

“My Last Lecture”

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First of all, I want to thank Tom for the opportunity to deliver this lecture, and secondly but especially, I want to thank him for reproducing for the poster that announced this lecture the picture of me sitting on a camel. The picture speaks of two of my passions, the Ancient Near East--the picture was taken in Egypt--and non-human creation represented by that magnificent camel. Now, let me begin.

Every year I read at least 60 autobiographies of pre-medical students. Most of them begin with an assertion that they did not realize how difficult a task the writing assignment would be—until they actually began. I felt the same way about this presentation. It was months ago that Tom asked me to give this lecture and I have been thinking about it on and off ever since, but actually sitting down to write was another matter. Many of the pre-med students tell us when they first became interested in medicine—a grandparent’s sickness, a trip to the ER with a sports injury, a wonderful science teacher who brought biology to life, and because of whom, ever since, they have been fascinated with the workings of the human body. I too trace my wanting to be a teacher to childhood, to teachers, most of whom I liked, and to the worlds they opened to me. I could read on my own, but if I didn’t understand what I was reading, where was I to turn? On the other hand, if everyone was **doing the same reading**, and we could **ask questions and discuss**, and have the material explained to us, I would learn a great deal more. And that’s what teachers did: they opened the world so that I could better understand it. English and History and Science and Art; the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn, and these people who knew the subject, who cared about it, who seemed excited that I was excited, they were **important role models** for me and why I wanted to become a teacher. I wanted to be able to unlock for others what I understood, to get them

excited about it, or at least to appreciate it. I was fortunate enough to have good teachers in grammar school and superb teachers in high school. I didn't care about grades. I got good grades but I didn't always get A's. My parents didn't care what grades we got; they only cared that we had **tried to do our best**. College prepared me to be a teacher; I majored in Latin and Theology and minored in Greek and Secondary Education. I had had four years of Latin in high school but in college I fell in love with Greek. *gnothi seauton*, "know thyself," counseled Socrates, and I listened. In fact, I came to believe that a major goal of college: to learn who you are, and what your strengths and weakness are, to make friends with yourself as well as with others, to **create your own expectations and work to meet them**, rather than merely conforming to the expectations of others and never dealing with whether or not they are truly your own.

Another of Socrates' wise sayings that I took to heart was that "an unexamined life is not worth living." It's not enough to ask "what?" and "why?" about the world, as important as that is, one must ask those same questions about oneself. What do I love? What do I believe—really? Do I love this more than that? Why did I act that way? Why did I say that? Why do I feel this way? Socrates was right that we must examine our motives and strive to be totally honest with ourselves. The apostle Paul, struggling with sin in his own life, confessed, "I do not understand my own actions. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Paul, reflecting on his own behavior, here admits to his inconsistencies and contradictions; his actions do not always conform to his values. It is important not to deceive ourselves, to be honest about what we value and how we behave, and when and why we are inconsistent. I think the time to come to grips with who we are and to

develop habits to ensure that we will continue to examine our lives is in college. At least it was for me. Ignatius of Loyola considered the examination of one's life and behavior so important that he counseled the Jesuits to take each day, twice a day even, to examine themselves. **What really do I desire?**

To be honest, in college, though I had courses in Aristotle, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Thucydides and others, it was especially those two phrases, "know thyself" and "an unexamined life is not worth living" that changed my life. I sometimes wonder, for how many Holy Cross students, will the phrase, "men and women for others" have the same lasting, reflective effect.

I graduated from college in June and began teaching in September. My dream was coming true. I was following in the footsteps of important role models whom I loved. I spent six years teaching Latin and Religion to first and second year high school students. But I wanted **to learn more** in order to be able to **teach better** and so I went back to school. Of all the worlds of knowing and all the things I might have studied, I came to specialize in the Old Testament. Because of my faith and my background in classical languages and theology--I had picked up Hebrew along the way--Scripture seemed a natural choice. I assumed that the Scriptures are sacred, that they are inspired and contain revelation, so I set out to learn about them as much as I could—with energy and enthusiasm, faith seeking understanding. I have never regretted that decision.

