

BIBLE & RELIGION DEPARTMENT

The Newsletter of the Bible & Religion Department at Eastern Mennonite University

SPRING 2013

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Greetings, Haverim!

As soon as I am finished with end of year department reporting, I am off on my first sabbatical. Along with my family, I will relocate to Boulder, Colorado for the next academic year. When people hear where I am going, they assume my sabbatical is about mountain biking, fishing and skiing. But I do have a writing project which may interest readers of this newsletter.



My project takes up an issue in the scholarly theological literature around friendship or philia. In the wake of Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* in 1930, a vigorous debate has raged about the relationship between agape, on the one hand and eros and philia, on the other. Agape, as many have pointed out, is unconditional and universal, quite different from philia, the love that picks out particular friends and family for preferential treatment. In the extensive post-Nygren literature, philia has found several articulate theological defenders, most notably Gilbert Meilander, Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Waddell. But curiously, neither of them has taken advantage of the full range of scriptural resources on friendship. That is, while John 15 and the love command get attention, no one has tried to read the Gospels as stories of friendship among Jesus and the twelve (as well as others such as Mary and Martha.) The major resources for these discussions have been Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kierkegaard and Barth. While I have a great deal of affection for all those thinkers, this seems problematic just to the extent that they neglect all the stories in the Gospels except the cross, the theologians deprive themselves of a crucial source of insight.

The hypothesis I intend to pursue is that they overlook friendship in scripture not because it isn't there, but because it is everywhere. Moreover, one reason it is missed is because the Gospels configure friendship far more

antagonistically than we are accustomed to doing. While almost any story of Jesus interacting with his disciples could be material for the point, the crucial texts are scenes of confrontation, argument, difference, struggle and misidentification. This is perhaps most clear in, Jesus's relationship with Peter, but it also becomes apparent in interactions with Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, James and John, and his companions on the Emmaus Road.

One way to describe my project is to say that much of the most recent work in ecclesiology has emphasized community, I am trying to emphasize friends. I am worried that in overlooking friendship, theologians overlook or neglect what is arguably the most significant part of our moral lives, especially for college students living away from family for the first time in their lives. We therefore contribute to a compartmentalization of the believer's life in which only moments and relationships of agape are truly Christian and ordinary friendship becomes sub-Christian. That compartmentalization gets reinforced in the pulpit and classroom where the ethical exhortations of pastors veer between the heroic and the platitudinous. In redirecting attention to the presence of friendship in the Gospels, I hope also redirect our thoughts about ethics to the ordinary stuff of life — our day-to-day interactions with family, friends and colleagues.

Of course, I also hope to do some fishing....

~ Peter Dula, department chair

Graduation Brunch

The annual graduation brunch was held on Sat., Apr.27. The graduates gathered with family and department faculty to enjoy conversation and dishes made by the faculty. After a welcome by department chair Peter Dula, followed by introductions, professor of theology and peace studies Ted Grimsrud offered a prayer of blessing for the food and for the students as they transition to new endeavors. Much conversation then followed, as evidenced in the images in the slide show!

Two Student Reflections

Failure Reaps Rewards

Jordan Luther, 2014 Biblical Studies major writes...

My cross-cultural experience in the Middle East [Fall 2012] was nothing less than exhilarating. My level of engagement, participation, and fascination were at an all time high. The practice of fully immersing one's self with the expectation of not only to adapt in an unfamiliar setting, but also to make connections to unfamiliar people, brought me a great amount of joy. I love the overwhelming sensation of discovery that comes with this experiential way of learning. There were many times, however, when I discovered how not to adapt, or connect, with my environment. Failure, whether I accept it or not, was inevitable. Nevertheless, I have found a great sense of comfort, and even liberation, in this fact.

It is in this gift of failure where I have gained some of the richest rewards from my cross-cultural learning. Failure freed me from the constraints of a timid mentality of upsetting my host families. Failure gave me the space to reflect about what did and did not work in a particular situation. Failure fostered more creative responses to how I engage another person with an obvious language barrier. Without failure, there would not be the sweetness of success. The wonderful part about my revelation concerning failure and its integral part of learning is that it is not limited to my Middle East cross-cultural experience. In fact, I am convinced that cross-cultural learning does not necessarily need to happen abroad. Cross-cultural learning can be and should be applied to how I relate to those around me. I believe that I can continue to practice this level of engagement and participation as a way of showing that I am not afraid to fail in order to learn or make a new friend.

A Conference of Radical Proportions

Brad Mullet, 2015 honors biology major, minors in philosophy and psychology writes...

Radical theologian Jack Caputo ended the first day of Subverting the Norm II with the prayer, “come.” Certainly Jack was on to something here. Like many of the postmodern type, radical theologians are brilliant at deconstruction. However, thorough hermeneutical analyses were not what caught my attention at the conference. The prayer did. Jack’s prayer represented the simple yet powerful nature of his complete embrace of uncertainty, vulnerability, and creativity, the deepest theme of radical theology.

According to radical theology, an embrace of uncertainty and vulnerability is the path to honest dialogue and fundamental human connection. Only through a complete acceptance of doubts, fears, and longings will there come a destiny of being seen. If I may draw from a few of EMU’s professors, Christian Early would describe being seen as the validation of the me-ness of me. Ted Grimsrud explores this area when he defines theology as “talking about things that matter.” Both of these notions represent what radical theology is all about. It’s about talking about everything left under the table: fears, doubts, worth, and unlovability. Instead of clinging to beliefs that bring certainty and satisfaction and blanket such natural human feelings, radical theology recognizes that covering up the deepest places in the human spirit does nothing but stifle. Instead, a full-body embrace of the human spirit brings the ingredients needed for true encounters between human beings.

