

"SCRIBES TRAINED FOR THE KINGDOM"

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The close of midterm week may not be the ideal time to hear a sermon on academic excellence. You have perhaps had this year's first wave of academic stress preparing for exams, investing hours in the attempt to master the content of the first six weeks of classes. You may be concerned enough about the grades you will be seeing next week, without wanting to hear terms like "excellence," which may call to mind the pressure to achieve certain "excellent" scores on tests and papers. If this sermon fell last Friday, perhaps it could have been a pep talk to get you through a hard weekend of studying. Now that midterms are pretty much over, it may seem like something of a post-mortem.

But timing is not the only obstacle to hearing a message about this seminary's fourth core value. It is, frankly, an ideal quite unlike the other three. Spiritual formation, Scripture, Community -- these are the things that make Christians feel warm inside, calling to mind gatherings of sisters and brothers sharing their spiritual journeys, meeting around the sacred texts to hear a word from the Lord of God, supporting one another in need, praying for one another. Those core values speak to the very core of our discipleship, and we all nod in affirmation as the virtues of being transformed into Christ-likeness, of filling our daily lives with Scripture, and of building up the household of God are extolled from this pulpit.

And now we come to reflect on academic excellence, the fourth core value, the apple among the oranges. It of course seems fitting that a seminary -- an institution of higher education -- should hold up academic excellence as an ideal, but how is this value like the other three? More to the point, isn't there a certain ambiguity about academic excellence as a value at all, since the pursuit of academic excellence holds both great promises and great dangers? Indeed, the other three core values themselves occasionally speak against, or are jeopardized by, things academic. Scripture does not speak uniformly about the value of academics: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1); "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not upon your own understanding" (Prov. 3:14); "In much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (Eccl. 1:18). Community can be

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disrupted over matters of "knowledge," from the use of "spiritual knowledge" in Corinth to separate the "weak" from the "strong" to the divisions which plague the church today. Great voices of spiritual formation, like Thomas à Kempis, remind us that "learned discourse about the Trinity is worthless if I lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity," and that "at the Day of Judgement, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done."

And what about the empowering of the Holy Spirit? We read about the twelve disciples astounding the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, despite the fact they were "uneducated," and about Jesus astonishing the Jewish leaders: "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (John 7:15), and perhaps think, "Why can't God do that for me as well? Why do I have to put myself through the rigors of seminary training, when God could just give me 'words of knowledge' and save me the trouble?"

The testimony of Scripture, however, is not all negative. Ezra, "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses," for example, enjoys God's favor "for Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD and to do it" (Ezra 7:9-10). The proverbs of Israel frequently point us to the value of learning: "The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge" (15:14); "a fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion" (18:2); "an intelligent mind acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge" (18:15); "apply your mind to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge" (23:12); and finally, "buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding" (Prov 23:23). Ben Sira adds that the pursuit of learning is a natural result of the way God made us: "discretion and tongue and eyes, ears and a mind for thinking God gave them" (18:17). Finally, it is Jesus himself who insists that the great commandment, that we "love God with all our hearts and all our soul," is not fulfilled until we also love God "with all our mind" (Mt 22:37). Community can be built up by those who have knowledge, for example those who have learned conflict resolution, or have gained the skills required to lead individual members of community to wholeness, or possess a sufficiently sound knowledge of the faith to instruct new disciples. And even Thomas à Kempis, the voice of spiritual formation, shows his erudition on every page, as he weaves references to Scripture, the Apocrypha, Augustine, and even Aristotle and Seneca into his handbook on becoming like Christ.

Where, then, does "academic excellence" fit among the other three core values of this seminary? It is not presented as the equal of the first three values, but as their servant, and as long as it retains its role as servant, those who pursue it will use knowledge rightly in the service of God rather than self. The administration and faculty of this seminary place "academic excellence" among the other core values as a constant reminder of both the benefits of

learning and the purpose for learning. Things brings me to the text which, after much searching, I decided best sums up "academic excellence" as an ideal in this community:

Jesus asked the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52).

This saying closes a chapter in which Jesus has taught many of the familiar parables -- the parable of the sower, the parable of the weeds and the wheat, and others. He likens the disciples to "scribes trained for the kingdom," who are learning from Jesus the correct way of interpreting and applying Torah for the new people of God. Scribes were experts in the Law of Moses and in the wisdom traditions of Israel. They did not enjoy honor by virtue of their office, like priests or Levites, but by virtue of their learning and the benefits their learning could bring to the people of their community who sought to walk faithfully in God's covenant and walk wisely in the world. Their authority came from their commitment to be the best and most reliable interpreters of Torah possible.

Jesus' choice of the image of the scribe for those entrusted with caring for his church lays upon us a burden, because at once it implies careful study. Ben Sira, who was himself a scribe in Jerusalem 200 years before Jesus, said of this vocation:

"those who devote themselves to the study of the law of the Most High will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, and will be concerned with prophecies; they will preserve the conversation of notable people and penetrate the subtleties of parables; they will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and be at home with the obscurities of parables. They will set their hearts to rise early to seek the Lord who made them, and will make supplication before the Most High; If the great Lord is willing, they will be filled with the spirit of understanding; they will pour forth words of wisdom and give thanks to the Lord in prayer (39:1-6).

