



Loving God with Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength

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Fall Convocation

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Today marks the 88th "convocation" of EMU. As colleges/universities go in the United States we are really quite young.

Several church leaders in eastern Virginia began discussing the formation of a new school. They circulated a petition; one leader even rode his bicycle about 40 miles to deliver it to another community. It wasn't long until these Virginia folks made contact with church leaders in Pennsylvania to see if they shared an interest in establishing a new school.

On December 8, 1912 a document was developed which said they "needed a school with a prevailing religious influence in defense of the simple gospel," to develop students "physically, morally, intellectually, and spiritually." The early plan was to place the school in the Tidewater area and the first name proposed was Warwick Mennonite Institute. Those early leaders were already into fundraising-they named a family in Scottdale PA that was worth a half million and would be expected to support the school with good donations (did the family know this?).

The story of EMU's founding includes some interesting "what ifs?" At one point someone found a mansion in Hayfield VA (near the current Alexandria, around D.C.) with several buildings. The group made a decision to locate the school there. There was a 19-room mansion on the property that had been built in 1769 by George Washington. The land had good agricultural value. It was far enough from the city to "keep students from its corrupting influences." It is now the site of an upper class suburban development.

In fact, one winter a four-week Bible course was actually taught there and already we learn that students were prone to test the boundaries. On a Saturday three young men snuck off from the premises and crawled over the locked gate of a wall that surrounded Mt. Vernon. They toured the facility and got back to the "campus" without getting

caught. When the "dean of students" found out what had happened, he confronted them and they sent a dollar to the Mt. Vernon caretaker to cover their admission charge.

Almost immediately concerns about this location were raised. One suggested that the students could benefit more from visiting the grave of a church leader or "some other saint" than by being close to the graves of political heroes. Eventually, after considering several sites, what became known as Eastern Mennonite School was located here in Park View, a little village then quite separate from the larger Harrisonburg community.

J.B. Smith was the first "president" and he didn't arrive on campus until October 9 in the fall of 1917. Some students had already been here two weeks waiting to start classes when he arrived and we're told he registered the students himself the next morning. Apparently the computer systems didn't take a long time to boot up!

I have a dream that some day EMU will be so energizing and attractive that one summer students will show up two weeks early just waiting for the president to register them for classes!

You can read entire story written by Dr. Hubert Pellman, retired professor of English, who still resides in this community.

The text read for us this morning was from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12. A teacher of the law has been listening to the debates and approaches Jesus with a very specific question. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" The context makes it clear that those who normally put questions to Jesus were often attempting to trap him. This lawyer, however, seems different. He actually wants to learn something. Perhaps he had been educated at a place like EMU!

The Jewish rabbis had counted as many as 613 laws that were to be obeyed-some of them prohibitions, others positive commands. Jesus boils all of those 613 laws down to just two primary commandments. Love God with your heart, mind, soul and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus knows he would have been familiar with the Hebrew Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Except that Jesus added "mind" to what was in the original text in Deuteronomy. One could wish we would know for certain why he chose to make that addition.

EMU is a Christian university in the Anabaptist tradition. For those of you who are Baptists, let me make very clear, the word Anabaptist does not mean anti-Baptist! In short, the term Anabaptist was originally a term of derision and it simply meant re-baptizers because our spiritual parents chose to practice adult baptism rather than infant baptism. In fact, today's Baptists were also Anabaptists historically.

As a university in the Christian tradition, we take our identity seriously. It is our intention to be a welcoming environment for students of all religious or secular traditions.

As a Christian university, with roots deep in the liberal arts, we intend to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. We dare to say that our love for God is expressed holistically. We aim to be balanced in our approach to faith.

Someone has suggested that if we love God with only a part of our personalities, we will in turn only receive a part of what God wants to be for us. How might we understand what it is to love God with our entire being?

Love God with your heart - the center of one's emotions. How would our relationships be transformed during this academic year if each of us had a daily reminder that we are called to love God with our hearts? The quality of my emotional relationships with members of my family, brothers and sisters in the congregation, with fellow sojourners on this campus-all are enhanced dramatically if I see them as reflective of my heart's love for God. At one level, this is perhaps the easiest of the four ways Jesus mentions to love God. It is our culture's primary notion of love-to connect love to emotion, to a feeling.