SUBVERTING THE NORM is “a two-day event that brings together pastors, theologians, philosophers, church practitioners, researchers in religion and all those interested in exploring the relationship between postmodern theologies and the church.” Held at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri, Subverting the Norm II speakers, including authors Peter Rollins and Barry Taylor, presented on broad theological topics. The other half of the conference consisted of “break-out sessions,” paper presentations that could serve potentially as launching pads for aspiring theologians.

Thomas and I drove 28 hours round trip for this two-day conference, but it was worth it. In fact, when asked, both of us describe the event as hugely impactful in our lives. For Thomas, it was a homecoming of sorts. Only around 10% of the attendants were undergraduates, and Thomas was not one of them. He was four years old again. He told me afterward that the conversations he had with the theologians and pastors there were the most meaningful ones in his life. Thanks to the B&R department and dean’s office for covering lodging and gas to make the trip possible. I enjoyed bouncing radical theology off of my primary interests of psychology and human nature. I also noticed very deep spiritual vibes running through the atmosphere of the conference. When combined with the intellectual energy that was there, it really was the place to be.

Faculty in Action

Peter Dula published “Can Theology Let Go of Peacebuilding?” in the Spring 2013 issue of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network Newsletter. Also, Peter was awarded a grant from the Louisville Institute’s Sabbatical Grant for Researchers Program. It will pay for a semester of salary while he is on sabbatical next year.

Christian Early delivered a public lecture at neighboring James Madison University on March 27th. The title of the lecture was “From Darwin with Love” and it was attended by about 150 or so faculty and students. Christian argued that new research is challenging the mainstream understanding of life as “self-interested.” By contrast, the new picture that is emerging suggests that life is massively cooperative and that humans, in particular, are genuinely motivated by the concern for others and, of all animals, are interested in their inner world. This gives us a great capacity for empathy and love, but it also gives us the capacity for manipulation and betrayal. Consequently, the new emerging picture of what it means to be human is neither romantic nor idealistic. Instead, it underscores how vulnerable, especially to tragedy, we really are.

Ted Grimsrud has written a new book: *Instead of Atonement: The Bible’s Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness*, published by Cascade Books.

Nancy Heisey will transition from the academic dean’s office back to the Bible and religion department.

Carmen Schrock-Hurst will be leading a Bible Study session at VA Conference Assembly for delegates and other conference attendees on July 26th. She will also be attending the Mennonite Church general assembly in Phoenix, with an eye towards learning about this generation of youth and how EMU students can best prepare to be youth ministers.

Haverim Awards – 2013 Recipients

Haverim Debt-Reduction **Scholarship Awards**

- Biblical Studies major **Corben Boshart**
- Philosophy & Theology major **Michael Shull**
- Philosophy & Theology major **Blair Wilner**

Haverim **Writing Awards**

- 1st Place: **Aaron Erb**, '14 Philosophy & Theology, "Examining the Biblical Portrayal of Hell in Relation to Peace & Justice"
- 2nd Place: **Blair Wilner**, '13 Philosophy & Theology, "Nonviolence without Metaphysics"
- 3rd Place: **Matt Naugle**, '15 Biblical Studies, "Romans 1: Condemnation of What Exactly?"

Ministry Inquiry Program

The [Ministry Inquiry Program](#) is an exciting opportunity of the Mennonite Church USA for college-age young adults to explore pastoral ministry. The program offers the opportunity to experience first hand what ministry is and to test one's own gifts and sense of call. The rich variety of placements this summer are representative of the multi-cultural nature of the church.



Nathaniel McKnight (Social Work, 2015) will be hosted by James Street Mennonite Church in Lancaster PA. **Andrea De Avila** (Biblical Studies, 2014) will be hosted by West Union Mennonite Church in Parnell Iowa. **Jordan Luther** (Biblical Studies, 2014) will be hosted by Wellman Mennonite Church in Wellman Iowa.

Funded in part by MCUSA the MIP program provides students with an opportunity to explore their gifts for ministry and to test their possible calling to longer term service work for the church. At the completion of their 11 week placement MIPers receive stipend money towards their continuing education at a Mennonite College. In addition to MCUSA, funds come from EMU, the host congregation and conference, and the student's sending congregation and conference. This summer MCUSA anticipates having over 20 MIPers from five Mennonite colleges participating in the program.

EMU MIP director Carmen Schrock-Hurst says, "The MIP program is a win-win for the denomination, the local congregations, the students, the participating colleges, and indeed for the broader church. The opportunity for students to test their gifts and to be mentored by seasoned pastors is truly invaluable. The insights that these students then bring back to the classrooms in the fall greatly enrich the learning environment on campus.

Read the [news release](#) about the 2012 program.

Upcoming Events of Interest

Save **September 25, 2013** ... **Peter Rollins**, prominent emergent church leader, author of books such as *Insurrection* and *The Idolatry of God*, and popular speaker, will visit EMU on Wednesday, September 25. He will speak at chapel at **10:00 am** and the University Colloquium at **4:00 pm** on the possibilities of Christian faith in the contemporary world. These presentations will be our 2013 Bible and Religion Department Justice Lectures. Rollins will be available for conversation at various times during the day.