
Pro Rege

Volume 51 | Number 1

Article 1

September 2022

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Recommended Citation

Cosgrove, Walker R. (2022) "Love With Abandon," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 51: No. 1, 1 - 6.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol51/iss1/1

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Love With Abandon

by Walker Reid Cosgrove

Graduates, family and friends, administration and staff of Dordt University, and my esteemed colleagues, I count it a high honor and privilege to be here to address you today. Class of 2022, I've had over half of you in class at some point during your time at Dordt. To borrow the words of esteemed philosopher Bilbo Baggins, of Middle Earth, no doubt half of you know me half as well as you should like; and I know that half of you like me less than half as well as I deserve.¹

Whether you like it or not, I refuse to let you leave Dordt without one more reference to Plato and Augustine. Around 2400 years ago, Plato, one of your favorite thinkers from CORE 140, commented in the *Republic*, "It would seem then, Adeimantus, that the starting point of a student's education sets the course for his or her future."² As Plato suggests, much hinges on one's posture toward education. Thus, in this time together, I want to reflect on the nature of education and what it is I hope that we do here at Dordt, and how I hope it impacts the trajectory of the rest of your life.

The dominant philosophy of education in America today is rooted in pragmatism, which I might call knowledge-as-information.³ There is nothing immediately wrong with this if it is kept in its proper place. The problem is that often in our society we set knowledge-as-information as the best or only way to think about learning, which in turn narrows what is worth knowing to that which we can quantify, measure, assess, control, manipulate, or commodify.

We must recognize that this is only part of a true education, and not even the most crucial part. When we treat education solely as knowledge-as-information, it becomes only about attending class, collecting information, doing homework, regurgitating information on exams and papers and labs, earning good grades, receiving the diploma, and becoming useful to the economy through accumulating wealth, prestige, upward mobility, vacations, success, retirement, and so on.⁴ This posture is dangerous because "we want to measure what we value, but we end up valuing what we are able to measure,"⁵ such as comments on our socials, income, property, titles, prestige, consumption, usefulness, success, all of which, as Pope Francis put it, leads us to be "dictated by selfishness, self-interest, profit, power, and pleasure, and not by love, by concern for the good of others."⁶ An education founded and rooted solely or primarily in knowledge-as-information will lead to us as becoming less-than-human, and, sadly, to treat others the same.

I warn you that the answer to this problem is not a Dordt diploma, because that will not automatically transform you into a kingdom citizen who will "work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life."⁷ Given the cultural pervasiveness of knowledge-as-information, many of the voices that surround you will urge you toward conformity to that vision. My hope is that we have offered an alternate and attractive vision of kingdom life and work, but ultimately you have to claim that vision for yourself.

There is much in our own Scriptures, as well as the wider ancient and medieval tradition, that leads us to see education primarily in relationship to wisdom and to becoming more fully human;

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I might call this knowledge-as-formation.⁸ This deeper approach to education forces us to grapple with significant questions of meaning and purpose: What is true? What is beautiful? What is right and good? What does it mean to be human? Why do we suffer? And so on. There is no rubric or study guide or lab experiment or teaching portfolio that offers quick answers to these weighty and profound questions, questions full of wonder.⁹ As the poet Christian Wiman puts it, in the Gospels “Christ speaks in stories as a way of preparing his followers to stake their lives on a story, because existence is not a puzzle to be solved, but a narrative to be inherited and undergone and transformed person by person.”¹⁰ Hence, the antidote to absolutizing knowledge-as-information is to remember that “What is unmeasurable is always more important than what is measurable.”¹¹

I hope that here at Dordt we’ve brought these two postures together, with special insistence upon the formative aspects as weightier. Any institution of higher education will provide the information and training you need for a specific job, and no doubt most provide it more cheaply than Dordt. But few engage in the formation of students. I hope that we’ve taken that formative role seriously and encouraged you in your various courses—especially the Core, but hopefully in your majors as well—not only to learn the information to pass a class and get the degree, but also to take an active role in the kind of person into whom you are being shaped.

All of this is predicated upon what we believe is at our core as humans. Is it usefulness? Power? Control? Consumption? Success? Or is it love? Is human life simply a competition, a zero-sum game where we take what we can at the expense of others, always living in fear of losing it all? Or are we created in the image of a loving God, an image that is most fundamentally about relationship and love because God is eternally relational in the love that flows among the members of the Trinity?¹²

To help us meditate on this, I now turn to your other favorite thinker from CORE 140, Saint Augustine, who, toward the end of his monumental *City of God*, wrote:

The earthly and the heavenly city are mingled together on Earth from start to finish. Both alike make use of temporal goods, and both

alike are afflicted by temporal evils. But their temporal lives are directed by different faiths, different hopes, and different loves....¹³

Augustine urges us to probe the deepest recesses of our being to begin to truly know ourselves and to discover which of these two visions for our highest good shapes our heart and dominates our thinking.

