

**“A Learned Memory for Lovers of Souls”**  
**An Address for the 143<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convocation of the Presbyterian College, Montreal**

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(1 Kings 17:8–16; Matthew 13:44–53)

Principal Vissers, Members of the Board of Governors, Members of the Faculty of the Presbyterian College, colleagues, distinguished guests, friends, and, above all, (now!) graduates: I am honored and grateful for the great privilege of addressing you this evening at this, your 143<sup>rd</sup> annual convocation. Thank you. This evening I am struck by the intimacy of addressing you—not as a guest from far away, but as one who shares with you in the work of theological education in this city and in this consortium that we know as the Montreal School of Theology.

And in the presence of you who have just graduated this evening, I want to begin by speaking rather intimately. This night my heart and mind are full of the memories of exchanges with many of you in the classroom, of conversations in the Birks Building, along University Street, and in your College—memories of tussles with texts and ideas, and memories of your discoveries, of your hard work, your exhaustion, your joy. Indeed it is one of the profound privileges of being a teacher to witness the ways in which you as students give yourselves day in and day out to the tasks and work set before you. What you do as students, in this devotion of yourselves to study and to learning, is one of the ways in which you reflect and share in God's giving of God's own self for the redemption and restoration of this world in love. It is not only that each of you has in your way made sacrifices as part of your preparation for a life of ministry—it is a given that you have done so. It is something more: the very work of study and practice, the life of learning and reflection participates in that same divine self-giving love that sustains and transfigures us. This is a night to honor you not only for your accomplishments in coming to the completion of this academic program, but it is a night to honor you for the ways you have poured yourselves out into this work, into your study both in the classroom and chapel and in the congregations where you have been placed. We honor you, and we give thanks this night for the work of divine self-giving within you—as we have witnessed it over the days and weeks and years we have known you. We honor you.

**A Learned Memory for Lovers of Souls**

A few of you, especially if you were my students in Advanced New Testament Greek some years ago or perhaps from an orientation talk or another occasion, might remember what I am wont to say to encourage theological students to learn Greek. After pointing out all the reasons why access to the biblical texts in their original languages is a good thing—for the freshness and freedom it gives you, for the ability to do detailed exegesis and analysis and to appreciate more fully the particularity and nuance of a text that

speaks to us from other worlds, centuries and millennia away—after saying this, then I usually say, “You know, in a few years after you graduate you probably will remember very little of your Greek.” Here I am a realist. But then I go on to say: the skills and capacities that you develop in learning Greek, in studying a biblical text in its original language, are exactly those pastoral skills and capacities that you will use each day in your work of ministry: the careful attentiveness to what the other person sitting, standing, or lying before you is saying, the detailed appreciation of how they speak of their world, their perception of their situation—the openness of your heart to the one who may be radically different from you, whom you have to work hard to understand and to appreciate, the accurate analysis of a complex system, the habit of paying attention to what is outside yourself: the habits of love.

I recall this “word of encouragement”<sup>1</sup> this evening in order to bring into focus what I understand to be two key aspects of theological education. The first aspect is learning to be “lovers of souls.” The second is what we might call “the formation of a learned memory.” I’ll turn first to the matter of learning to be “lovers of souls.” The characterization of the spiritual teacher, the pastor, the minister, the priest as a “lover of souls,” is ancient, dating back at least to the third century CE, and is equally at home in the Reformed, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. Amma Theodora, one of the great women teachers in the tradition of early Christian desert spirituality, says of the spiritual teacher, that he or she “should be patient, gentle and humble as far as possible, tested and without partisanship, full of concern, and a *lover of souls*.”<sup>2</sup> The work of ministry begins and ends with the love of souls, with that passionate concern with what causes a person to thrive in body, mind, and spirit, with what enables us to respond to God with all our heart and mind and strength, with “holding forth the word of life”<sup>3</sup> in such a way that gives life to all. It is easy perhaps to hear the phrase a “lover of souls” only in ways that are individualistic or therapeutic or pietistic—and indeed it does encompass the deep privilege entrusted to each pastor and teacher to share in particular lives with all their sorrows and joys within the relations of ministry. But it much more. Lovers of souls are fierce advocates for justice, for ensuring that people throughout the world have access to food, water, shelter, medical care, education, to protection from violence and devastation—recognizing that human souls are whole persons, who require both the bread of life and the word of life in order to thrive, in order to respond to God’s delight in them. Lovers of souls are concerned with all those bonds of relationship—human and divine—upon which community depends. Thus lovers of souls attend to all that transforms community into the context of mission, all that shapes a community into the environment where everyone can do the good work to which they are called, to be fully alive, to live into the glory of God. You know this, and you who have graduated tonight know that your theological education has begun to prepare you to live and work as lovers of souls. You have been tried and tested, you wrestled and resisted in this process of learning what it takes to be a lover: like Jacob you have been wounded, and you are learning that it requires always an emptying of self. But to be lovers of souls, you must be “savvy,” “canny” (that good Scots word), about what “souls” need—about so many dimensions of life and community, of the structures of society and the environment in which we live. And I would say too that you need, with all humility and self-awareness, to be “canny” in discerning what God is up to in the fabric of human life and society, in

