

## **A Letter to My Son about Beginning Seminary**

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*Our sermon today is a letter I wrote my son, Jeremy, not long after he discerned a call to ordained ministry. The letter explores what it means to begin seminary. Some of you here today are just now exploring the possibility of what it might mean to be called to some form of ministry. Others of you have already discerned a distinct and clear calling. Others are already engaged in ministry. I hope this sermon addresses us wherever we are as we seek to follow Christ in trust and obedience, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Dear Jeremy,

I promised you that I would write regularly, and so I will. There are lots of things to think about as you begin seminary, and I am eager to think about them with you.

As I think back thirty years ago to my own arrival at seminary, I can still remember the excitement I felt. Some mornings I would get up early just to walk around the campus before anyone else was stirring. I was reminded of this today, as I stepped on to our campus with the first blush of dawn tinting the sky. Back then I felt like a kid who couldn't wait for the bakery to open so I could get the first hot rolls from the oven.

Some of my friends warned me that seminary would be the death of my faith. One wisecracker even called it "The theological cemetery." I confess I never ever felt that way. Seminary opened to me the doors on a world of knowledge and wisdom. I never feared it. I never regretted it. Seminary invited me to explore sacred texts and ancient stories and rich traditions I had only superficially understood up until then. The critical tools seminary gave me were a gift, and seminary gave me far, far more than it took away.

As I often say to new seminary students: "*Knowledge is not the enemy of faith.*" Hatred, bigotry, small-mindedness, pride, and self-righteousness: all are enemies of faith, but knowledge is not. If sophomore biology threatens your faith, your theology has bigger problems than Charles Darwin. And if a class like "Introduction to the Old Testament" threatens your place in God's eternal covenant, it isn't just the walls of Jericho that need to fall.

You already know this. You've always been a sponge soaking up everything you could learn, and you'll do the same in seminary. I still remember with delight how much you

enjoyed your courses in Islamic studies and feminist theory in college. For you the question has never been, “Do I have to read all of this?” But, “What is the best order to read this to get the most out of it?” And, “When I finish these books could you help me figure out what to read next?”

I’ve been thinking recently if there’s some message I should give you at the beginning of seminary, some guidance that might help you focus on what’s most important in your preparation for ministry. For some perverse reason my thoughts this morning turned to a song you used to sing with me when we watched Monty Python’s “Meaning of Life” together. It goes something like this:

*“Whenever life gets you down, Mrs. Brown, and things seem hard or tough, and people are stupid, obnoxious or daft, and you feel that you’ve had quite enough...”*

“Just remember that you’re standing on a planet that’s evolving, and revolving at nine hundred miles an hour. That’s orbiting at nineteen miles a second, so it’s reckoned, a sun that is the source of all our power. The sun and you and me and all the stars that we can see, are moving at a million miles a day, in an outer spiral arm, at forty thousand miles an hour, of the galaxy we call the Milky Way.”

“Our galaxy itself contains 100 billion stars, it’s 100,000 light years side to side, it bulges in the middle, 16,000 light years thick, but out by us it’s just 3,000 light years wide. We’re 30,000 light years from galactic central point. We go round every 200 million years. And our galaxy is only one of millions of billions in this amazing and expanding Universe.”

“The Universe itself keeps on expanding and expanding in all of the directions it can whiz; as fast as it can go, at the speed of light you know, 12 million miles a minute, and that’s the fastest speed there is. So remember when you’re feeling very small and insecure how amazingly unlikely is your birth. And pray that there’s intelligent life somewhere up in space, because there’s [very little] down here on Earth.”

(Eric Idle and J. Du Prez, *The Monty Python Songbook*)

There’s something about that song that rings especially true for theological education. If seminary works the way it should, you will find yourself flatfooted in the presence of the awesome, stunning, overwhelming reality of what one of my seminary professors once called GWAOT: God, the World, and All Other Things.

Some people run as fast and as far as they possibly can from the terrible and wonderful complexity of it all. They try to convince themselves that it is a virtue, a mark of faith to remain ignorant. It’s not a virtue to be ignorant of your faith, especially if you are called to ordained ministry; it’s just cowardly and lazy.

Other people run as fast as they can into the complexity. They dig deeper and deeper into the details, sometimes becoming more and more fascinated with the most minute and mundane of questions that demand years of painstaking work; and often no one else in the world cares about the answers they eventually discover. Usually, these folks become Ph.D. students. Some emerge years later as normal human beings with a lot of information. Some never quite make it out again.

Still others see in the overwhelming reality of mystery and wonder a cosmic portrait that keeps them in proportion. The universe *is* unimaginably huge, and God is even bigger. We are very, very small, but by the grace of God and for reasons I cannot even begin to imagine, we are significant to God.

