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Gather Wisdom While You May (Psalm 1)

Ellen T. Charry

Dr. Ellen T. Charry is the Margaret W. Harmon Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. She delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on Tuesday, September 1, 2015, at the opening convocation for the 2015-2016 academic year.

W

hy are you here?

Why are *you* here?

Why are you *here*?

Why *are* you here?

For those of you who are first-year students, perhaps a few have not yet had a proper conversation with God about why you are here; that is, what you expect to accomplish in your time with us.

I am among those fortunate members of the faculty who teach first year students from time to time. I will not be teaching many first-year students this year, so here I speak to you as you begin navigating the PTS experi-

ence. The first year here is notoriously challenging and we who never get to graduate know it. Buckle your seatbelt. You may be disappointed that tonight I will not offer you advice on how to negotiate the year, other than to say that the learning environment that you are entering is rigorous. You do well to be organized and disciplined.

Rather, I will address the other side of the coin, and muse aloud on why I think you come to us, beginning with what I think some of you might think are adequate reasons to come here. Perhaps some of you will have identified your own gifts for ministry and come to us to get a credential that will let you preach in communions that guard their gates. Some students are so sure of their gifts that seminary, on top of the gauntlet your judicatories make you run (at least those of you who have judicatories), appears to offer little more than a list of boxes to be ticked off like required courses to be got through.

Are you here because you think that having the letters P-R-I-N-C-E-T-O-N after your name will land you a better position later on? Have you been warned by your mentors back home to beware of what goes on in our classrooms because we teachers are out to undermine your faith with tainted learning against which you should close your ears? Perhaps some of these thoughts blur together so that your goal is simply to get through and get out with as little touching you as possible.

If any of these reasons brought you here, I can only say to you that you have not engaged with God sufficiently. Your reasons are instrumental and fatuous. They see us as no more than a means to an ulterior goal as if there were another place where ministry happens. These are not only false, but self-defeating reasons to spend time with us. I know that you know that. These are not really the reasons you are here.

None of you really thinks that you arrive here having everything you need to know to preach presciently, teach wisely, “tend the sick adequately, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous,”^[1] and enable your waiting community to thrive. You are not that vain or that self-deceived.

Now let us name the real reason that all of us who learn here—perhaps preeminently those of us brazen enough also to teach here—are here. We are all seeking to know, love, and enjoy God and the things of God better, so that the communities in which we live may flourish. Perhaps that bears repeating: The real reason we are all here is to know, love, and enjoy God better, that the communities in which we live may flourish. That is the reason that we are all here. It is to become beautiful.

Although the road we strew before you is rugged, you, not we, are in charge of your education and formation here. Ministry does not begin with your first position after graduation. It happens in every single interaction with every single person that you have every single day. Ministry happens in every e-mail you send, every meal you eat in Mackay, every conversation you have, every gesture you make, every smile you offer, every glance you give, every tweet and Facebook posting that you propel into the world. We are ministering to one another here 24/7.

We are not the university. Their goal is to advance knowledge for its own sake. While we are by no means disinterested in the cultivation of knowledge, our goal is to enable God and the things of God to flourish. You contribute to the flourishing or the languishing of each and every person in this community. Another way of putting this is to say that you are the body of Christ. If you are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, if Christ has carried you up into God’s intention for the flourishing of the cosmos, if you have been gifted with

the Holy Spirit for a sacred life with God, you must pass through the Trinitarian fullness of God every time you touch another person's body, mind, or soul. You have come here to become beautiful in God.

The Psalter opens by painting a word-picture of the beautiful people that the collection of poems wants to enable. Those who heed the poet's advice pick their way carefully among alluring voices that would derail them from the beautiful way of God's path. They eschew cynicism and temptation to an ugly way of life. They discern God's way, considering carefully how to apply God's teaching to their life. "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (Ps 1:3).

Becoming as beautiful as a flourishing tree is more difficult than memorizing dates and terms for the test and writing well thought through papers that we do hope to receive from you. For the ability you really want to gain here is to become beautiful by enhancing your ability to love well. Like you I have heard much glib talk about Christian love. Some of it is self-deceived and hypocritical; some of it is simply empty. Yet the challenge to learn to love well will not be stilled. Paul etched the desire to become beautiful into Christian consciousness even before the word "Christian" was coined: "If I speak in the languages of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol" (1 Cor 13:1). That is, if I preach love but am not willing to pay its price I belittle the Christian calling to beauty. "And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have enough faith to remove mountains, but am without love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). Currently, the Church has far too many people running around calling themselves prophets, boasting of their deep faith, sure that their interpretation of Christianity is the right, the best, the only defensible one.

They are Paul's clanging symbols. He does not simply condemn, however, but tells us how love acts: Love is "patient, kind, not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in what is right" (1 Cor 13:4-6). This is the Christian beauty that you crave.

Now the last word of this sentence of Paul's, *aletheia*, is usually translated as "truth." So the NRSV reads: "Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, *adikia* (un-righteousness), but rejoices in the truth." The juxtaposition of *adikia* with *aletheia* made sense in Paul's day but it does not make sense now because we are working with a different understanding of "truth" than prevailed in his world. Modernity gave us an evidence-based information-driven notion of truth whose opposite is not ugly wrongdoing but quantitative inaccuracy. But for Paul that which is wrongly done, that which is ugly, is false, not that which is contrary to fact or is unquantifiable. In Paul's world what is ugly is wrong; it is not beautiful. There was no value-free notion of truth that is beautiful to which we today hope to approach and that has enabled modern science, for example. Yes, scientific exactness may be elegant but moral beauty is another design altogether.