Augustine tells us that those whose hearts are rooted in the earthly city put their faith in worldly powers, wealth, and success; their hope for our deepest needs is limited to the temporal realm of technology or economics or politics; and their love ultimately focuses on the self. Fundamentally, this vision for human life is rooted in fear, and sees no other way forward than through force and power and violence.

I hope that at Dordt we’ve encouraged you to have a heart rooted in the heavenly city, for such ones are those who put their faith in a God who is love, who created all that exists in an outflowing of that love, and who pursues his creation out of love; those whose hopes rest in the ultimate act of love, Jesus Christ’s life and death on the cross, through which he will reconcile all things to himself; and those whose loves are selflessly directed at God and others, most radically at one’s enemies.¹⁴

In a world built on selfishness and competition, it is nearly impossible for us to imagine God’s love, humility, and selflessness that works for our good to his own cost. Even so, God longs to share his love with us, and without his love we cannot move beyond the self,¹⁵ as Wiman remarks: “God’s love creates and sustains human love, and whatever else may be said of God is subsidiary to this truth.”¹⁶ This is the upside-down nature of the kingdom and of divine love: the more we give, the more we receive; the more we empty ourselves, the more we are filled; the more we humble ourselves, the more we are exalted. The paradox of the gospel is that instead of moving forward in the world through force and power and violence, we build our lives on humility and selflessness and love, as Paul writes: “God chose the foolish things...to shame the wise; the weak things...to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1.27). He writes later in that same letter that without love, nothing else matters (1 Cor. 13.3).

We cannot divorce the gospel from this up-

side-down kingdom. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray for a kingdom built on forgiveness, not revenge (Mt. 6.9-15). A close reading of the Beatitudes suggests nothing less than a kingdom built upon humility, poverty, selflessness, and the like (Mt. 5.2-10). And the incarnation itself shows that the kingdom way goes through humiliation and suffering. In other words, to live as a kingdom citizen, to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal, is to follow the way of the gospel where the way down is the way up. And in its best moments the Christian tradition confirms this—from

blessing and forgiving our neighbor,"²² which is, as Wendell Berry writes, "the radical neighborliness of the Gospels."²³ This love is specific and real, and cannot remain abstract, because "if nature abhors a vacuum, Christ abhors a vagueness. If God is love, Christ is love for this one person, this one place, this one time-bound and time-ravaged self."²⁴ Only those transformed by the gospel, in whom "Christ daily easters," can live a truly kingdom life. This helps us be present where and with whom we find ourselves. It helps us to pay attention to the here and now—in Fyodor Dostoevsky's words, to

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Augustine in his *Confessions*, to Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, to the Puritans longing to learn the paradox that, rather than the mountain peak, "the valley is the place of vision."¹⁷

Thus, the Christian faith can never simply be about memorizing creeds and confessions to believe the correct theological propositions or follow the right rules or check the correct boxes, because this approach leads us to become "a consumer of information, but not a participant in transformation."¹⁸ Rather, Christianity is fundamentally the opposite, the transformation of lives, not mastery of information. As one theologian writes, "There is never an *authentic* disclosure of truth which is not also transformative."¹⁹ The 19th-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins illustrates this transformation when he commends, "Let [Christ] easter in us."²⁰ To let Christ easter in us is nothing short of Jesus' words, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15.12).²¹ Everything flows from this command. Easter faith forces us to embrace a new reality, "where conflicts are not won and lost by power, intimidation, or violence," but rather "through self-surrender, humiliation, turning the other cheek, loving and

"God's glory around [us]: birds, trees, meadows, sky..."²⁵ It helps us to put down our phones and to experience the ordinary and thus see the beauty and glory of it all, which ultimately leads to wonder, as Wiman puts it: "wonder is the precondition for all wisdom."²⁶

The logic of this upside-down kingdom is rooted in Jesus, who did not live or teach power, force, violence, selfishness, but rather taught love as our highest good and final end: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of the entire creation, as St Francis so beautifully illustrated in his life, as well as in the hymn we just sang. I hope that we've cast this vision for you at Dordt. I hope that we have not given you tools to pursue wealth or success or upward mobility or power or influence or celebrity, but rather wisdom to seek with your whole being to love as Jesus loves, to seek joy in the well-being of others, to find true happiness in serving others, to strive for wisdom, humility, and love. This is true kingdom citizenry and culture shaping, to have fidelity to humble and ordinary people, humble and ordinary places, and humble and ordinary vocations.²⁷

