

**A Pedagogy of Redemption
Romans 8: 18-25; Micah 4:1-4**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ—I cannot fairly express what an honor it is for me to address you as one about to be installed as Dean of this Seminary. I have spent a third of my life in this teaching and learning community, many of those precious years with many of you. You have allowed me the privilege of your friendship, shared with me your rich wisdom. You have taught me so much I did not know about Bible, theology, pastoral care, education, preaching, and so much more. You have invited me to teach classes with you and serve on committees with you—lots of committees—and talk about things that matter together. You students and years of students before you have granted me the high honor and privilege of teaching you and learning with you and sharing the dear things of your lives. All of you have borne patiently my failures and foibles and my awful puns. And you offered healing love and compassion in the darker moments of my soul's dark nights. That you have entrusted the role of academic dean to me is profoundly humbling, and I am deeply grateful to you all for such a show of trust and for the support and care I have already experienced from you these last six months. Thank you all, very much.

Nor can I begin without saying publicly how deeply grateful I am to Gale, my dear friend and companion for more than forty three years. She has borne more patiently still my fears and frets, tears and sorrows, hopes and dreams across our two life-times. She has been my encouraging word, my impassioned defender, my energy, and my practical grounding. She has forgiven me countless hours stolen

from our time together and from time with our children. For all this, I am eternally indebted to you, Gale.

Now to the task at hand. You will not be surprised, I expect, that what I intend this morning is that you and I have an opportunity for critical theological reflection on our work together as a theological seminary of the Presbyterian Church (USA), in other words, critical theological reflection on our vocation and identity as a seminary. These are not so much two things, of course, but one: what we are called to do here shapes who we are as a theological school and, in turn, who we are—our ethos—is interwoven with how we live out our vocation. To call our work here “vocation” makes a theological claim at the outset, so I will state my presupposition clearly. I believe we are a seminary called into being by God, through the church, for the holy purpose we serve of educating men and women to participate in the continuing redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. This claim does not deny the squabbles and pettiness and tedium and routine and anger and despair that are part of our life together. But it does mean to say that the purpose to which we as a Seminary are committed, our reason for being, is grounded in God’s creative and redemptive presence in the world, which calls us to the work we do. That promise both inspires us and calls us to account; it is our freedom and our responsibility.

In a document that grew out of the intense work of a significant number of our faculty who participated in a racism dialogue group just over a year ago, its authors spoke of this as a “kairos” moment in the Seminary’s life. “Kairos” is a Greek word for time, contrasting with another word for time, “chronos.” The latter

measures time by length; it asks “for how long”? “Kairos,” is about “opportune time,” the “right time,” a “crucial moment in time,” particularly in the life of a community. Our working group was asking our community to see that this is just such a time for us, a moment when possibilities and promises, when the Spirit’s work, all seem to converge, when creation groans in travail as if to give birth to a new present and a new future, a truly pregnant moment. Such sacred moments call for response and decision. In that sense *kairos* is a time of crisis, *krises*, a time of judgment and a time for opportunity.

Our Kairos Document pointed to the present moment in the Seminary’s life as a time to become an anti-racist and multicultural community, to build our life together profoundly around these commitments, seen as decisive extensions of the Seminary’s passion for justice and celebration of diversity. To become anti-racist means recognizing the deep, pervasive and dehumanizing power of racism that is our inheritance from slavery, which thrived and deeply cut into the fabric of society particularly in this region and the south. And it calls for repentance, for recognizing the myriad ways, intentionally and unintentionally, we continue our participation and culpability in the interlocking system of privilege and oppression that racism is. To be anti-racist is also to recognize that the exclusion and dehumanization that is racial oppression participates in a social system that is similarly oppressive of people working at or below the minimum wage, particularly single mothers, of gay, lesbian, and transgendered people, and of people with physical and mental disabilities.

