

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
December 16, 2005 | St. Ignatius Church

I offer my own words of congratulations to those of you who have graduated and to your family and friends who share your joy of accomplishment today. I also express my appreciation to our staff and faculty who are the heart and soul of this University you make for our students.

At these December graduations it is customary for me to switch hats—this one, for this one. I do so because the diploma I just gave you, is probably the most expensive Christmas gift that you will ever receive. Happily, my responsibility is only to give you your diploma—not pay for it. This gift will keep you giving for a long time!

This year we celebrated the life and death of Rosa Parks. You remember that she was the African American in Montgomery, Alabama who refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Mrs. Park's action was the basis for the legal challenge that ultimately led to the Supreme Court decision that declared the segregated bus system in Montgomery illegal.

You may not know that Mrs. Parks was not the first black bus rider in Montgomery to refuse to give up her seat. Two other women had done so in previous months. Nor was she a simple seamstress who one day—a long, hard day at work—decided that she had enough and would no longer allow herself to be treated as a second class citizen. In fact, Rosa Parks was a longtime N.A.A.C.P. activist who attended the famous Highland Folk School where she studied social change and learned about effective activism. Her regular lunch partner was a prominent civil rights lawyer.

None of the above diminishes the significance of Rosa Park's achievements, but they do highlight the fact that courage, conviction and informed action are not spontaneous acts nor spur of the moment reflexes, but habits of the heart and mind carefully cultivated over time. These personal qualities constitute what we call "character" and are the product of effort, discipline and focus. Rosa Parks worked hard to be the person she was, to make herself a well-informed and effective agent of change. That is the story behind the story of Rosa. Parks' place in history. That she rightfully occupies an important place in our history is not a question of fate or accident.

The truth of the story behind Rosa Parks is well illustrated by the story of the elderly carpenter on the verge of retirement, who told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business so that he could enjoy the company of his wife and the pleasures of his extended family. He acknowledged that he would miss the pay check, but he really wanted to retire and he and his wife figured they would get by if they carefully watched their finances.

The contractor was sorry to see one of his best workers go and asked if he would build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter agreed, but didn't really put his

heart into his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship, cut corners and used inferior materials. It was not the perfect conclusion of a long career. When the carpenter finished his work, he was a bit taken aback when his employer handed him the keys to the front door. “This house is yours,” he said, “my parting gift to you.” The carpenter was shocked! What a shame he thought to himself! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. And so it is with us.

It is axiomatic that we are all works in progress; every decision we make or fail to make shapes our character, makes us the person we are. We live with the person we build for our entire life and our work never stops. My prayer is that you will build your life daily—well and wisely. My hope is that USF has given you some of the tools that you need to do so.

My best wishes to all of you and your families for this holiday season and my warmest welcome to the Alumni Association of the University of San Francisco. You may be sure that we will stay in touch with you.