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# Academic Pressure and The Inner Life

-- a sermon by the Rev. N. Rud Seaton
Wellesley College Chapel
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My this morning theme — ia "academic pressure and the inner life-?" -.*----------
My—texte-s are from -Isaiah and-Luke, -berth in -the—farm_&f. questions:

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"(Is. 55:3)

"To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?"(Luke 13:20)

Speaking about academic pressure around here these days is a little like grabbing hold of the tail of a tiger. Ever since I announced the topic I've been getting jittery. XKKX It would be easier to talk about some global problem, I suppose, like such a hunger or peace. But I'll give it a try.

First of all, JLwant to tall you what I'm not going to talk about. In preparing,this Sunday sermon, I ended up with enough material for anywhere from a 'Aalf-dozen to a dozen addresses'/ on various Sunday sermon topics ranging from the history of liberal arts education to the implications of feminism for education today. I'm convinced, I want to emphasize, that academic pressure, as students and faculty know it today, is fundamentally a systemic problem and that to deal with it creatively we have to move toward systemic change of some kj.nd. It's not just a matter, in other words, of you or me getting ourselves better adjusted. It's fundamentally a question of gsfcfc what we ought to get outselves adjusted to.

At the same time, the change of structure and change of heart that this institution as a whole needs is only going to happen when individuals and groups begin to change it and lead it and pressure it toward change. So it's important to consider how M academic pressure in fact does impinge on individuals here, and what those of us who are Christians, or who are struggling tobeChr^stians, might be doing and the thinking xxxacademic xpressure xand xthe xinner this morning. in response to it. Hence my focus^on tne individual xndxkhKChristian Christian community. This just one part of a whole picture, mind you — but an important part.

I.

Here's the first question, then, from Isaiah: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

I could well imagine 1750 Wellesley students, in a fit of honesty, XRKiHdxHgx&kxkxgKWKkxsnxxKxkkRXKHKgiwpK writing that question home to their XJiXXX parents, along with Lhsdxx their term^bills. Or, I could think of some pre-med student writing an anonymous note to her instructor in organic chemistry: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? The same question could well be spoken by some faculty spouse, who hears about all the various kinds of in-fighting and competition that goes on in a faculty such as ours, who hears stories, too, of students who care more about grades than learning, more about graduate school than human growth. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

What is academic pressure? I^m, no^sure anyone knows how to andwer that question. All I know^is tKatthe fall-out, in terms of

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human anguish and human frustration, is considerable.

As a pastor I may see only a sample , maybe only a minority, of this academic community. But the people I talk to, both students and faculty, tell tales of a certain widespread fragmentation and isolation of community and persons. People are hurting^JLn these parts, in other words? and at least some of them^perhaps more than a few^ are hurting bad.

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Face it, if your identity consists in grades or in publications, in getting into graduate school or getting tenure, then anything that smacks of failure feels like a disaster. Just think of that telltale word -- the deadline. If your life consists in meeting deadlines sooner or later the deadline is gping to meet you. When you don't get an A in organic, or when you don't get promoted, who are you? When you don't make the grade adademically, if that's what your life is all about, what do you have left inside? Who are you anyway? Are you anyone? Do you matter? Does anybody care that you exist?

No wonder more than a few people today, both faculty and students, want to get out of the xafcxxKK academic ratrace today — another telltale. ""2erm, along side of deadline. Stop the world, I want to get off.

~~Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?~~

I don't want to rule out dropping out as a viable solution for some people. But there's too much at stake, isn't there, for us to recommend, somehow, the de facto abolition of the academy, it seems to me, we need some kind of paradigm shift.

The historian o^ science, Thomas Kuhn, has given this term currency. He's used it, for example, to describe the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics. Contemporary physics has a new and broader perspective, It doesn't deny the laws discovered by Newton, as such. Rather it sees them as incomplete, and sets them in the wider and deeper context, deputed by Einstein, Heisenberg , and drfchers.

So rather than calling for some mass withdrawal from the forces of academic pressure, I suggesting that what we need overall, is a new framework, a new perspective, a new perspective for understanding the or[illegible]academic institution and our own individual work within it.

II.

I think our second question, from Luke, points us in that direction, that is, those of us who are Christians or who are struggling to be Christians: "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?"

Jesus immediate^gives us the answer. "It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened."

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For Luke, apparently, this text refers to the Church, and to the Spirit which enlivens the Church. As Christians singly, and as the Church together, in other words, we have the leaven of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts, dwelling in our midst. Specifically, then, our life in the Spirit makes possible a new life for our minds.

Recall again the words of the prophet. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Then we read: "Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come to me, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant...."

St. Luke identifies the outpouring of the Spirit of God precisely with the promises of this Isianic prophecy. In the wake of Christ's coming, in a word, you and I, and the whole Church, have a leaven within us that is enabling us to be the living Body of Christ, the living Bread of Life, — a community of people which knows no final deadline, only a ultimately victorious lifeline.