To be both anti-racist *and* multicultural is to celebrate the diversity of a world, mirrored in our near communities, that is marked by different religions and

by changing demographics within our own Christian religion. To be multicultural is to affirm the value of difference, to recognize the richness of peoples' stories and histories and cultural perspectives without reducing them to a forced homogeneity. But, importantly, our commitment to becoming multicultural does not arise from the fact that the world around us is. Rather, to become multicultural means more nearly to reflect the diversity of the human family of God and what Central Presbyterian Church in Louisville calls "the wildly inclusive love of God." To be anti-racist and multicultural is to be a seminary of Christian people where teaching and learning and life together, in bell hook's imagery, "practices freedom," that "transgresses" the social forces that limit or inhibit human liberation. Put differently, to be anti-racist is to practice a pedagogy of redemption and to live redemptively.

To name this moment in our Seminary's life *kairos* comes at a time when the church we serve is facing profound choices as well, questions of justice and compassion, hope, and healing. Some of these issues may also provide singularly opportune moments—*kairos* moments—what James Russell Lowell's hymn calls "the moment to decide" that comes once in a lifetime. Not every choice, however, is kairotic, in the words we're using here. And we will need, of course, to attend, individually and as a community, to ways of responding, and preparing our graduates to respond, to a range of challenges and mysteries. But my work as your dean will be shaped by my commitment that this work of anti-racism and multicultural expansion will have a unique place in our work in the years to come.

Both Paul and Micah know something about *kairos*. Paul imagines the time in which he and the Christians at Rome to whom he is writing are living as a moment of new creation, a time of groaning toward new life, a vitality conceived in God's self giving love in Jesus Christ. While elsewhere he can say, "the old has passed away, the new has come," its clear from the Romans text that there is still more to the promise of Christ than yet meets the eye. There is a "not yet" to creation's birthing which, nonetheless, Paul would have us know puts all that's now in new and proper perspective. The present is so full of the future that the present is itself transformed. It is, in other words, redeemed, freed from its bondage to decay, freed from the distorting power of suffering that renders anxiety ultimate. Redeemed, yet waiting for redemption—the odd illogic of Gospel. The present is changed—transformed, not at all the way it was before the eyes of faith in Christ saw it—so full of the future, yet the future remains still new. Promise is still unfolding. Bondage to decay is broken, yet decay remains. Paul's friends are asked to live by still unfolding promise, trusting in the steadfast love of the Promising One in whom the promise is so sure and certain you can stand on it and act on it, which is what faith is.

Micah's *kairos* is announced as promise, too. "In days to come" Micah imagines a radical global change in which there is a universal "school" in Jerusalem, offering a multicultural crowd of people that stream before the Holy One a theological education without parallel. What those who come want to know is essential theology: the ways of God, the godly paths to walk in, and God's instruction—the word of the Holy One. In Micah's view, it is God who is believers'

teacher, who lays before us all that is needed for living a just and good life in peace with God and with one another, a future without war, without fear, a place to belong, to be at home, to be nourished, to be at rest. God our teacher's pedagogy, is, in other words, a pedagogy of redemption.

This pedagogy flows from the words we have heard from Micah. Micah's vision quite intentionally represents a stark reversal of the present Micah knows. Micah's world is a place where the powerful and privileged of his bipolar society of rich and poor pervert justice. Those entrusted with the welfare of society, while knowing what God requires of them, in the prophet's vivid words, "tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones." Micah's world is a place where judges charged with protecting rights steal the property of ordinary citizens. Micah's world is a place perpetually threatened by war and violence, where fear is a constant companion—fear of corrupt leaders, and fear of religious leaders who cry "Peace" to those who pay them well and "War" to those who cannot pay. Micah's "coming days" is a vision of hope and freedom, a transformed world guided by people changed by divine instruction. It is a world redeemed—not "over the rainbow" but in a cultural—multicultural—and historical reality.

