

**Boston University Commencement
Baccalaureate Celebration Service
Marsh Chapel - Sunday, May 16, 2021
Comments by Catherine D'Amato**

Good morning graduates.

Today, we celebrate you.

My sincere thanks to President Brown and Rev. Hill for inviting me to join you today.

As we reflect on your accomplishments this morning, we cannot remove COVID-19 from your experience as a student, a parent, a son, or a daughter. It has touched us all. This pervasive virus has changed our lives forever. Many of you have experienced sadness, disappointment and for some of you, the loss of a loved one during this terrible time of uncertainty.

While COVID is a pandemic, hunger is an epidemic that has been exacerbated by COVID. Hunger is now at historic numbers in our city, state, country and around the world. And sadly, the volatility, complexity and consequences will be with us for years. And for many, for lifetimes. This challenge we face together will require us to also recognize all the challenges your generation is now witnessing first-hand: racial inequality, economic inequality, food insecurity, educational access, and the list goes on and on. The intersectionality of poverty is before us, surrounded by the profound truths of inequity and injustice.

If you ever doubted your ability to help...to make a difference...to make an impact, large or small, doubt no more. Now is the time to act.

We each have our own journey that informs our choices. Yours will take you from this point into the future, into a bit of the unknown. When I was much younger, I truly believed I was going to be a singer and yet here I am, a food banker, fighting for justice my entire career. My experiences informed my choices.

My grandparents were immigrants and my parents were struggling working class, eventually opening a restaurant when I was 8. That move from working class to middle class changed my life. The values in my family were strong. We had shelter, food, family, and friends. We were taught to help others, in our case this often meant feeding anyone coming to the back door of the restaurant seeking food in exchange for work. No work required. Instead, everyone was seated at a table, treated with respect, and fed a nutritious meal. I reflect now and think that it's no wonder that I decided to study Theology and commit my life's work to helping others get access to food.

Hunger is agnostic. Even in this period of extreme beliefs that can polarize us, hunger HAS NO POLITICAL affiliation. It can show up at anyone's doorstep...it can happen to anyone. In any city. In any state. In any country.

And hunger is also prevalent on half of the college campuses across the U.S.

The Greater Boston Food Bank and others have shared studies that indicate that 1 in 10 in the world are hungry; 1 in 6 in the United States are food insecure; 1 in 3 people in Massachusetts do not know where their next meal is coming from. Recently, the World Health Organization called hunger the greatest threat to public health.

Hunger is clearly top of mind for me, and I believe that together we can bring empathy forward to solve the problem of hunger.

However, if hunger is not what resonates for you, I ask you to take a moment and confirm what DOES resonate. What issue might have your voice behind it? What cause do you feel passionate about or personally connected to? What is that one thing that has a connection to your life: to your story? I encourage you to think about this and learn to truly know this. You can use the gifts you have earned...and have been given... to make a difference for others. And some might say you have a unique, unprecedented opportunity.

As I look out at you, I am encouraged. I see enormous potential. I see smart, capable people ready to make an impact.

You think differently.

You have the commitment to advance good.

You care about the environment, about health, about your community.

You can use technology to connect with each other and to others more than ever before.

There is so much you can do if you choose to act. As we listen to the readings this morning, they call on us to do something for others.

I believe that means we must fight inertia and complacency. Don't be indifferent... Be authentic.

Talk to your friends, family, and at work about what you care about. Give voice to those who cannot speak.

Wherever you go next, back home, another city, another country or right here in Boston, be sure to learn about your community. As a start, consider looking at the inequities of poverty, such as racial injustice, economic injustice, and food insecurity. Get involved. That's how you will learn more about how you can help make your community better. Share what you know...and encourage others to join you in action.

The values I learned as a small child have not changed, they've evolved to awareness and empathy. I have seen the shame it takes to seek out help. I have also witnessed the relief that comes with the gift of understanding, acceptance, and support.

In my world, people often ask me what frustrates me the most. That's an easy question to answer. We aren't fixing something that can be fixed. Hunger is a solvable problem. Yet it takes political will and public engagement to solve it. We certainly know how to grow, transport, sell and prepare food.

Simply put, the answer does not require sophisticated science or chemistry. No drug or vaccine needed. There is a solution to cure this epidemic: Food.

That's why I and so many others are fighting for it; working to secure it and finding the best ways possible to share it.

What will you fight for?

Will you be indifferent? Or will you be authentic?

By being who you are and using your talents for good – you can help make life better.

I know this. I am encouraged by this.

And, I thank you in advance for this.

I told you earlier that when I was younger, I wanted to be a singer. Even though I chose a different career path, it turns out, I can still sing!

So, let me leave you with a song, a Navaho prayer, a blessing to honor all of you. Stay aware of the beauty around you. Stay aware and act.

Catherine sings...

In the hours of my life, there I wander.

In the hours of my happiness, I wander.

Beauty before me.

Beauty behind me.

Beauty below me

All around me

Thank you.