This afternoon at about 3:00, something really significant will happen on this campus. You see, a few blocks from here in our new campus garden, a seed will sprout, and push up through the earth, reaching toward the sun. **So, this is truly a day to celebrate!**

Our new garden is the work of a group called Centre GROWS.

Now, it’s true that not many Centre students have hands that smell like dirt at the end of a spring day. But seeds have been planted—and neither frosty nights, nor a 10-inch rainfall, nor even Brody Hays have been able to prevent what will happen there this afternoon. *Something’s bursting forth!*

We will reap what we’ve sown.

It’s a common-sense truth.

Today’s reading from Galatians is a simple reminder that you *will* reap what you sow. Good seeds yield good fruit.

Of course, your graduation is also a reaping—that other event at 3:00 that’s pretty significant.

Today we celebrate that what was sown over these four years will reap a harvest for years to come. For loving parents, today’s ceremony is the fruition of sowing and nurturing begun years ago. And now, with the additional cultivation of fertile minds, and a bit of weeding, and pruning, and feeding, you have grown and blossomed.

Occasionally some fertilizer had to be thrown in (after all, some of you had to take classes with David Hall). And there were those papers Carter Pilkington turned in over the years...

Anyway, we can’t wait to see how these years of cultivation bear fruit.

Now, this is not to say that we on the faculty think of you as vegetables. Occasionally, however, your class performance did have us wondering! But lettuce squash those memories, and pepper you with sincere congratulations.

The image of sowing and reaping also speaks of how you change the world—but not as you might expect on a day when graduates hear talk of big dreams as they plan futures among the talented and powerful who make things happen. Rather, today’s texts speak cryptically of a conspiracy of the imperceptible, or what Tom Sine once called a “mustard seed conspiracy.”

The mustard seed parable in Mark claims that the better world humans have always hoped for, the more just world coming into existence, is like planting a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds—almost imperceptible—but one that yields the largest plant in the garden; so big that the birds nest in its branches.

In fact, biblical writers seem to debate how lasting change really happens. So today, I want to explore some groundbreaking ideas in Hebrew stories, for what they reveal about an unseen conspiracy; about the often-unnoticed way the world really works.

These writers might even germinate some ideas that take root, as you take your own places in history.

So let’s start with Joseph, a biblical character whose story holds a sinister truth about one kind of world-changing power. Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob, but the first borne to him by his beloved wife Rachel. As Rachel’s boy, Joseph was the favored one; kind of pampered.

In fact, you get the idea he was a spoiled brat.

While his brothers worked the fields in the hot sun, Joseph lounged around the tent in the fancy long-sleeved robe his parents gave him, sipping Flor de Canaan, and doing the odd things 17 year-olds do—maybe even stripping off his robe to run around some flame in the desert.

Every so often Jacob sent Joseph to check his brothers’ work.

“Dad wants to know how it’s going, guys. Wow, lots of land to clear. Well, gotta run—it is hot out here.” You can imagine the resentment.
Even worse, Joseph had the annoying habit of greeting them with reports of dreams he had while they worked—dreams that he’d rule over them; visions with elaborate imagery indicating they’d bow down to him! So one day when he’s checking their work, they seize him, cast him into a pit, and sell him to a caravan headed for Egypt. The traders sell Joseph to an officer of Pharaoh’s court— they probably couldn’t stand him either.

In Egypt, Joseph has to resist the seductive advances of the boss’s wife; but then uses his gift of dream interpretation to advance to the court of Pharaoh himself. He becomes Pharaoh’s treasury secretary, in charge of the empire’s economic program.

And then the story takes a startling turn. Joseph is the agent of a concentration of wealth so centralizing, so total, that people throughout Egypt and Canaan become vassals of the Egyptian elite. With complete control over the food system, Joseph appropriates the people’s monetary wealth, then their herds, their land, and finally their labor—creating a thoroughly dependent serfdom working for the elites, and transferring a fifth of all future production to the economically powerful. Even the seeds were under Joseph’s control. People did bow down to him. It was a dream come true...

With everyone fully dependent on the economic structures, Egypt’s collapse became unthinkable even to those subject to its power. Trying to imagine an alternative left them as bewildered as wanderers in the constantly shifting sands of the desert.

No longer self-sufficient, the people paid a heavy price. They were no longer free.

In one of the great ironies of literature, Joseph is praised for resisting the designs of his boss’s wife, while his role as the inadvertent catalyst for the eventual enslavement of his own people is overlooked.

Of course, Joseph probably couldn’t have known what his program would lead to. But future generations in Israel reflected on their long nightmare in Egypt and filled their literature with warnings about concentrated economic power.