Reading Paul's sentence as if *aletheia* meant factually correct information without reference to being morally beautiful has led theology into a trap and quite away from Paul's commendation of *agape*. His admonition in this sentence is to avoid *Schadenfreude*; rejoicing at another person's fall into ugliness. If we mistakenly substitute the modern notion of truth for the ancient one, we miss Paul's point entirely. In that case, one's hope becomes to persuade others of the better information that we have, or that we at least believe we have and they lack. We delude ourselves into thinking that this correction is a form of loving them while what we really want is for them to recognize our superior experience, knowledge, or clarity of mind. Or yet further, to become like us, or admit that they are wrong and we are right so that we experience control and feel powerful. But Paul teaches

that love does not insist on its own way, that is, on being right in the information-driven sense or to gain psychological power over others. But love rejoices seeing others being in the truth, that is, seeing them flourish morally. Love is not controlling but beautiful and in that way transforming.

Now, who among us loves as Paul would have us love? He presses the point: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Cor 13:7-8). Here Paul is teaching that growth in love is inexhaustible and therefore imperfectible. Becoming the perfect lover is always out ahead of us. If only my irritation had not gotten the best of me in that moment. If only I had held my tongue. If only I had understood her better. Our ability to become beautiful lovers stretches out before us beckoning us ahead to dwell with Christ in the fullness of God the Father that our joy may be complete.

Paul contrasts love, whose possibilities are inexhaustible, with experiences that will peak and conclude.

Ironically, the first item on Paul's list is prophecy. It is an admonition for our moment when we pretend to ourselves that we might be the first generation to bemoan our inability to "let justice roll down like a mighty stream." Shame on our arrogance. Thanks be to God that Amos got there first.

Paul knows that our knowledge of love is partial, fragmentary. "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only partially; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). Here is the antidote to the certainty about our ability to love adeptly in this life. That should sober but not discourage us. We have, after all, to heed Deuteronomy 6:5, the first great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Or, as the children's dance "the hokey pokey" puts it: put your whole self in. Jesus set it together with Leviticus 19:18 ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord") to give us paired love commandments to engage all of yourself all of the time for becoming beautiful and enabling others to do so as well. Jesus's linking of these two biblical commands was not lost on Paul who gave us the three great theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. And then he socked it to us: "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

What is love? We reach out for it with wide-stretching fingers like trying to catch smoke. We crave knowing that we matter to someone...somehow, perhaps even for no reason. Then, love strikes us from behind, catching up with us unbeknownst.

And what of loving God that Deuteronomy commands and Jesus echoes? Is love of God the model for loving one another, or does earthly, even earthy love fashion our grasping attempts at compliance? We are to love God in response to first being loved as evidenced by the cumulative case for God's love for us: creation itself, salvation from the great flood, liberation from Egypt, rescue at sea's edge, deliverance into the land of promise, and eventually the gift of Jesus Christ. Still, let us press ahead, for love is thicker than gratitude:

But what do I love when I love my God? No material beauty or beauty of temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet harmony of melody and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. And yet, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. That is what I love when I love my God. [2]

Augustine of Hippo knew well the power of earthly and earthy loves whose satiety fades as we reach for them over and again. He regretted, but did not despise them for this shortcoming knowing that they beautify us for that love whose satiety never ceases. Loving God, he teaches, involves more than experiencing gratitude when recalling past gifts. It engages the spiritual senses, each of which is stimulated to grow beautifully. He calls us to enjoy light that does not fade, sonority that never ceases, fragrance that never evaporates, taste that does not become stale, and arousal that is never quenched. Loving God adroitly ushers us into a lighted sonorous, scented, tasty, palpable reality vibrating with life that beautifies us to love one another into flourishing. Augustinian delight (read: heaven) is not calm and static but pulses with energy. Loving God is not a mental exercise done in secret. It does not happen apart from but through our senses as we grow more adept at loving well, seeing others more clearly, listening to them more attentively, feeding them more nourishingly, and touching them more gently. Thus we become beautiful in God.

Contrary to our construals of Christian ethics that identify Christian love as self-sacrificial, the Augustinian vision affirms that our creatureliness carries us to God. Loving others beautifully beautifies us as God's lover. Classical Christian ethics has worked on the zero-sum principle that well-being is a scarce commodity to be parceled out in modest increments with the most valiant among us giving up their share for the sake of others. The Christian life is said to be about giving and giving and when you have no more left to give you give some more, as if self-depletion were advantageous. Yet in truth, we only enhance ourselves when we enhance the well-being of others. Loving well is not a zero-sum game but a win-win proposition, demanding as it may be at times. The better we become at loving the more lovable we become. And the more adeptly we enhance others the happier we become because we are becoming the beautiful person God calls us to be.

Listen now to the words of a great Christian theologian-poet's ode to loving God:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life;
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joys in love. [3]

I do not know the personal experiences that lie behind George Herbert's stunning verse here, but it is clear that earthly and divine love mutually enable one another. Herbert breathes, sees, eats, sings, and touches joy, truth and life exquisitely in love. Loving both God and one another well are a feast that makes us as strong as trees planted at the river's edge that yields sweet fruit and whose leaves do not wither. Such a life radiates light that cannot be extinguished, joy that cannot be lost and pleasure that makes us whole.

So, if you have not yet had a serious conversation with yourself about why you are here, this is an invitation. Consider a serious conversation with God about the beautiful person you are to become in God by virtue of your baptism into God's design for the flourishing of the cosmos. Remember: You are the body of Christ.

[1] *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 134.

[2] Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.8.

[3] George Herbert, "The Call," in *The Temple: The Poetry of George Herbert* (ed. Henry Carrigan; Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 158.