Sometimes my colleagues wonder how I could possibly teach an Introduction to the Old Testament course twice each semester, two semesters a year, for about twenty-five years. It must be so boring; either that or you're retarded. Well, it's not boring. It's literature filled with life. It contains the wisdom of an ancient people who tried to put

into words not only their faith but their **experience of their God and their constant struggle to be faithful to that God** amidst people who did not share their beliefs, and who believed in other gods. They struggled **to discern how to do what was right for their times, and to come to grips with their failures, to regret, and to repent.** Each time I teach these texts, I learn. Each class is different because the students are different and their questions are different, but also because reading the texts against our own times, I always see new and valuable connections. The biblical story is **about relationships, primarily about the relationship of God to His people, and the people's relationship to their God and to one another.**

The opportunity to deliver a last lecture reminded me of three close friends: Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. Each one of them also delivers a farewell speech. Each recalls the past, how God had blessed them, and with knowledge gleaned from that past, they speak to their audience's present. Moses tells the people that he is one hundred twenty years old and that he is no longer able to get about. He then reminisces about God's gifts to Israel of deliverance from slavery and of the covenant at Sinai, about their being God's people and God being their God. He predicts that they will reject God once they feel secure in the land; he warns that they will think they don't need God anymore. Joshua, old and well advanced in years, reminds the people of all that the Lord their God has done on their behalf. He then counsels them to be conscientious about observing all the teachings of Moses. His exhortation to faithfulness is based on all the gifts that the people have already received. Finally, Samuel, old and gray, recalls how he has always acted in the people's best interest, and then he assures them that, despite their sin of wanting a king other than God, God will nevertheless continue to be faithful to them. As

I prepared this lecture, I took comfort in these characters. Looking to the past, each was grateful for what he and their people had received, and I am grateful. Their insight into the future was realistic in so far as the people, **once things were going well**, would forget their dependence on God. Nevertheless, **despite their betrayal** of their covenant partner, **God would not forget them; He would continue his faithfulness.**

When I teach Genesis, students read about a people's belief that a powerful God cared, a God who brought human beings and all of creation into existence; the people **experienced and articulated** that creation is "good," and that they themselves are "very good." They **experienced and articulated** that the Creator God used power on their behalf: to open the wombs of barren women, to promise the people a land in which they would survive and even thrive, and to defend them against their enemies. Abraham, called into a relationship with God, is willing to take **big risks**. On God's directive he leaves his homeland to go to an unknown place, a place God would show him; the future is unknown, but he trusts the God who calls him. On God's directive, he is even willing to sacrifice his son. Is this a story that depicts absolute trust in the Person with whom Abraham is in relationship, trust beyond rational understanding? Is it a story that shows that the God of the people who become Israel does not require human sacrifice like the other peoples' gods, a story therefore of the kindness and compassion of their divine relationship partner?

But the modern or post-modern student may ask, "**Is there a God?**" I used to tell students that if they were trying to discover for themselves the answer to that question, a legitimate endeavor to be sure, Old Testament might not be the best course for them. For the ancient peoples there was no question about the existence of God; the issue, rather,

was to distinguish among gods, who and how many to worship. A few years ago, I was corrected by a student who told me that I should not discourage skeptics from the course; the texts had prompted him to question his facile non-belief.

And what about the creationists and evolutionists today? Who knew about evolution when these texts were written? Can one believe in a Creator God and a scientific process? What is hermeneutics? What does it mean for believers to say that these texts are inspired, that they contains revelation? Does it mean that all the texts are to be taken literally, with a conviction that everything contained in them is factually true? In any given year, students can do research on the current state of the question because, as you know, these questions are alive and well in our own courts at this very time.

But there is so much more. That is only an appetizer of the first of forty-six books. The Pentateuch contains the “teaching”--a more accurate translation of the Hebrew word *torah* than law. If God claims a people and they claim God, in a deeply personal and committed relationship known as the covenant, how is this relationship expressed? God creates, and saves, and sustains, and protects...and what can the people do in return? Well, they can behave in *godly* ways. And what does this mean? First and foremost, it means that they take God, their covenant partner, seriously, that they organize their lives around this Divine Person. It means that they “make time” to worship this God, and that they offer back to this God the very best of the gifts He has given to them, thereby acknowledging that everything they have He has given to them. It means also that they treat God’s people justly. But what does it mean to treat other people justly? It means they respect one another, especially their parents, the elders; that they do not murder each other, that they do not steal what belongs to somebody else,

whether that be another man's wife or any of his property; that they do not even desire to take for themselves what doesn't belong to them, which suggests that they be satisfied with what they have, grateful for what they have received, and finally, that they tell the truth. Is it any wonder that these guidelines for behavior have withstood the test of time, that they are, to this day or at least until very recently, posted outside many courthouses in this country? Does not adherence to these teachings provide for fairness and help to secure peace?