Love God with your soul - the essence of one's spiritual being. That part of you and me that transcends physical life. Heart may be relatively easy to grasp because we have a tangible reality to point to and we know our emotions exist. Soul is not so easy to locate because it is intangible. Where is your soul? What do I point to as the essence of me?

Last Sunday the Washington Post carried an article by a retired columnist who has a bad aortic heart valve and unless he undergoes an open heart procedure he is almost sure to die within a few weeks. He is 93 years old and he has made a decision not to seek additional treatment. He has lived a full and productive life, and having lost his wife of over 60 years he is not enamored by the idea of a long and lonely recovery from a rigorous surgical procedure. At the end of the article he writes that he does not believe that he possesses a soul. In his mind, he is but a physical body that will cease to exist when he dies. He does not believe in life after death.

He may be right. I don't believe he is, but I can't prove he's wrong. I haven't ever talked with anyone "on the other side" of life. I certainly can't "prove" what life after death may be like. It is, bottom line, a matter of faith. I don't mean to be facetious or flippant, but if he's right, I won't experience much of a surprise. My life will end! If I'm right, however, he will have a significant surprise waiting for him! I just happen to believe that my faith adds significant meaning to my life here and now, such that even if there was no life after death, I would opt for loving God with my soul.

Love God with your mind - intellect. It may appear self-evident to us at a university that we would choose to love God with our minds. But, I'm not convinced that it is quite that obvious. Many of us have been socialized to believe that it is appropriate to challenge ourselves intellectually when it comes to academic disciplines such as biology, history,

psychology. We assume, rightly so, that a physician's mind should be well prepared intellectually. We expect a business graduate to understand complex concepts of finance and economics. We would want no less.

Unfortunately, we aren't always so sure that our minds should be fully engaged in matters of faith. As one observer recently put it, some religions assume you and I will remove our shoes when enter into their place of worship. All too often Christians act as if we are to remove our minds when we enter a church.

About 10 years ago I had a conversation with a person who is now the CEO of a nationally known corporation. He holds an MBA from a widely recognized university. By the standards of our culture he has surely achieved greater success any other person with whom I am personally acquainted. When I last talked to him we got into a bit of a theological debate, and it suddenly struck me that while he has the "best" business education one can buy in this country, and he is obviously very successful, his theological education seemed to have been arrested somewhere around the end of high school.

That is not to say that if he had come to EMU he would think like me. It is to say, that if he had come to EMU I would hope that he would have put the same energy into studying issues of faith that he has put into business. It is precisely for that reason that I want the future business leaders of our church to study at a place like EMU, where they cannot escape the inevitable challenges of integrating faith and learning-just as is the case for the historian and the psychologist.

Loving God with our minds is hard work. As one campus pastor put it, "It is a daily challenge to resist looking for microwave answers to crockpot questions." We do well to be reminded that ultimately loving God with our minds is not about obtaining knowledge, but about growing in wisdom.

Loving God with our strength - might this refer to one's body? Historically Christians have not been sure how to think about the physical body. Our culture vacillates between two extremes-some are so focused on their bodies that they become nearly an object of worship, others seem to treat their bodies as recyclable material. Most of us, in the western world at least, mistreat our bodies in a variety of ways and then spend incredible amounts of money in an attempt to prolong life whenever that option presents itself.

Robert Webber reminds us that Christians are not Gnostics-we do not reject the body, the material, the tangible. To do so would be to reject the incarnation.

What would it look like if all of us at EMU were to love God with our strength this year? One of the new initiatives of the Student Life Division is an emphasis on wellness for the year ahead. You will see a growing number of people on campus wearing pedometers, for example, encouraging us to walk more steps in the course of a day. We love God

with our strength and our bodies, not because we worship our physical selves but because we believe that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This morning I am personally and publicly committing myself to two specific disciplines as a way of loving God in the year ahead. First, I will regularly engage in reading the Scriptures as suggested by the Moravian Church every day. I receive these via email early every morning. Second, I will regularly utilize the fitness center in the University Commons. When I am in town I will be there at 6:00 a.m. most every morning. If you'd like to join me for a good cup of coffee and Scripture reading at 1919 Park Rd., that will be at 5:00 a.m. most mornings. And, I promise that when I'm on the road I will continue to engage in regular exercise and Scripture reading.

I owe it to this university and to my family to be healthy, spiritually and physically. More importantly I owe nothing less than my complete self to the God I seek to follow. All of us owe it to each other and to God-to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.