What Micah offers here, in God's name, to rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, is a pedagogy of redemption. The prophet is teacher, too. His vision of redemption—a future of promise as a promised future—offers hope in place of destructive patterns of mutually impoverishing relationships between people and nations. Like the prophetic teacher before him, Moses, who stood on the edge of promise fulfilled and offered slaves redeemed by God's compassion a choice

between life and death, Micah, too, summons God's redeemed. "Choose," he implies, "between the corruption and destruction with which you are living and life where God's redeeming word sets you free from the emptiness of idolatry to enjoy the fullness of life at peace with yourself, your neighbors, and the Holy One." A pedagogy of redemption like this can transform the present, empowered by the promise of "coming days" made by the Holy One whose steadfast love assures their realization. There is no vision of rapture here, no one is left behind. Rather, Micah's word means to transform the world he knows and now. A pedagogy of redemption draws the hoped-for future, the fullness of redemption, into the present to hold the present accountable to God's promise of freedom and fullness of life—*Shalom*. The power of Micah's vision for the "coming days" lies in the space between memory and hope, which is just the place, as David Kelsey observes, where the redeemed live. The hoped-for future, without war, without fear, with land and living for each and all, belongs to a commonwealth re-membered by *Torah*, God's given instruction, God's word of freedom and way of peace and justice. Memory and hope—remembering God's *Torah* for a life responsible to redeeming grace and responsible for the practice of freedom and the creation of just communities, imagined in the vision of a promised future—memory and hope are constitutive of Micah's pedagogy of redemption.

Micah's pedagogy, however, includes something more: it pays attention to present context. Apart from engagement with the community of faith's critical situation—Israel's *kairos*—Micah's redeeming Gospel of memory and hope would remain abstract. But Micah is a practical theologian. In Ed Farley's phrase, he

interprets Israel's critical situation in light of Gospel, the good news of God's loving work. The time at hand, confronted by the memory and promise of redemption, calls for decisions that transform living patterns of what Farley describes as idolatrous "efforts at self-securing" -- into patterns of compassionate love. Micah's pedagogy of redemption is exegetical and interpretive. It brings the redeeming Gospel into critical conversation with the community of faith's situation, exposing patterns of self-destruction, of devaluing others, and of oppressing communities. And, at the same time, it offers potential for embracing practices that transform self, relationships, and community and participate in God's redemptive project in the world. A pedagogy of redemption imagines and teaches for a world of swords beaten into plowshares, of schools of war closed, where food and a place to live—the basic needs of life—are enjoyed by the whole human family, and where the distorting power of fear is impotent.

Micah's approach to theological education—his pedagogy of redemption—is instructive for us as we think about our vocation as a Presbyterian theological seminary. Our mission statement declares our calling to be "to educate men and women to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ," and I would add, "for the world." That may be implied but to be explicit about it is to remind ourselves that God's redeeming work in Christ is Gospel for the whole human family and, indeed, for the whole creation. Our educational work is not ultimately for the church but for the redemptive work of God in places and in ways that, while including the church, reach beyond it as well. Our mission statement asks at least three things from us. It asks us to identify for the world's sake this "continuing

ministry of Jesus Christ.” It asks us to understand how men and women whom we educate may participate in that continuing ministry. And it asks us to imagine how we “educate for participation,” a daunting task that requires all our imagination.

Let’s begin with the first task: identifying the “continuing ministry of Jesus Christ.” I start with an image central to the Gospels and Paul, namely, as Christ the Redeemer and the continuing ministry of Christ as the ongoing redemptive love of God for the world. This image proclaims that, in Christ, God has acted decisively to set at liberty a humanity in bondage to sin, a human family who live centered on saving ourselves from the limitations that are inherent in being human, refusing God’s offer of a full life secure in a relationship of divine embrace, compassionate love, and providential care. Our efforts to still our fears of a meaningless life, of an empty future, and, ultimately, of our own mortality, lead us to create “idols” for ourselves, things we hope will “save us” but cannot. Indeed, the very things to which we cling, ironically, enslave us. We come to belong to these efforts at self-securing, replacements for a responsible relationship in love with God. From the corruption idolatries like these wreak on our lives as individuals and communities and the ecology of creation of which we are a part, God in Christ has redeemed us—set us free.

The depth of God’s love for us that Micah perceived became visible and tangible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a love uncompromised by hate, by injustice, by fear, by threat of death; a love moved to healing tears and righteous anger by oppression, by injustice, by sickness, and by exclusion; a steadfast love that promises presence in life and in death and anchors life in the

promise that the time is coming when Love's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. To believe in such love and its promised presence, to believe that God in Christ has set us free to live empowered by God's spirit in Christ, to practice freedom in a world still inclined to idolatry, is to live redemptively, and thus to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ. For this we educate men and women; namely, to participate in the continuing redeeming, liberating, ministry of Jesus Christ that transforms powers and patterns of being that corrupt people's lives, our relationships with one another, and our public life.