Are they not some of the behaviors asked of Holy Cross students today? What does it mean to treat other people justly? To respect other people, and not to deprive anyone of what belongs to them--their belongings which constitutes theft, or their ideas which constitutes plagiarism? How does treating other people justly translate into attitudes and behaviors? Is this why Holy Cross has Allies and ABiGaLes and a "Hate, not Here," campaign. Is acting justly related to how we consume the world's natural resources—with implications for peoples in other parts of the world as well as for future generations? Is it related to Holy Cross' participation in the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment?

But there is so much more. The behaviors, worshipping God and treating other people justly, are not independent of the covenant relationship. Rather, they are expressions of faithfulness to that divine-human relationship. The Jesuit assertion, "the service of faith and the promotion of justice," a phrase that fittingly appears in Holy Cross' Mission Statement and on an opening page of the academic catalog, articulates the essential connection between taking God seriously and acting justly.

The Israelite people, who did not believe in life after death, tried to figure out, logically, what God's justice toward them would consist of; they assumed that being faithful to God, doing good actions, would yield blessings, while wrongdoing, equated with being unfaithful to God, would yield adverse consequences, curses. The narratives contained in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings, and others, detail how behaving in ways compatible with their identity as God's people enhances their well being while rejecting their covenant partner and betraying their identity as God's people inevitably leads to disaster. What does it mean that God saw to it that, when the people listened to their godly leaders, they thrived? And when the people turned away from their God to other gods, they fared badly, but when they petitioned their God for relief from their distress, God was compassionate toward them and delivered them. This God continued to become known through acts of caring on behalf of his covenant people. What does it mean that God chose Saul, but that Saul, when he disobeyed God, made excuses and then lost the kingship? And that David, who like Saul also sinned, but who in contrast to Saul acknowledged his sin and repented, came to have a dynasty? What does it do to any relationship when one of the parties is unfaithful? Is it important to acknowledge your wrongdoing and say you're sorry? Will the other forgive? Does love mean "never having to say you're sorry," as the novel, "Love Story" would have us believe, or does it mean being able to say you're sorry, and to mean it and, when love is reciprocal, to be forgiven?

The literature of Amos, Hosea, and other prophets, the social critics of ancient Israel and Judah, is very intense; the prophets' **experience of God** demanded that they speak out. Hosea cut to the heart of the matter: ungodly behaviors become possible

when the people become prostitutes and idolaters, in other words, when they no longer take their God seriously, when they put other gods before their covenant partner, the One who created and saved and sustains and delivers them. Ungodly behaviors become possible when the people become indifferent to what had been an intimate relationship with God, when that relationship becomes casual or superficial. Knowing God's concern for justice, for the poor, Amos denounced attitudes and behaviors of complacency and greed. But condemnation was not these prophets' primary intent; rather, their intention was transformation. Filled with God's passion, they desperately wanted, not to reject the people, but to persuade the people to change. How could they use language to make the people realize the absolute insanity of their behavior? Micah counseled: "what the Lord requires of you is to act justly, to love covenant faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Israel's prophets before the exile had been their social conscience. They condemned evil behaviors; they warned of their consequences. But as long as things are going okay, who needs the prophets? Had not Moses' farewell speech intimated as much? **Who—what person, what people--wants to be told that what they're doing, which seems to be yielding success, a better quality of life, wealth even, is wrong?** And so the text records that the people **failed to be honest with themselves**, to truly **examine their lives**; they turned a deaf ear...

When Israel falls to Assyria, and Judah to Babylon, any good historian will tell you that two smaller countries succumbed to larger empires. Who would doubt the truth of that statement? But for Israel, **their experience and the articulation of their experience** was that they had been unfaithful to their God, that their continued betrayal

of their relationship with their God, their continued practice of polytheism, their continued political compromises, and their neglect of their responsibility to act justly toward one another, especially toward the most vulnerable of their society, was responsible for their demise. For Israel, not taking their Creator God seriously was the real cause of their defeat. **What good can come, ultimately, from doing evil?**

The ancient Israelites who believed that this God created everything, also believed that this God could, and would, and did, forgive them—**big time. This is a relationship that doesn't fall apart in the face of unfaithfulness.** Even in exile, after the sinfulness that they believed had led to the exile, **the people do not experience and do not articulate that their God has abandoned them.**

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I continue my faithfulness to you,” assures God through Jeremiah. “Be comforted, be comforted, my people, says your God,” “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” declares Isaiah. **Israel's God forgives; their God restores; there is punishment, to be sure, but educative punishment, not ultimate rejection. What kind of role modeling is this of fidelity to a relationship? of love that forgives?**

The books of the Old Testament that address the Jews' life after 539 B.C.E. are filled with struggle, some with struggle to be faithful to God, but some also with the struggle to hold themselves together as a people. Ezra and Nehemiah want the people to act out behaviors that will clearly separate the Jews from other peoples, that will exclude foreigners; the books of Ruth and Jonah, on the other hand, point out that David's great grandmother was from the hated Moabites; and while God's prophet Jonah fled from the presence of God, the despised Assyrians heard the word of the prophet and repented.