Of course, the Hebrews finally escaped from Egypt. The Exodus from enslavement was the great liberating event of their history. And in the lore that developed about their deliverance, Hebrew storytellers emphasized some intriguing imagery that signified a different way.

Manna in the wilderness: The tale of the manna is much more than a miracle story. It envisions an economic alternative!
* Work in the place where you are.
* Take just enough for your family’s needs.
* Depend on the abundant provision of creation.
* Hoarding and excess result in rottenness.

The dream of Joseph envisions more and more. The vision of the manna says enough is enough. Accumulate or cooperate. One dream uproots—and turns into a nightmare for others. The other dream plants—and prioritizes the needs of others. The symbol of the manna is the visionary charter of an unseen conspiracy, the seed of change, quietly operating just below the surface.

The manna imagery even takes root in Israel’s national covenant. Their gleaning laws allowed the poor to gather food off the land. They outlawed interest rates that might lead people into spirals of debt servitude.
They envisioned periodic years of *Jubilee* for redistributing land, to level out patterns of concentrated ownership.\textsuperscript{iii}

Some Jews even rejected monarchy itself, because it grafted political authority onto economic power. It was too much like Egypt’s system of an all-controlling center, enriched by an impoverished periphery.\textsuperscript{iv}

But there’s always more happening, just below the surface—a hidden undercurrent of history. For every version of history that focuses on the powerful and the wealthy, there’s a *sub*-version, an unseen conspiracy of change from underground, poking up through the soil of history, reaching for the sun.

The unfolding of the story back in Egypt is a perfect example. When Pharaoh tries to protect his power by ordering the death of newborn Hebrew males, the agents of historical change are two ordinary midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.\textsuperscript{v}

These women know who they are—Hebrews, not Egyptians—the seeds of a new order sprouting in the midst of the old. Shiphrah and Puah refuse to cooperate with Pharaoh’s order, and plant a seed that results in the liberation of their people. Their small act of humane defiance delivers a deliverer, Moses, who leads his people out from under Pharaoh’s system.

These are the Bible’s subversives. There’s always a *sub*-version of the master narrative. Seeds of change just below the surface, growing into a new reality.

**So what do these ancient stories mean for you as you graduate?**

Of course, the same competing visions grow in the soil of our history as well. In our society, wealth has been redistributed upward for 30 years, toward greater concentration at the top, and increasing dependence at the bottom. As you graduate, our nation has the largest gap between rich and poor in its history. The top 1% of Americans now possess 40% of the nation’s total wealth.\textsuperscript{vi}

You attended college during the worst economic crisis since the Depression—an era also characterized by excess and scandal on Wall Street. Our largest banks are under investigation for complex financial maneuvers that profited from misleading their investors.

We’re now accustomed to terms like hedge funds, derivatives, debt swaps, and mortgage-backed securities—all symbolizing the flagrant unchecked greed of an unfettered oligarchy, speculatively gambling with the nation’s wealth for the enrichment of a few, profiting even from the nation’s housing meltdown.\textsuperscript{vii}

The other side of this coin is millions of homes in foreclosure…

Today, the reintegration of commercial and investment banking has yielded mega-banks so gigantic that their collapse threatens the entire financial system. And most of us are carrying their credit cards—our money, our homes, our welfare tied up with their power. We can scarcely imagine an alternative. Now considered “too big to fail,” the mega-banks appropriate even more of the nation’s wealth unto themselves, gobbling up tax-funded bailouts while awarding themselves multimillion-dollar bonuses.

So we’re faced with the age-old choice: The dream of Joseph or the vision of the manna. **More and more, or enough is enough.**

**Take all you can, or share what you have.** Accumulate or cooperate.

The danger is more than economic. Justice Louis Brandeis was right when he said: "We can have *democracy* in this country, or we can have *great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few*, but we can't have both.” With millions spent on lobbyists, the mega-banks aren’t just “too *big* to fail,” but too *well connected* to fail.\textsuperscript{viii} For them, it’s a dream come true.
The trouble is, while modern-day Josephs dream of profit piled upon profit, we can’t seem to do without a system we now depend on.

Even now, the Gulf oil spill exceeds 5 million gallons, leaving 11 workers dead, unparalleled damage to an ocean ecosystem, fragile wetlands polluted, pelicans and sea turtles coated with petroleum, fish suffocating in underwater plumes of oil.

It’s the terrible price of a crude addiction we cannot shake.

 Meanwhile BP, Exxon and Chevron amass slick profits – with oil from Angola and Colombia, Indonesia and Iraq, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia all flowing in their direction, feeding the self-destructive habit of a dependent population — a habit that subsidizes tyrants, an addiction defended with violence, a fix that scars the veins of the earth.