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We know something about the curriculum of scribes in the first century AD. The scribe-in-training had to take hermeneutics. There were rules of exegesis among the great schools of Jerusalem, and the scribe had to master these rules so as to be equipped to apply a limited amount of divine instruction (the Torah) to an unlimited number of situations in everyday life. The scribe also had to take Old Testament 1 and Old Testament 2, mastering Bible content -- in the original language -- as well as the history of interpretation. The scribe-in-training had at least to pass homiletics, that is, to know how to teach the right interpretation of the law to the people. But Ben Sira's passage also gives us an important insight into the "academic excellence" of the scribe. It came from a combination of commitment to study and diligence in prayer to the God who gives understanding. Neither one works without the other.

This seminary is committed to producing "scribes trained for the kingdom." We seek, of course, to shape good Christians -- hence the commitment to Scripture, Spiritual Formation, and Community -- but we also seek to form shapers of good Christians -- leaders who will go out into their local communities and be reliable authorities in connecting God's Word to everyday life, counselors who will bind up the brokenhearted using all the knowledge of the human personality and all the skills of healing available, educators who will model sound theological reflection and sound ethical response to the needs of the world. 1 Timothy 1:6-7 warns of the danger to the church of those who presume "to be teachers of the Law" without devoting themselves to the careful study of the Law. Hence to the first three core values, essential for all followers of Christ, we add "Academic Excellence," essential for those entrusted with the care of other followers of Christ.

Perhaps we can consider what "academic excellence" means for those who are "scribes being trained for the kingdom," particularly in light of what Scripture and other formative voices in the church have had to say about knowledge and learning. Academic Excellence is not held out as a core value as a way of promoting obsessive concern about grades. Academic excellence is not about grades or test scores, nor is it about judging our own worth on the basis of grades. Paul has much to say about this topic: our worth comes from the price Jesus paid on our behalf, namely his own life. Academic Excellence is not about worshipping "head-knowledge" for its own sake, forgetting the call of God to each of us to participate in the building up of God's church. Those who disconnect learning from calling soon find that "much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl. 12:11). Academic Excellence is not about feeding intellectual pride, for as soon as we lose our humility -- as soon as we think we know what we need to know and stop seeking out other conversation

partners, other teachers to refine our thinking -- we lose academic excellence.

Academic Excellence is about loving learning. The proverbs of Israel, and the later wisdom traditions, return again and again to the importance of loving the quest for knowledge, for understanding, for that wisdom which would make the fulfillment of our God-given work more fruitful. It is therefore less about the grade you get and more about your approach to the assignment. It is not about including a certain number of sources, but about loving the conversation of the learned found in those sources, and deriving from their discussions and even their arguments benefit for the work to which God has called you. Academic Excellence means embracing the challenge to equip ourselves for the work to which God has invited us, examining our own thinking and testing our own "knowledge" against the larger conversations which go on between devotees of each area of study across the curriculum.

This dedication to the larger conversation is perhaps at the heart of Academic Excellence. Proverbs points us continually to the conversation of the wise as the path to safety and understanding: "Those who trust in their own wits are fools, but those who walk in wisdom come through safely" (28:20); "the way of a fool is right in her own eyes, but a wise woman listens to instruction" (12:15). "Walking in wisdom" means listening to the cumulative learning of centuries of sages, and the curriculum of this institution is in many ways an expansion of that principle. We interpret Scripture better for having listened to the conversations of exegetes long dead and still living, learning about the angles of reading that each has found fruitful. We know God better for having listened to the conversation of biblical and systematic theologians throughout the history of the church. We communicate the word better for having listened to the advice, and having observed the models, of seasoned preachers. We enter counseling situations with greater awareness and listen to clients with greater sensitivity for having heard the wisdom of physicians of the psyche. We are better equipped to lead those under our care along the road to spiritual maturity for having listened to the conversation of spiritual directors across the centuries.

Academic Excellence requires humility. The conversation of scholars will frequently challenge "knowledge" that we have held dear. Do we defend our turf, or do we allow for the possibility that our turf may require replanting? Do we enter the conversation holding up the refinement of our grasp of the truth as the goal, or holding up the defense of our grasp of the truth as the goal? If we are to proceed in our ministries with excellence, we must always prefer learning to being proven right. Indeed, we need humility even to take on the yoke of instruction, to admit that there is more we need to learn in order to be the ablest ministers that we can be. Academic Excellence

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involves the willingness to feel dense and confused as we try to learn a new language, to feel uncomfortable as we learn new techniques of reading familiar texts, to feel again like schoolchildren even when we are the parents of schoolchildren. Intellectual pride -- the insistence that we know enough, the avoidance of learning situations which remind us that we do not know all -- is the enemy of academic excellence.

Finally, Academic Excellence is about caring enough for our ministry -- indeed, caring enough about the values of Community, Spiritual Formation, and Scripture -- that we commit ourselves to exercising all diligence to learn about how to perform that ministry for God to the best of our ability. It is finally about loving God with all our mind, exercising that faculty entrusted to us fully for the service of God. It is not an ideal which is achieved with the completion of your degree here. If you go on for advanced degrees, you will still not fulfill it. Only as you continue to love learning, to refine your thinking and practice in light of the larger conversation of sages, to grow in the skills and areas of knowledge which make you a more profitable servant, do you fulfill this ideal. If your life does not outlast your pursuit of learning, you fulfill this ideal best.