

THE WORK OF HOLY CURIOSITY

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Installation addresses, like many other introductory pieces, are meant to help the speaker and listener, or reader and writer, forge a fruitful partnership by starting off well together. These addresses also provide an odd combination of ingredients, as part sermon, part vision-casting, and more than a little hope that you'll leave reassured that your choice to hire me as your dean was a good one. Let's be honest, though, installation addresses risk going the way of commencement addresses, notable more for the pomp and circumstance, the woolen robes and velvet caps, than for any enduring impact of my actual words. However, as a biblical scholar, I cannot help but take a moment of personal privilege to remind us that in his installation address at the University of Altdorf in 1787, Johannes Gabler almost singlehandedly defined and established the new academic discipline of biblical theology.

My goal today is not so lofty. I merely want to tell you why I have dedicated my life to serving Christ through the academy, why you students have made a faithful choice in returning to the academy this year, and why the Church and the academy need each other as much as ever.

The academy is the arena of my life's work, because, as simply and boldly as I can put it, God meets me in classrooms and libraries and books. God meets me in other places, too, in forests and sanctuaries and songs. But for as long as I can remember, and most reliably over the years, the infinite, almighty, fiercely loving God of all Truth has met me in my teachers' words, in my students' questions, in a writer's pages. I have come to celebrate the remarkable discovery that God loves nerds, too. Or, more profoundly, God welcomes us to love with all our minds, too.

I haven't asked her, but if you were to ask Dr. Patrick why she studies the history of the Global Church, she might tell you that ultimately her studies in history, and art, and culture, lead her to worship the God of all nations. If you were to ask Dr. Hardy why he studies spiritual formation, I suspect his answer would have something to do with how God meets him in the practices, the rituals, and the imaginations of humans pursuing Christlikeness. For myself, the academic study of the Bible has taught me how to recognize the Spirit of God breathing through human words. Like many of you, I found my way to the academy because God is at work here.

Another answer to my 'whys' describes one way I have been formed by this academic life. The classroom provides a place where I was invited to cultivate the mental and spiritual habits of holy curiosity, where I am reminded that there is always, always, always more to know of God, more to integrate into our sense of the world and of its Maker. As a population, professors remain infamous for hoarding absurd numbers of books, and often offer as many justifications for such a habit as there are professors. My favorite comes from Nassim Taleb's idea of the "antibrary," in which one's books should always include volumes as yet unread, for their effect upon our humility.¹ As one author put it, "(m)y library is a visual reminder of what I

¹ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2nd ed., (Random House, 2010), 1.

don't know."² May we *always* be surrounded by reminders of what we do not know! The cultivation of curiosity as a posture: this is a path to humility. And friends, those of you among our alumni, trustees, and friends of the seminary, you can help us profoundly, by championing the Seminary as a place wherein the *spiritual exercise of Christlike curiosity is learned and practiced with humility*. After all, if God is infinite, there is always more to be curious about. If Jesus is himself the Truth, there is nothing to be feared in learning. If the Spirit of Truth blows where it will and intercedes for me beyond the limits of human words, I can expect learning to lead me into places where I am both torn away from my most comfortable ideas and tended in my discomfort by the Comforter himself.

In the theological academy, my curiosity is being made holy, and it is quenched and whetted again and again, and I feel God's pleasure in that. I have discovered the delights of a well-copied verb paradigm, the beauty of an inscrutable prophetic oracle, the artistry of Hebrew parallelism, and the humor of Mesopotamian midwives. I have wrestled with violence and vocabulary lists, with thesis statements and theodicies. I have conquered reading lists, and graded endless papers, and cried from exhaustion and despair. I have triumphed, and I have come up short and fallen into the arms of Jesus. I have, in the psalmist's words, occupied myself with things too great and marvelous for me, and found myself calmed and quieted like a weaned child with her mother.

In entering the worlds of the Bible, I have probably entertained and discarded more questions than I have answered. However, I have been invited to cultivate a seeker's heart along the way. Not for the sake of the knowledge itself, though God gives knowledge, but in order that my theological instincts may be shaped, refined, dare I say sanctified? Or as Paul prayed, "that [my] love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1:9, NKJV). Discernment of which questions deserve our attention, and how to proceed with humility when questions require sustained attention rather than easy answers.

I'd like to share a brief story of this curiosity—learning—humility cycle. In a recent workshop on racial reconciliation, our facilitator proposed that theological education begins at birth, and he invited us to share stories from our childhoods that might illustrate such a claim. In the moments of silence that he gave us, the Holy Spirit whisked me back to my primary Sunday School classroom in a little Wesleyan church in Portland, Oregon, where we were learning the song, "Father Abraham." To this day, I do not understand why we needed a Christian replacement for the Hokey Pokey, but on that day the *words* bothered me. With the literality of toddlers everywhere, I told my Sunday School teacher that I could not sing that song because I am not, in fact, Abraham's son, but his daughter. She attempted to soothe me with a butterscotch candy and an age-appropriate explanation of such metaphorical applications of gendered language; I was not satisfied, though, and I never did sing that line again.

As our workshop facilitator suspected would be the case, this early lesson in my theological education was a harbinger, both of my enduring questions, and my enduring passions. A question was formed in me that day: does God know I'm a girl? Does God welcome

² Parrish, Shane A., "The AntilibRARY: Why Unread Books Are the Most Important," <https://fs.blog/the-antilibRARY/>, October 10, 2022.

me as girl, or do I have to fit myself into the paradigm of “son”? My formal theological education has both welcomed my questions and helped me reason out answers.

