Tribute to David Pacini

By
Elizabeth Corrie

May 6, 2021

Good evening colleagues. Welcome family, friends, and former students. Hello David. It is a tremendous honor to be asked to pay public tribute to a colleague on the occasion of his retirement, but for me, it is much more. Although technically I have been David’s faculty colleague longer than I was his student, I will never stop being his student, and it is impossible for me not to see him as a teacher. And though at first I worried that this would limit my ability to speak to David’s impact, I now believe that “teacher” is the most appropriate lens through which to see David’s career—his contributions to scholarship, to the church, to Candler and Emory, as well as to his students.

This is because the best teachers engage in wrestling that brings out treasure, showing that reveals new insights, hospitality that builds shelter, and listening that apprehends mystery. David is an educator. That is, he “educes” or “brings out” hidden treasures. But bringing out these treasures takes work—indeed it requires wrestling. His scholarship wrestles with modern European religious thought—a tradition that both liberates and oppresses, reveals and occludes, promises to unlock wisdom while insisting on strict limits of what can be thought, known, or said. This work has required returning to the same dense texts, again and again, learning not only how to read philosophers such as Kant and Fichte and Wittgenstein—thinkers whose projects by their very nature defied clear articulation—but learning how to read around and through and over and against the layers of interpretation and criticism of these thinkers, in order to educe not only what these projects offer us today, but also what they took from us. In addition to the ideas of those long dead, David’s life work has also included educing the ideas of living people into accessible English, whether the German-language lectures and notes of his mentor Dieter Henrich, the dissertations of his doctoral students, or the papers of his master’s students. He taught us that writing is re-writing, and not only pushed us to wrestle down our vague notions and labyrinthine statements into clear, coherent sentences but modeled this lifelong commitment to writing in his own work. And, in his many ways of serving both Emory and Candler on committees and in his leadership of the MTS program, he has educed from us—oftentimes by raising points and questions that go against the drift of the conversation—the implications of the decisions we make that impact our students, the curriculum, the church. As an educator, as someone who educes, David has invited his students and colleagues into a kind of wrestling that, for those of us willing to take the risk, brings out profound, and sometimes hard, truths.

David is also a teacher. That is, drawing on the Old English roots of the term, one who “shows.” Through his love of visual art, David has shown his students ways to explore ideas about and experiences of God that go beyond the words he wrestles with so much. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein makes a distinction between what can be shown and what can be said, and places the “unsayable”—the metaphysical, the ethical, the aesthetic—into the realm of what can be manifest, what can be shown, if never said or thought. David has always drawn on the aesthetic to help us see the metaphysical and the ethical; his use of art in the classroom has helped his students plumb the depth of the
Transcendent, to see truths about faith and reason, God and humanity, that cannot be said. What’s more, David’s mentorship of students has shown them depths to themselves they did not know was there, or did not believe could be valued by the academy or the church. David has shown us that the project of theological reflection reveals as much about ourselves as it does about God, and though the profoundest revelations may never be known, they can—with eyes to see—manifest themselves in our lives.

David is also an instructor, that is, one who in-structs, building a structure, one who edifies by building an edifice that serves as a shelter in a world in which we are, at core, homeless. A consummate cook, David, along with his partner Martha, have opened their home countless times to colleagues and students for wonderful gatherings that have built a sense of belonging that has made navigating the academy, the church, and our school more humane. One of David’s central insights about modern religious thought is its impact on our sense of belonging—caught in the eternal regress of self-consciousness, the modern subject, meant to be set free from the tyranny of religious fanaticism and the flattening of scientific empiricism, found itself set adrift, cut off from its belonging to God and to the world. And while we may not all recognize the philosophical sources of our unmooring, we are adrift, and our students know it. But, by working so hard to build a structure for the MTS students within which to forge their own community, and by building a shelter for his doctoral students within which to fortify themselves for the often alienating life in the academy, and by helping MDIV students build a well from which to draw out life-giving waters of deep thinking to nurture them in a life of ministry, David instructed and edified his students through his hospitality.

And David creates this sense of belonging because he apprehends. An apprehender uses his intellect to lay hold of ideas and his senses to feel the force of what cannot be said but makes itself manifest. David apprehends by listening to the wounds and fears of students with his counselors’ ear, by listening to the hunger of laypeople for theological conversations so often denied them by a church that seeks to entertain rather than to transform, by listening to the tensions we struggle with as an institution when we make decisions, by listening to what we have missed within the traditions that shape us. And an apprehender knows that while we may spend our lives studying scripture and theology in our pursuit to understand God, we will only know God when we allow ourselves to be apprehended—seized—by the Wholly Other, Mysterious God who breaks through our solipsism and invites us to grasp the life-rope that can save us from fully drifting away.

And so, on behalf of all your students—those who learned from you in a classroom, in the midst of a meeting, from the pulpit, around your dinner table, and through your books—I want to say—and show—our gratitude. Thank you, David, for educating, showing, edifying, instructing, listening, and apprehending. Thank you for being our teacher.