the lives of the people by whom you will have the privilege of being received. So the content and the process of theological education, the practices of inquiry and reflection can be understood as directed toward all that being lovers of souls requires—of forming in you those practices and habits, those orientations that you will need over the years of ministry ahead.

But there is something more, that which I call “a learned memory.” In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard earlier,<sup>4</sup> the evangelist shows us Jesus describing “every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven” as “like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” You may know that this verse is often understood as the evangelist’s “signature” in the gospel; in other words, it is Matthew’s characterization of his own work in crafting a gospel out of the revered heritage of tradition now focused through the freshness of Jesus’ ministry in life and death and resurrection. But I would say also that it is a vignette that characterizes the leadership necessary for communities of those devoted to Jesus: we are to be “stewards, householders of memory,” capable of drawing upon the rich treasure of memory of who God is, how God has worked in ages past to rescue and to liberate, to lead forth and to inspire, to restore and to make all things new. Such leadership is capable in recalling communities and individuals to the memory of who they are in God’s eyes; such leadership is also capable in lifting up the deep memory of God’s work so that it is available as the groundwork out of which all decisions about moving into the future become possible. I am reminded of words of the song from the early 1960s, “Try to remember, and if you remember, then follow.”<sup>5</sup> But what do we remember? What do we remember in order to be effective lovers of souls?

Theological education is about the cultivation of a learned memory, that is, a memory that is deeply informed by the disciplined inquiry into how those before us and around us have spoken of the action and presence of God. It is about the cultivation of a memory soaked in the scriptures and saturated with the understanding of how the texts of the scriptures were crafted in order to give multi-faceted voice to the encounter with God—a memory learned in the experiences of others. It is about the cultivation of a memory—within you, within the church!—that is restless with curiosity about how others have spoken of God, how they have argued for God and how they have extended God’s welcome, and how they have prayed and how they have sung God’s praises. Theological education involves the cultivation of an ever-expansive memory with an increasing capacity to appreciate what is strange and unfamiliar, seemingly very foreign, yet part of the whole multi-faceted treasure of how humans encounter the divine. I’m not talking here about nostalgia—that longing for return to an earlier, idealized time. I’m talking rather about the recognition that we live in an ongoing, dynamic multi-vocal stream of process of making and expressing meaning wherein the richness of the past, discerned and understood in some depth, is available as a resource for the very present work of living in the here and now and for moving with courage and wisdom into the future. A learned memory is indeed not something that we possess, but it is rather a way of living, a set of practices that ground us and give us confidence. A learned memory is how the practice of ministry, our love of souls, comes to be filled with depth and insight, beyond any techniques or charming words or tricks, beyond ourselves.

Elijah said to the widow of Zarephath, “The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that LORD sends rain on the earth.”<sup>6</sup> I offer you tonight this verse and the story in which it sits as touchstone of memory—for ministry, for the future of the church, a point of orientation whereby we may know the provision of God for the days ahead. A learned memory enables us to reach deeply into the provision of God, which does not fail—in order to recollect all that is life-giving and healing. A learned memory allows us to do so with greater flexibility, versatility, resourcefulness, canniness—in ways that allow us to move among cultures and peoples and times—in order to embrace the new work that God does among us and to discern the treasure that God has discovered and revealed, hidden within the fields of our lives.

Lovers of souls require a learned memory. Thus, as you—the graduates—go out from this College, from this time of study—know that you do so with the habits of memory and the habits of love begun to be inscribed in your souls, your bodies, and hearts. Be assured that you will need to practice memory—a learned memory—as much as you will need to practice the love of souls wherever you find yourselves. And as you do so, have the confidence that “the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail” and that the merciful provision of God will instruct your memory and complete your love.

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 13:22.

<sup>2</sup> Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1975), 81–82.

<sup>3</sup> Phil 2:16; the motto of the Presbyterian College, Montreal.

<sup>4</sup> Matt 13:44–53

<sup>5</sup> Lyrics by Tom Jones; music by Harvey Schmidt, from the musical *The Fantasticks*.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 17:14.