Have you ever seen yeast work? You take this insignificant looking little powder, mix §_JLt with an ordinary, mucky looking mass of ££B!ts»x floury stuff, and it comes to lifejtT It becomes the stuff of the bread of life. So, as one who takes the name of Christ, you have the Spirit, I have the Spirit. The Spirit is our leaven, dwelling in our hearts, dwelling in our midst.

~~II~~ III.

Now I want to apply this liberating Gospel of the Spirit of God directly to our academic situation. Not that this is the only application, by any means. But if we don't apply it here, we Christians might fall into the trap of looking at the Spirit as a mere momentary catharsis, rather than as an abiding, integrating catalaris; as merely some temporary release, rather than a ~~concrete~~ enlivening proeess of redemption.

tangible,

The Spirit, in other words, is no opiate for the weekends — no ecstatic escape that makes the daily drag of academics tolerableK, no hafclucJbgenic trip to some transcendental psychedelic or sexual heaven, away from it all. The leaven of the Spirit is in our hearts, inSM <bur midst, in this Chapel community, situated in the middle of this very real, very problematic^ academy.

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~~Very~~ Concretely,' the leaven of the Spirit gives you and me a new mind. Jfety Concretely, the leaven of the Spirit makKSxjaax and expands our consciousness so that we become theologians of the Church. That's part of what the slogan "the priesthood of all believers" means ~~what it was got the~~ thinking about your faith, and about how it can hold everything together for you.

You are a theologian^'. How do you feel about that? Every rank and file believer is a theologian. I don't mean now some dreary xx nit-picking theological .expert so-called, the kind you might find hiding behind some^Sesk at Harvard Divinity School. No, I mean the XHxpxxxxdx inspired visionary ~~aw ci?~~ i^~~omaa of- farrttea~~^ the kind of individual who has always people the ranks of the living Church, — from Paul to Luther, from Julian of Norwich to Evelyn Underhill.

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"And in the last days it shall be, God declares" — this is the Book of Acts now, describing the time of Pentecost, which is the time of the Church' describing a tire when the people of the Church gave every evidence of being drunk on new wine, — "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, ... I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy..."(Acts 2:17)

Suddenly here we see the inner life exploding, as it were. There's no external pressure anymore that can hold it in. The inner life, enleavened by the Spirit, overwhelms and overcomes the, forpes of the HMKXKK outer life. In the Spirit your intellect comes alive in a new way; your intellectual passion is born again.

Some years ago Gorden Allport addressed the American Psychological Association^ and scandalized many people by telling them that they were too fixated on what he called the "itsy bitsy empiricisms." Just this past week I sat at a table in the College club and heard economist Kenneth Boulding tell our economics department that they were all toogood at measuring things that didn't matter* ~~an~~d., a~~ll~~ -to poor in ~~dealing~~ with the glnhnBX problrmn, the—se-eeHed - "external- -dfrsee~~enomi~~os.~~.~~. ~~that -afflic~~t us-a-TL-v^j

Well, inspired by the Spirit, enleavened by the Spirit, you and I are feee to dream dreams and see visions that transcend the itsy-bitsy empiricisms and the trivial data that so fascinate so many conventional minds,^ inspired by the Spirit, enleavened by the Spirit, you and I are free to send our minds soaring, to theologize^ if you will, -- to reflect about the xiaXxmxfesx ultimate significance of our college experience, abouts its shortcomings and its possibilities, to search out the deep things, of God, ~~vaster and~~ morem^terious than all the complexities or human life and all the<j5owers of our universe.

If now&hre else on this campus, in other words, the life of the mind, not deadlines, the freedom to ponder the deep things of life, not the xakxx compulsions of t^exxLxxxx academic ratrace, can be the order of the day in this community, for you and for me, in the midst of this academic world.

"Finally," says St. Paul to the Philippians, "...whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."(Phil. 4:8)

IV.

Think. Inspired by the Spirit, let your minds soar. As people who've been embraced by Christ and given kxx the leaven of his Spirit, you and I are feee to search out ultimate meanings, to try to pull things together^XXXXXOX intellectually, — and to enjoy it all thoroughly, to feast on every delicacy of intellectual fatness we can, notwitstanding the pressures we all feel for achieving a very narrow kind of know-how and a very ~~demanding~~ enervating kind of ^success ~~existence.~~

*Jy*— With the leaven of the Spirit, we can truly begin to think, not just take notes and do assignments, write papers crneT go to department meetings.

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Not too long ago Mary Daly was standing in this very place, criticizing the posturing pretensions of our academics, and the escape mechanisms that often go with the pretensions, as she can do so well. Among other things^ she rejected the so-called "sexual revloution" as one more male plot, more or less. In its place she called for a hew kind of joyful, exuberant thinking, what she called an "orgasm of the mindj£. "

Why not?

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.

Amen.