
Hear, Read, Mark, Learn, and Inwardly Digest Them
Address at the Annual Fall Convocation
North Park Theological Seminary
August 26, 2007



David L. Parkyn, President

The title for my address is taken from a favorite collect in the Book of Common Prayer. It is assigned for the second to last Sunday of the liturgical year so in reading it today I'm taking it out of its traditional context. Nonetheless, it is worth considering at the beginning of a year of theological study. The collect reads as follows:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

You've gathered to study, specifically to engage in the study of Scripture, theology, and ministry. This collect, then, provides good guidance for this year in your life. You must take the holy Scriptures and hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.

This is quite obvious, I would think. Then again, perhaps not. Where do we find these holy Scriptures? Are they limited to the pages between leather bindings? And once found, what does it mean to "inwardly digest" them, especially without incurring a bad case of indigestion?

Let's begin with a story from my childhood.

I was a young boy, living in a very small, remote village in the country of Guatemala, where my parents were doing their best to teach what it means to be a Christian.

Two men visited our home one day. They were from a very small gathering of Christians who lived about two day's journey by foot over the Cuchumatane Mountains. They had come seeking Dad's advice about several concerns raised in the life of their Christian gathering. They asked questions about what Christians believe and how they should live. They wondered what words in their language might best be used to express certain elements of faith. Since Sunday was the only market day in these mountains they wondered how best to fit in time for worship.

This small group of Christians spoke only the Ixil language, an indigenous dialect of Maya heritage. At the time, only a few sample verses of the Gospel of Mark had been translated into their language. Consequently, these Christians had no means to hear God's Word, nor to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. But Dad spoke both Spanish and English, and they thought that since Scripture was available in these languages he could read it, tell them what it said, and they in turn could take the message back to their family of believers.

That evening Dad sat down to write a brief letter to this small Ixil parish. In it he summarized what he had talked about with these two men. In the morning, they received his letter and ventured out on their return journey home.

A year passed and I joined Dad on a trip which took us across the mountains to visit with these two men and their families. After dinner we gathered in their home to worship. And to our great surprise, when one of the leaders asked a young girl in the room to read from Scripture she picked up a few crumpled pieces of paper and read from my Dad's letter.

Your seminary professors will teach you that my Dad's letter was not Scripture. By ancient tradition, the canon is closed – this was decided long ago in the gathering of church councils. The collect I read a few minutes ago also notes that God “caused all holy Scriptures to be written” – it is something which happened in the past, but does not happen any longer.

But these young Christians gathered in very small and distant homes, with meager belongings and certainly no formal education, disagree with your professors. Since they had no Scripture to read in their worship gatherings, and since they believed Dad had written the letter based on what he believed Scripture teaches, they received his letter and read his letter as divine Scripture. Not only this, but several neighboring groups of Christian believers had acquired hand-made copies of the letter and used it in their worship as well. God's word had been written and was now read in these churches.

You know the writers of the Christian Scriptures – St. Paul, St. John, Saints, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is also Saint Fred, writer of the epistle to the saints gathered in the Cuchumatane Mountains.

I know my Dad well enough to be sure that he never set out in life to write scripture. The reading of this letter in our worship came as a shocking surprise to him. But I suspect that Saints Paul, John, Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not set out in life to write holy scripture either. In fact, if any of these saints, from Fred to Paul, had been told as young seminarians that one day they would write scripture they would have laughed – just as Sarah laughed when told she would become pregnant in her advanced age.

Surprise and laughter. These may well be the two key elements in theological education. Let surprise and laughter be staples in your faith, and certainly in your study at North Park. If you're not surprised each day you're in seminary, I dare say you're not learning much, at least not much about faith, and life, and all things divine.

Anne Lamott writes that "laughter is carbonated holiness." I think she is on to something. Perhaps we should create a new criterion for evaluating seminary faculty. Do they make us laugh? Do they surprise us?

What is equally intriguing, however, is what prompted Scripture to be written – both by Saint Fred and Saint Paul. Both Fred and Paul were asked questions which floated out of life and they were expected to give a faith-based response. This too is our task – today as students and tomorrow in our various vocations – to look at the hard edges of reality, and ask our faith to make sense of them.

