we will meet those challenges, and in the best Sewanee tradition – with civility, consideration, respect, and at least a bit of doubt in our own infallibility.

Indeed we all are blessed to be part of a special community. Over the past few days, as we have welcomed new students and faculty and staff, we have stressed to them that our understanding of diversity here includes diversity of opinion. And that our measure, and society’s assessment, of the education they have received here will most likely and compellingly be found in their ability, as sons and daughters of this University, to think for themselves.

And I acknowledge that times of change can be stressful, even jarring. I understand that, as do my administrative colleagues. Help us to manage that change by bringing your questions forward and asking us directly. Of course not everyone can be expected to know everything that is going on. We are constantly striving to improve communication and make it more transparent – why else hold you in the stifling Chapel for so long when a wonderful picnic awaits? But I ask you to help me, and help us as a community, to bring questions forward, to seek rather than to imagine answers, and understand that in the end a cohesive community is one that is based on trust.

When accompanied by honorable behavior, when insisting upon civil discourse, and when assuming and expecting the best of intentions, rumor is stifled, ill-will suppressed, petty grievances subdued. It is not, and should never be, “we” versus “they,” and we should identify such usages for what they are: a threat to the most basic values of civic responsibility. All of us in this community are working together for a great and shared purpose. Let us not lose sight of these fundamental things as we go about our work in the coming year, work that will inevitably challenge us and test us. And when we are tempted to assume the worst or pass along gossip or post something for all the world to see on Facebook or other social media, let’s remember that the rest of the world is watching, and judging.

I hope you share my excitement about the year ahead. I close with a quote and then a story. The quote comes from a prayer offered by Bishop Polk at the laying of the cornerstone of the University. In it, he prays, on behalf of all those gathered, for “wisdom to plan and strength and skill to execute … till the whole structure rise in due proportions and finished beauty [and] be
instrumental forever in enlarging knowledge and promoting the peace and happiness of mankind.” May this be our prayer as we take up our work in this new year and begin to frame, as Eliot would put it, this year’s voice.

And now the story, and one that many of you know. Willie Six is a Sewanee legend. For 40 years he served as an athletic trainer. According to the University history, “he worked tirelessly to keep Sewanee men on the field, whether as stars or as scrubs.” Upon his retirement in 1947 this beloved figure was made an honorary member of the “S” society and received a varsity athletic letter. Willie Six Road memorializes his service to the University.

A reporter asked Willie, at the time of his retirement, what was the best year in Sewanee athletic history. This man, who had seen many great teams and many great moments, answered without hesitation: “The best year? The best year is the one comin’ up.”

I like that a lot. Willie Six refused to look back, refused to live in the past. His comment neither denied nor demeaned that past. But that was the past. The best was yet to come. Willie Six, even in retirement, looked forward to the year “comin’ up.”

And so we begin our work in this new academic year, hoping in the end to be found faithful servants, striving to build a place where the worth and dignity of every human being are respected, where freedom does exist in proportion to wholesome restraint, where education does take place around the clock, in all venues, and where, even when the fog closes in, a kindly light still leads us on.

So let us take up our tasks for the year, as our liturgy puts it, “with gladness and singleness of heart.”

The best year is “the one comin’ up.”