These narratives teach that **it's not so easy to tell who the good guys are. It's not so wise to facilely judge according to one's own categories and assumptions who belongs and who doesn't, who is right and who isn't. How open are we to inter-religious dialogue?** How open are we to realizing that even Muslim fundamentalists and members of al Qaeda are created and loved by God?

And then there's the Psalms. **If one does believe in God, if that relationship is there, as it was for the people of ancient Israel, what does it mean to pray? Is it giving voice, as Psalm 41 does, to the people's longing for God's presence and for an ever deepening relationship with God?** "Like a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God; when shall I come and seen the face of God?" **Is prayer giving voice, to name and praise and celebrate, all the good things the people have experienced that their covenant partner has done and the relationship that they can count on?** "The Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; the Lord is faithful forever. The Lord sets prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; he watches over strangers, and upholds the fatherless and the widow." "How wonderful are your works, O Lord!" **Or is prayer giving voice to the people's ability to trust their covenant partner with the shadow, with admitting the truth that they are not always faithful, knowing that God knows, and loves them anyway?** The psalmist entreats, "According to your abundant mercy, blot out all my transgressions." **Is prayer giving voice to their desire to say thank you because they are so grateful to this person, this God, this friend:** "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for his mercy endures forever." "How can I repay the Lord for His goodness to me"? **and is prayer giving voice to the**

people’s desire to apologize for the least thing that would offend, “Wash me thoroughly from iniquity and cleanse me from my sin,” **and having the humility to ask for help?** “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress.” “Take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.” **If the ancient peoples had done all the talking and hadn’t listened and had God not somehow responded to their prayer, would they have continued to talk? But they did hear back; they did experience God: God speaks in many ways, including through the psalmist,** “Those who love me [which they heard as themselves because they did love God] I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.” And the people of Israel, the Jews, continued the conversation, just as people of faith do today.

When I teach Proverbs, I try to get students to reflect on their own education. Most children in ancient Israel began to work early, learning from their elders how to do the things that would enable their survival—hunting and gathering, farming and herding. But education was more than that. It was teaching “bits and pieces” of the elders’ wisdom, perhaps around the campfire at night. Perhaps that is what this talk is about, passing on pieces of knowledge and wisdom garnered from years of lived experience. And so, true now as it was then, “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly hold it back;” (this one, as some of my colleagues know, I still haven’t learned too well); “The lazy person does not plough in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found.” (the student who doesn’t study--no one here of course—and then does not learn). “The purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them

out” (a description of human intelligence and what our minds can accomplish); “The righteous walk in integrity—happy the children who follow them” (an assertion of the value of integrity and its benefit); “There is gold, and abundance of costly stones, but the lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel” (knowledge is as valuable as material wealth.) “Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterward the mouth will be full of gravel.” (Deception will not issue in anything worthwhile.) Though not a perfect analogy, this last proverb reminded me of Ignatius’ experience of reading about the lives of the saints that issued in a sweetness that endured in his thoughts afterwards, and by contrast, his reading of the romance novels of his day, which though enjoyable at the time of his reading, eventually led to a sour aftertaste.

When the author of the book of Ecclesiastes proclaims, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” is he the ultimate pessimist, or is he cautioning that **we can take ourselves too seriously**, and when he asserts that a wise person knows that there is a season for everything, and a time for every purpose under heaven..,” is he himself being wise in reflecting that we each, alone and together, will know both suffering and joy in our lives, both life and death, and that “this, whatever is now, is not lasting.” **He counsels us to live, appreciatively, in the present.**

And is the book of Job just about innocent suffering, or is it about a deep personal relationship with the God in whom he believes, a relationship that allows Job to trust God, because of what he has already received, even though Job does not understand why he has suddenly lost life’s material blessings--progeny, prosperity and health. Job’s relationship with God allows him to question God, but Job does not reject God or their relationship. God’s reply to Job’s questions enables him to be at peace with

understanding that he does not understand. Is the book of Job about the kind of relationship that is grateful, and trusts, and asks, and accepts the Other's answer? Is it about a relationship that does not demand that the Other meet one's own expectations? Is it about a relationship in which honest conversation leads to a deeper relationship and reverence, a greater intimacy?