The dream turned into a nightmare…

Closer to home, the Upper Big Branch disaster left 29 coal miners dead in a region mostly dependent on one type of employment, for a public hooked on a fossil fuel habit now defacing the Appalachians, choking mountain streams, destroying ancient eco-systems, replacing green hills with gray mounds of toxic ash and unstable ponds of sludge. For Massey Energy, our 5th largest coal producer, with 500 safety violations last year, regulatory fines are just another business cost.

Joseph’s dream lives on in the corporatism that depends on our dependency.

And when that dream comes true, we are no longer free.

On this, sociologists offer the same warnings as biblical writers. They tell us that wherever there’s a large, active middle class, more even distribution of wealth, and widespread civic participation, democracy flourishes. Systems of vertical relations, where power concentrates in the hands of a few, often uproot civic engagement, withering the hope that things can be different.

Freedom requires patterns of horizontal relations, where power and wealth are more widely distributed. The truth is that social change emerges in the soil of participation — in local community organizations where widespread citizen investment forms habits of cooperation. That builds social capital—the rich topsoil in which free societies flourish.

The official history of our era is the story of the powerful — bank bailouts, financial flows, military campaigns, election returns… But do not be deceived. There’s another story. There’s something going on underground. It’s the quiet revolution of mustard seeds. The conspiracy of the seemingly insignificant… It’s the story of countless unnamed midwives to a history flowing forward in a simple basket of reeds. It’s the story of Shiphrah and Puah, Moses and Amos, Gandhi and Wilberforce, Sandino and Mandela, Cesar Chavez and Rosa Parks.

What’s happening at the campus garden today doesn’t seem like much. But in a concentrated agro-industrial system, the garden is nothing less than a new vision germinating in the midst of the old.

Yes, three corporations control the world’s grain trade.

Yes, Monsanto controls 3-fifths of the world’s seed production.

But the dream of Josh Moore and Bethany Pratt envisions local, sustainable land use that nourishes students and nourishes the earth, reconnecting a generation with the source of its food.

If you look carefully at the ground where you’ve put down roots these last four years, mustard seeds are sprouting all over the place. Right here, something’s taken root below the surface, where the lasting changes in history emerge.

So, listen, here’s the meaning of faith.
Faith is the conviction that the seemingly insignificant seeds we plant, inspired by the vision of a better world, will one day forest a desert made barren by injustice.

*They’re the seeds planted with three cups of tea in the midst of Afghanistan’s war.
*They’re the seeds planted by Edge Outreach, installing water purification systems in Latin America.
*They’re the seeds planted by your donations to Haiti’s earthquake victims, including funds for the organization you learned about in the first book you read at Centre.
*They’re the seeds planted by Bonner Scholars repairing mountain homes in West Virginia, and by countless hours of Bonner service in Boyle County, with the community spirit and dedication to civic engagement that can preserve our freedom—one seed at a time.

Can you see them?
With a housing market beset by foreclosures, and sub-prime loans re-setting at unpayable rates, your hammers built Habitat homes, funded by sweat equity, and civic cooperation, and revolving no-interest loans. That house in Junction City won’t make the history books, but it’s the foundation of historical change.

The sub-version of the housing crisis...

In the midst of Wall Street scandals, bank bailouts, and executive bonuses, you quietly formed a chapter of a non-profit called NEST, creating employment in developing countries through interest-free micro-loans. And every sale is seed money for a new economy, growing markets for businesswomen in the global south.

In the face of oil spills, mining disasters, and mountaintop removal, you quietly voted yourselves a tuition increase to purchase carbon-offsetting renewable energy credits—sowing the seeds of an alternative energy economy. And those tiny mustard seeds yielded hydroelectric power on the Kentucky River.

With an education system that hoards the best resources for schools in the suburbs, and prices too many out of higher education, Deborah Bial planted a seed that became the Posse Foundation. And that seed took root even in the unlikely soil of Danville, Kentucky with the first class of Posse scholar-leaders from Boston graduating today. And this little plot of earth has been changed by your presence.

Here’s one more. Several weeks ago I got this envelope from a friend named Daysi in Ramon Garcia, Nicaragua. In it I found the report cards of 16 students! You see, a year ago, this campus raised $5000 for scholarships that sent these kids to high school.

In 2009, 21 of us stayed in that village. We ate tortillas and beans, carried our water from wells, bathed in a river, and heard stories of crushing poverty and agonizing struggles for land rights. And one January day on those tough mountainsides, in the hot Nicaragua sunshine, you gathered a harvest of beans. But this, this was your harvest.