The educational work we do as a seminary, furthermore, we do on behalf of a church Farley calls "a new universal community of salvation." "Somehow," he writes, "redemptive liberation takes place in conjunction with the activities of that community." While redemptive transformation need not take place only through the church, nor does it mean the church saves, it does mean, Farley continues, "that the event and person of Jesus redemptively transforms in and through this community." (*Practicing Gospel*, p. 6). We educate men and women for participation in the continuing redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ through the church in all the varied settings in which they may work. The transformations that redemption implies take different shapes as varied contexts are interpreted in light of the Gospel by our students who become counselors, chaplains, or scholars. For some, redemption's liberating power is experienced as freedom from abuse of self or others, from destructive behaviors, and from crippling memories, from wounded spirits and shaken souls. For others, redemption's transformation means finding a

way to live with chronic pain without being bound to it, to find peace and meaning in the midst of suffering.

Most we teach, however, will serve the communities of redemption that congregations are called to be as pastors and teachers, or better put, as teaching pastors. Their calling is, in *Ephesians*' familiar phrase, to "equip the saints for ministry"—a phrase, significantly, that we have used as a seminary to speak of our own work of education. As teaching pastors, they stand in Micah's line and in Paul's, charged with practicing a pedagogy of redemption, teaching those who stand between memory and hope to live there with imagination, with steadfast love, a passion for justice, and a keen sense of sin—personal, ecclesial, and public. A pedagogy of redemption requires that pastors be able to teach Scripture and theology—the church's history and living tradition—in ways that enable people to interpret the multiple and complex worlds in which they live in light of the remarkably Good News of God's continuing transforming presence.

To do that requires that the saints they are equipping know the story that forms the community, and know it well enough that it may provide the lens through which they look at themselves, their relationships with others, and the public worlds created for the common good. So it's not only the Christian story those who would live redemptively must know. They must also know the worlds they must interpret in the Gospel's light. They must be able to read the textuality of cultures as well as Scriptures' texts. And they, like those who teach them, must have discerning minds, exercised by serious grappling with the ambiguities of reality and by critical reflection on the claims for truth made by cultures and by church. The saints who

would live redemptively these days must do so intelligently, loving God with all the mind, as well as heart and strength. Christians in our complex world of seductive promise and deceptive labeling, of numbing fear and prolonged life, of low paid jobs and obscene wealth, of right to life and right to choose--Christians like us must be passionately intellectual and thoughtfully compassionate. A questioning mind in which faith seeks understanding; a compassionate heart that embraces suffering; a deep humility that admits our share in sin: these are hermeneutical commitments of redemptive interpretation that those who would be teaching pastors and those whom they would teach must cultivate.

Pastors teach believers to interpret situations in light of Gospel in multiple ways that include the classroom but much more, as well. They teach as they invite people to read and interpret scripture together. They help young people think through life changing decisions in light of their faith, decisions about where to go to school, what to become, how to make good choices about sexual behavior, the use of stimulants, and the use of personal resources. They teach when they help make Christ visible in labor rooms and funeral homes and the ICU and locked wards on the psychiatric units of hospitals. They teach when they help the congregation make stewardship decisions guided by Gospel, and when they lead the community in public witness to God's passion for justice and the welfare of those who live at the edge of society. They teach, in other words, in all the multiple and diverse ways they invite and enable the people of God to practice faith, which is, in Farley's phrase, "the mode of existence that follows from redemption."