As to the passion for words I exhibited that day, I still love words, deeply, even foolishly. If I let myself, I can get lost in a good dictionary; I take a particular delight in novelists who can send me to the dictionary. It is probably no great surprise, then, that I became a scholar of the words of God. As I follow the Word Incarnate, I am growing more curious about what words mean to others, and how my words can make a home for everyone in the room. I am more and more curious about how the Word Made Flesh is at work in you, and in us, but I learned early that words used carelessly can teach us that our own experiences may be unwelcome. It seems appropriate here to quote Mark Twain, “The difference between the *almost*-right word and the *right* word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”³ Theological education, if it is worth anything, should make us not only knowledgeable and precise with words, but curious in our use of words and wise in deploying them.

Students, I turn now to you. I said a few moments ago that your choice to come back to school this autumn was an act of faithfulness. You joined our learning community because you are curious: you want to know more about God, you want to discover more of what God has in store for you, and you want to learn how to serve God well wherever you are called. I would argue that any faithful response to an infinite God involves a good dose of holy curiosity. We usually speak of human faithfulness using the language of dedication, vocation, sanctification, discipleship, or mission. But curiosity is integral to all of these. Dedication without curiosity is blind submission, not living relationship. Vocation without curiosity leads to burnout. Sanctification without curiosity devolves into legalism. Discipleship without curiosity produces clones. Mission without curiosity fails.

We relegate the word “seeker” to a particular, pre-conversion season of the spiritual journey, but a true seeker defines one who remains curious even after the sinner’s prayer. Blessedly, we are assured that all who seek God will be satisfied. As we go “further up and further in” to the grace of God, we are invited to keep discovering more and more of what the world needs and what God gives to meet those needs.

I pray that you get even more curious here; that your curiosity is never quite satisfied. It turns out there is quite a lot at stake if you don’t! Incurious ministers are dangerous leaders. Ministry that proceeds only from mastery of material, from an education in which curiosity has not been cultivated, will not in fact, minister to anyone for very long. An infamous cliché goes, “they don’t teach *that* in seminary.” And no, we cannot teach you everything you will need over a lifetime of ministry. But in addition to the content we can provide into your years with us, we intend to make you curious: curious about the people you will serve with and how they experience God; curious about the systems they live in and wrestle against; curious about what the Holy Spirit might be up to in your town; curious about how your church could shine the light of Christ into the particular shadows of your neighborhood. In other words, we want to teach you to think theologically, which necessarily involves wonder and curiosity.

³ Letter to George Bainton, October 15, 1888, quoted in *Familiar Quotations*, edited by John Bartlett, sixteenth edition, ed. by Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 527.

I warn you now: anytime a student complains in a course evaluation about not having learned anything new in a class, I am inclined to suspect not the professor's skill but the student's curiosity. Theological education is not about equipping you with every right answer, but about training you in the habits and resources for holy curiosity, so that even after we have answered some of your questions together, you keep wondering with God what those answers mean for your people, and how those answers should or should not manifest in your ministry.

And so, to the Church, where you will put your learning and holy curiosity to work in partnership with God. NTS is an expression of the Church, a place where believers from many traditions and backgrounds gather to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Throughout our two millennia of worship and ministry, the Body of Christ has given the work of learning a central place in our mission. The very word by which we name followers of Christ, disciple, means "student." Follower, seeker, disciple, student: these all share the posture of humility and curiosity required for any learning to take place. It is no coincidence that everywhere the gospel has gone in this world, formal education springs up. From the catechesis of the early church, and the world's oldest universities, to the Sunday schools of 18th-century England and the missional training center opened last month by my friend in Nepal, the Church has depended on formal theological education as one of the essential tools of her mission.

This marriage of the academy and the church has never been an easy relationship. The people of God often struggled with the ethics of access to education. We hoarded the freedoms that even the most basic education can give. We used education as a tool of empire and colonization; to maintain the boundaries of class and caste. We made students in our own image, instead of in God's.

More prosaically, we often remain tone-deaf to one another. Those of us enamored with learning keep "banging on" about curiosity, while many folks in the pew just wish they had ten minutes to call their own on a given day. After all, education is the privilege of those with time to rest. But here is one of many ways in which the academy can serve the church, by doing the hard and deep work of reminding us that rest is a privilege the Gospel offers to every child of God.

Jesus wove together these twin pillars of the faith—rest and learning—in our Gospel passage: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30, NIV2011). When he said, "Learn from me...and you will find rest," Christ was giving us a vision that should properly inform any endeavor in theological education. We learn so we can rest more fully *in* our divine Teacher, and we rest so we can learn more fully *from* our divine Teacher. We take up the yoke of rest so we can learn how to meet God in the work God shares with us.

It is no accident that anti-intellectualism flourishes when people are exhausted and fearful. To pursue learning is to admit that we have something to learn, and that admission is just too dangerous sometimes. As long as we imagine human beings to be primarily consumers and workers in a zero-sum economy of power and worth, we will not cultivate either the curiosity, the humility, or the courage to arrange the rest required for learning. There is an abiding relationship between rest and curiosity, between exhaustion and fear.

That is the genius of Sabbath, the mystery of resting even in the yoke. And lest we believe the individualists among us who would counsel us to settle for observing Sabbath each in our own way, I would remind us that the Sabbath commandment we read a few moments ago makes us responsible to carve out rest not only for ourselves, but for our households, for our immigrant neighbors, and even for our animals (Exodus 20:8-11).

This expansive vision of rest makes room for holy curiosity, which leads to learning, which leads to more rest, more curiosity, and more learning. Performed as an act of worship, then, as an expression of the Church particularly suited to hosting curiosity, the theological academy can serve as a voice calling us out of ourselves, out of our fears, into learning, into humility, and thus into the paradox of restful work in Christ's yoke. **Lord, make us faithful in the work you have given us.**