If seminary has worked well for you, you will find yourself standing in the presence of the mystery of life and (ultimately) the mystery of God. What you do with that experience is entirely up to you!

The French novelist Marcel Proust once said: “Since we are children who play with divine forces without shuddering before their mystery, we only find the telephone ‘convenient,’ or rather, as we are spoilt children, we find that ‘it isn’t convenient,’ we fill [the newspaper] with our complaints.”

I fear that Proust’s words hit my generation (the baby boomer “Me” generation) especially hard. We take the mysteries of existence and the wonders of God for granted, and spend an astonishing amount of our energy complaining that the plane is fifteen minutes late *when the marvel is that we can fly*.

I want to warn you against the sin of taking God’s world and God and the wonders and graces (small and large) of your life for granted. To be grateful is just about the least we can do in the face of existence. To be ungrateful is not only a sin, it is just plain tacky.

There is an alternative, however, and I think a first-rate theological education can help with this.

We can stand before the mystery of life and before the mystery of God; we can look up into the night sky and see the whirling, spinning majesty of the starry universe; and we can apprehend the worlds as God’s play things. Standing there, baptized in the exuberance of the universe and the possibilities of God, we can listen for a heart-beat beyond the clutter of all the background noises.

My old friend, the late Professor David Cairns, once told me about how his father came to embrace the universe and God as good. It was an uphill battle. And it was an intellectual as well as an emotional and spiritual battle. His father, the great D. S. Cairns, was principal of Christ College in Aberdeen, Scotland, a close friend of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Principal Cairns lost his young wife to illness, and raised their children alone. He was devastated by her death. And he nearly lost his faith altogether. He struggled with his faith for years. You can sense it in his book *Faith that Rebels*.

Later he wrote another book, *The Riddle of the World*, toward the end of which he is finally able to say: “But the soul of Hebrew religion in its noblest manifestation in the prophets asserts this kinship in all those utterances of faith which assert the righteousness and grace of God. To assert these is to carry human values into the very heart of the universe, to proclaim that ‘That which sits dark at the centre’ behind Orion and the Pleiades and the Bear, that Sovereign Dweller in the Innermost is deeply akin to [humanity] and can be known and worshipped by [us], not merely because of [God’s] awful might but because, judged [even] by the standards of [our humanity] [God] is just and good.”

At the core of the universe, there beats a human heart, God’s heart. Other theologians, most notably Karl Barth, the greatest Reformed theologian of the last century, came to the same insight – or thereabout. Barth writes movingly of “the humanity of God.”

I’ve made something of a career as a theologian denying the value of essentialism. Essentialism holds that the rich and varied complexities of life can somehow be boiled down to just one or two or three essential qualities. I’ve argued against this for years. But I want to contradict myself now, at least in one regard. Throughout the Bible there are these moments when the clutter of codes and stories and prophecies gives way to a startling insight, a pure, happy moment of clarity and simplicity, when we can see something like the “essence” of it all. Like the scientists who isolate and remove the background clutter that keeps us from hearing the heart-beat of the universe, some few prophets help us through the mass of details to hear the essential.

St. Paul does it when he writes: “But now abide faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

St. James does it: “Faith without works is dead.”

Micah the Prophet does it when he preaches: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus of Nazareth does it better than anyone else, when he says: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

As you begin seminary, I pray that you will embrace the complexity, but never lose the simplicity.

William Baer, a contemporary poet, says it like this in his poem, “Job.”

“Yes: wisdom begins with *fear* of the Lord,  
which comprehends the power that made the seas,  
the earth, the shimmering dawn, the unexplored  
unfathomed skies, the moon, and the Pleiades.  
which also know Who comes to judge our shoddy

little failing lives, knowing full well,  
we need not *fear* the one who kills the body,  
but only He who condemns the soul to hell.  
which also knows it magnifies the Lord,  
defying the demon, being the only release,  
oddly enough, from *fear*, being its own reward,  
which is also wise, is faith, is hope, is peace,  
is tender mercy, over and over again,  
until, at last, is love, is *love*. Amen.”

As you begin seminary, son, I would not want you to neglect your studies. I hope you bring to every task of preparation both the seriousness and the imaginative play that becomes the high calling to which you are called.

And I hope that you will enjoy the deep, rich, abiding complexities of theology and biblical studies, history and ethics and philosophy that have challenged the brightest and best minds of the centuries.

But I pray, also, that you will not forget and that you will learn to proclaim for the people you serve in Christ’s church the simple message of another poet, Philip Larkin, that sad old Anglican agnostic I admire, who once said: “What will survive of us is love.”

Love,

Dad