Teaching pastors teach those they serve to participate in Christ's continuing ministry—a theological task they, as practical theologians, have in common with the seminary. This teaching for participation aims at something more than knowing *about* or knowing *that*. It aims at showing *how*, which is what Gabriel Moran says teaching is: “showing how to live and die.” It aims at what Micah suggests is “knowledge of God”: to be instructed by God, to know God's paths, God's ways, and to walk in them, consistently and constantly, and to catch a life-shaping glimpse of God's promised global community redeemed, at peace, fed, sheltered, and free from fear. Teaching theology for the practice of a life of faith, whether in congregations or here, means to inform, form, and transform those who learn, which, surprisingly and wonderfully, turns out to include those who teach. Theological education like this, in church and in seminary, points to a kind of knowing that Aristotle called “*phronesis*,” a kind of “practical wisdom” that results from a pedagogy of redemption: a process of learning the community's memory and hope that enables those who learn to choose wisely and live justly in a changing and challenging multicultural commonwealth. “Practical wisdom” that attends redemptive living is a way of thinking, a way of being, and a way of acting or doing that, taken together, provides ever deepening insight into who we are, what our worlds are like, who God is, and how we may live in freedom, at peace with ourselves, in love with our neighbor, and with justice in our diverse public spaces.

In the fall we begin a new curriculum, shaped from commitments like these I have described in this address. If a pedagogy of redemption requires that students who would be the church's practical theologians be able to interpret Gospel in the

context of a society that is, at the same time, rapidly changing and painfully slow to change, a society in which generosity and love live side by side with hate and greed, it is not surprising that our curriculum embraces learning to read and interpret Scripture and traditions critically and constructively. Nor is it surprising to find in the curriculum requirements that students learn to read cultures, and to think about how people think and feel and cope with systemic stresses and function together in social structures and make choices about what is good or bad, true or false, right or wrong. If we want students who can both practice the ministry of Christ and empower others to do so, then our curriculum must also include, as it does, courses that teach students to preach and to teach and to be caregivers and to reflect theologically and critically on how and why they engage these skills and practices. And if we are committed to being anti-racist and multicultural, to countering oppressions that attend economic status, gender identity, and physical and mental abilities, then we must teach the curriculum in ways that practice freedom, that welcome differences in the classroom, that honor the variegated experiences that students bring and take as principle that students need to learn to think for themselves and to find their own voice. Further, these commitments will require us to expand the shape of how we offer theological education. If we are to become anti-racist and multicultural, we must have a curriculum that is accessible for students who must work full-time and go to school part time or who must take courses largely in evenings or on weekends.

Our new curriculum and the commitments that are woven through it challenge us to imagine ourselves as a seminary community differently. *Kairos* is an

opportune time, but it can be a frightening time, too, asking us to trust the One who promises to “make all things new.” Yet the signs for the kind of community we may become are implicit in our Reformed heritage. Because we affirm the ultimate unity of Christ’s church and can articulate most faithfully what it means to be reformed only in conversations with other Christian traditions we must be ecumenical, a place where the rich diversity of God’s world-wide household of faith, God’s *oikoumene*, is reflected in the faculty who teach here and the students who study here. Because we recognize the tyranny of sin and the necessity of mutual accountability, we must be a community that practices freedom of conscience, on the one hand, and collaborative decision-making and participative governance on the other. Because, as “A Brief Statement of Faith” confesses, “the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, we must be a community that submits our thinking and being and doing to critical reflection in the Scripture’s light. Empowered by the Spirit, we commit ourselves to an honest and open, generous yet suspicious, gently rigorous uncovering of truth. And certainly, whatever shape we take, we will be a community that celebrates in worship the surprising grace of God, that prays for one another regularly and passionately, that confesses sin and practices forgiveness, and gladly gathers around this table, as we do fittingly this morning, to break bread and drink Christ’s cup together. We are a seminary of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and, like the church, we are reformed and always being reformed by God’s redeeming.

Kairos moments call for reimagining who we are and how we are to live together. How shall we live redemptively and teach redemptively so that the values

of redemptive existence, responsible freedom, loving relationships, and communal equality, are practiced here? For it is in what we teach and what we learn, how we teach and how we learn, and how we live together that pastors and counselors and teachers are formed, our identities and character, hearts and mind and spirit shaped for participating in the continuing redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ. May the wisdom of God and the imagination of God's Spirit guide us in keeping the sacred trust that theological education is, for the sake of the church, for the sake of the world, and, ultimately, for Christ's sake.