Jose Mauricio Gomez. Angela Gaitan Lopez. Ernaldo Ramon Mendoza…. and 13 more, living a dream…

This was the making of history. The mustard seed conspiracy.

It’s a history that won’t show up in the textbooks. Or will it?

Well, at 3:00 today, you’ll walk across this stage, pushing up through the soil of a new history, reaching for the sun. So what’s your dream for a better world?

We urge you to get your hands dirty, turning that dream into reality with some mustard seeds.

Because you will reap what you sow; so do not grow weary in well doing.

That’s the mustard seed conspiracy, the jubilee project, the manna alternative, the midwife underground, the surprising work of God.

Whatever you call it, it’s the meaning of faith, the substance of hope, the seedbed of freedom, and the key to abundant life.

Amen.
welfare was greater in American communities dominated by small business and widespread ownership" and 4) Robert Putnam in places where ownership and control were more widely distributed. 3) C. Wright Mills, et al, who showed that "civic industrialize" 2) Walter Goldshmidt whose study of California communities "showed that the standard of living was higher and Silas House (Sierra Club, 2009) and 3) Cynthia Duncan, Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America (Yale University Press, 1999), 153, 198-200. Duncan cites 1) Peter Evans and John Stephens showing that "nations where property is predominantly in small land-holdings rather than large, concentrated estates are more likely to develop a democratic political system when they industrialize" 2) Walter Goldschmidt whose study of California communities "showed that the standard of living was higher in places where ownership and control were more widely distributed", 3) C. Wright Mills, et al, who showed that "civic welfare was greater in American communities dominated by small business and widespread ownership" and 4) Robert Putnam
whose study of Italy in the 70s and 80s found that democracy and economic development thrived where social relations
were “horizontal” (with widespread participation in private voluntary associations that developed “social trust and habits of
cooperation”) while democracy suffered where relations were “vertical” (with concentration of power and wealth, and
systems of patronage and clientelism).

xii Eric Holt-Gimenez and Loren Peabody, From Food Rebellions to Food Sovereignty: Urgent call to fix a broken food
system, in FoodFirst Backgrounder, Institute of Food and Development Policy, Vol. 14, Number 1, Spring, 2008.
The three corporations are Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill and Bunge.
The average size of American farms has doubled in two decades. (“Federal Subsidies Turn Farms Into Big Business” in
the Washington Post, 12/21/06). Just 7% of all farms account for 60% of all farm production, and receive 54% of U.S. farm
subsidies. Federal agricultural subsidies have cost $172 billion since 2000, $25 billion in 2005 alone, while pretax farm
profits were at a near-record $72 billion (Dan Morgan, Gilbert Gaul and Sarah Cohen, “Farm Program Pays $1.3 billion to
People Who Don’t Farm”, in the Washington Post, 7/2/06.) See Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma (Penguin, 2006)
for an eye-opening look at the U.S. food system.

xiii The group’s mission statement says, “Centre GROWS is an organic garden with the goal of promoting a campus culture
of sustainability through the provision of produce to the student dining facility. Through these actions, Centre GROWS will
be a tangible symbol of what it means to live sustainably.” The CENTO, 1/21/10.

xiv Tracy Kidder, Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World
(Random House, 2003). Even the devastating Haiti earthquake must be understood in the context of patterns of concentrated
wealth. For years, Haiti was the functional equivalent of a U.S. colony, providing everything from sugar to cheap labor.
Haiti’s wealth flowed to the Duvalier dictatorships and to the U.S. corporations that subsidized their rule. Even U.S. aid
that dumped surpluses on the Haitian market drove small-scale farmers out of business, creating a dependent low-cost labor
force for low-wage factory production. The January 2010 earthquake was naturally devastating and occurred in heavily
populated areas. But what killed so many of the 230,000 Haitians who died was poverty, and the poverty in Haiti was no
accident.

xv Coal currently provides 45% of our electricity nationally and contributes over 30% of our CO2 emissions (Ben Evans,
Stephanie Pistello and Jeff Biggers, “Coal-free future begins in Kentucky” in The Courier Journal, 2/1/10). Noting that
104,000 Americans have died in coal-mining accidents, and three coal miners die every day from black lung disease, the
authors cite studies that estimate the costs of coal at more than $62 billion in damages to our health and lives (National
Academy of Scientists), costs to the Appalachian region of five times more than the industry provides in economic benefits
(U. of WV), and net loss (in state revenues vs. expenditures) of $115 million in Kentucky.

Centre’s Renewable Energy Credits have financed one 680 kilowatt turbine at the Mother Ann Lee hydroelectric plant near
Shakertown.