These texts have been in existence for some twenty-five hundred years. During that time, they have meant different things to different peoples. When they were produced and where they were produced affects how they were produced. They were written by men for men. And yet over time they have been read inclusive of women.

What was that ancient world like? What would it have been like to live in that world, to experience these texts in the way that their authors and their first audiences did? The biblical texts, produced at a specific time in history, also are classics; they are relevant to their own time and to our time and to all time. In a Jewish-Christian culture in the West, as time passed, they were re-interpreted for new times and new situations, and they produced new insights. These re-interpretations took the form of commentaries, like those of Origen on Jeremiah and Augustine on Genesis; of literature, like Milton's "Paradise Lost" and "Samson Agonistes"; of art, like Michelangelo's sculptures of Moses and David, like the stained glass depicting Old Testament prophets and kings found in the windows of the Canterbury Cathedral, and like Michelangelo's paintings of God creating man and of the prophets found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; and, finally, of music, like Handel's "Israel in Egypt," his "Samson," and his "Messiah"?

And even more recently, the biblical texts have been re-interpreted as stories for our time, for example, by Archibald MacLeish in his updated version of Job in *J.B.*, by

Don Keller in his imaginative re-telling of King David's story in the novel, *God Knows*, by Margaret Atwood and Anita Diamant in their feminist reconstructions of Genesis in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Red Tent*, to name only a few. They have also been re-interpreted in music, by Andrew Lloyd Webber in his "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" and even by Bill Clark in his versions of "David's Lament," "Lament for Absalom," and Psalm 42. Nor can we omit the important medium of film, the most famous perhaps, the re-telling of the Exodus story in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments." . . .

What constitutes fidelity today? It would seem for both the Jewish and Christian believers who revere these texts, that taking God seriously is as important today as it was when the texts were first produced. But what constitutes taking God seriously today? How is a commitment to taking God seriously to be incarnated? Are we, too, like those who produced these texts, meant to take time, alone and together, to pray, to speak and listen to God and nurture through honest conversation our covenant relationship, to long to see the face of God? The Holy Cross Mission Statement says explicitly that the College enables all who want to do so to form an active worshipping community.

And what constitutes acting justly toward one another? The Core Human Questions Cluster of Montserrat puts the question this way, "How then shall we live? The College's Mission Statement asks, "What is the moral character of learning and teaching?" "What are our obligations to one another?" and, echoing the Old Testament prophets challenges, "What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless?"

These questions led my own continued learning and scholarship in the direction of power, women, and ecology. If the world which produced the texts of the Old Testament was patriarchal and hierarchal, should it always be thus? Does acting justly today mean understanding women as men's equals? and what does that mean? Should women aspire to the greater power that men have in a patriarchal society, or should both men and women together, as equals, deeply conscious of their interdependence with all of creation, take God seriously, humbly acknowledging the God who creates and sustains all. Christians believe that Jesus, not clinging to power but letting it go, became a servant.

And who are today's poor and powerless to whom we have a special responsibility? And what is that responsibility? Are they the people of the developing world? Are they those who have no advocates, no voice, no one to speak for them? **Is not the environment a creation that cannot speak for itself?** What about future generations? The people who produced the Old Testament surely possessed a much greater consciousness of their dependence on the natural world than we in our technological society seem to have.

What is the common good? We live in a society very conscious of the individual in contrast to the consciousness of the people of Israel who experienced themselves as part of a people in a relationship of interdependence with one another, with all of creation, and with their God. Who are the bad guys? Are they really who we think they are, or are the ones we think are the bad guys really the good guys? And are the good guys really the bad guys, or at least not so good? What are the assumptions we have that prevent me and us from learning beyond our expectations? What does it mean to always be willing to move out of our comfort zone, **to take big risks**, as Abraham did?

And so why am I telling you all this as my last lecture? You didn't need a crash course in the Old Testament. It is because I wanted to impress on the students among you **the importance of getting to know yourself, and what, and who you love, to listen to what you are passionate about, and to follow your dream.** I have tried to do that in my own life and to help students do the same; I have not always tried hard enough and I have not always succeeded, but I have spent the time that is my life in that endeavor. Each day when I come to class I wrestle along with the students with **fundamental religious and human questions.** Though I personally believe in the God whose story begins in the Old Testament, who that God is, is as much a question as an easy answer, a journey of discovery and ever deepening and more intimate relationship. What does it mean for an individual and a people to be in relationship? Relationships are never static.

If I were not continuing to wrestle with these questions, if I were not continuing to learn and to love what I am learning, I could not continue to teach. These texts, you students, my colleagues and my friends continue to be my teachers. Pursue your dreams. Thank you.