Consider, for example, what philosophers and theologians call theodicy – the problem of evil and the justice of God. If God is good, as we believe God is, then why is there so much suffering and hurt, so much evil, so much pain, so much violence, even among the Christian faithful?

The Gospel of Matthew includes that interesting passage where the faithful are praised for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. This is a grand passage, yet it paints only a partial picture.

Certainly we are responsible to respond to the need before us. But we also must ask why the need is there in the first place. Why are people hungry or thirsty, sick or naked? I thought we were cared for, that our lives were watched over, by a good and loving God. How then are people hungry or thirsty, sick or naked?

If we want to study Scripture, if we want to learn theology, if we want to be prepared for ministry, we must begin with life in all of its hard edges, and from there go to the text, and then head back to life again.

And where do we find the hard edges of life from which to begin our seminary studies? In Nyvall Hall? In Brandel Library? I don't think so. You won't find many of the hard edges of life in seminary so you can't study Scripture, learn theology, or prepare for ministry if you're just in seminary.

How, then, does it work? Quite simply: start with who you are, and then take a walk—take yourself on a walk into Albany Park. Once you've walked through all the streets of Albany Park come back to campus and ask your professors about what you saw and who you met. The life of each person in Albany Park matters to your seminary education, no matter how inconsequential they may seem against the backdrop of all the theological volumes in Brandel Library. You won't understand the lives of the people in Albany Park, and you won't understand your own life, until you've mastered at

least parts of these theological treatises. But it is also true that you must test the validity of the theological treatises against the lived reality of Albany Park. Our responsibility is to connect grand religious ideals found in Nyvall Hall and Brandel Library with the messy realities, the hard edge, of your own life and of life in Albany Park and beyond.

Part of what we discover in others is what we already know from our own life. Life is complex and messy. Relationships are never neat; marriages are not perfect; parenting is a constant challenge; it is hard to know when life begins and difficult to know when and how life should end, disappointment follows joy. Why? Because good and bad, pleasure and pain, peace and violence, success and failure mingle incestuously in every life.

This is narrative theology, the theology of life's story. It is faith expressed not in abstractions but in the lives of people. This is why we read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Martin Luther King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*, Ernesto Cardenal's *Gospel in Solentiname*, and Henri Nouwen's *¡Gracias!* These are theological treatises forged in the language of life. These are stories of people who have heard, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested the words of Scripture.

And in these stories of the faith-filled and the faithful, we discover a mystery. The reality of God is most powerfully expressed not in abstract ideas or clanging proclamations, not in church resolutions or sermons, but simply by being present. The Great Thanksgiving in the liturgical tradition asserts that we are to praise God "not only with our lips but also in our lives." Micah tells us that what God requires of us is to do justice, love kindness, and walk with God. There is no speaking here. So I trust you've come to seminary not so much to learn how to preach as to learn how to be present in the lives of others.

Virginia Mollenkott once noted that faith must be discovered "from the holy in ourselves to the holy in the other." This can be said about any relationship, at any time, in any circumstance. "From the holy in ourselves to the holy in the other." Does this stir our imaginations about what we might learn, and from who we might learn it in seminary? How we approach others, whether we are in fundamental agreement or disagreement with them, whether we know them well or not at all, is at least as important as the actual substance of the beliefs we hold. In fact, I'll argue that how we approach those who are different from us is much more telling about our faith than the actual substance of any position we hold.

From the holy in us to the holy in others – this makes conversations possible, and when conversation is present, learning happens.

Life for each of us in one grand story. We are born with a blank book; we die with a full novel. You are here to write, to live out, the next chapter in your book. Inspiration for this chapter will come as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the words of Scripture. And our vocation – this hearing, this reading, this marking, this

learning, and this digesting (along with a fair share of indigestion) – is best shaped in the company of others. God speaks, I've found, most often in communion with others.

The face of the church is rapidly changing – around the world and closer to home. You can experience this by traveling widely, but you can also experience it at North Park by taking a walk around the neighborhood. Let the story of this walk mark this chapter in the novel of your life.