God is the ultimate example of this Christian love, for he is love (1 John 4.8, 16). He incarnated

love for us in the person and work of Jesus, who loved all whom he met, regardless of wealth or status or ethnicity or gender. This was a love so radical that he prayed, while suffering on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23.34). When I finish, we are going to sing “O Holy Night,” which is about the night that this very love was unleashed in and on and throughout the entire cosmos at Christ’s birth: “A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices / For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.” I urge you to pay special attention to the third verse, when we sing, “Truly he taught us to love one another; / His law is love and His gospel is peace. / Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother; / and in his Name all oppression shall cease.”²⁸ Imagine that! That is true kingdom work!

It’s almost impossible to imagine having this kind of love for family members who did, or didn’t, wear masks; co-workers who did, or didn’t, get vaccinated; those on our bus wearing Black Lives Matter, or Blue Lives Matter, shirts; neighbors who voted differently from us; those whose beliefs we abhor and whom we want so desperately to hate. How do we avoid, as Wendell Berry puts it, the “liberal” zeal and “conservative” zeal that fall into the pattern of “condemning with ferocious righteousness the sins of *other* people?”²⁹

I find these words of Thomas Merton very helpful in that direction:

[Jesus] alone holds the secret of a charity by which we can love others not only as we love ourselves, but as He loves them. The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be charity?³⁰

Henri Nouwen echoes this thought when he writes about hospitality:

...the stranger has to be received in a free and friendly space where she can reveal her gifts and become our friend. Reaching out to others without being receptive to them is more harmful than helpful and easily leads to manipula-

tion and even to violence, violence in thoughts, words and actions.... [It] is more important than ever to realize that it belongs to the essence of a Christian spirituality to receive our fellow human beings into our world without imposing our religious viewpoint, ideology or way of doing things on them as a condition for love, friendship and care.³¹

And God also expects us to extend this true, Christian love to the entire created realm. As Father Zosimo in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* says, “Love all. Every person. Every leaf. Every ray of God’s light....”³² On this, Berry expounds:

It is not allowable to love the Creation according to the purposes one has for it, any more than it is allowable to love one’s neighbor in order to borrow his tools.... The Creator’s love for the Creation is mysterious precisely because it does not conform to human purposes. The wild ass and the wild lilies are loved by God for their own sake....³³

Knowledge-as-information encourages not the love all things but understanding all things, and unfortunately, if we’re not careful, this often leads to control, domination, and exploitation. Knowledge-as-formation serves as a corrective because it encourages love without always understanding, as Norman Maclean writes, in his beautiful novel *A River Runs Through It*: “But we can still love them—we can love completely without complete understanding.”³⁴

I want to be absolutely clear that this openness to others in love is terrifying, and you need to know that it does not mean that we cease to be ourselves or hold our beliefs.³⁵ The gospel simply forbids us from making our own preferences, beliefs, opinions, way of seeing the world as the gateway to loving others. The difficult work of truly living out the Christian faith is to love and forgive with abandon (Mt. 6.14).

As I now bring my remarks to a close, I return to Augustine to emphasize the point, that despite the mingling of those rooted in self and those rooted in God’s love in the here and now, that at their core both of these are driven by different faiths, hopes, and loves. So, I lay the choice before you this day, and every day of the rest of your life. Will you choose the love of self, which pur-

sues power and strength and violence and wealth and upward mobility and influence? Or will you choose the way of love, love of God and neighbor and the creation, love that pursues humility and self-sacrifice, and love which always seeks the good of others, including the good of the creation? I hope that at Dordt we've helped you move deeper than knowledge-as-information into a more self-reflective, lifelong process of knowledge-as-formation, which ultimately leads to the most profound place in the cosmos, "the still point of the turning world,"³⁶ which is the very love of God. As Augustine so deftly puts it, "for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you (*Conf.* 1.1.1)."³⁷

With that in mind, and on your behalf, I offer this prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, in which he yearns for God's guidance in his faiths, hopes, and loves. As you commence today, may this prayer set your trajectory, and may you incarnate love as a way of life. In the words of Saint Francis,

O most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart [and the hearts of these graduates] and give me [and them] a right faith, a certain hope, and a perfect love. Grant that I [and they] may know You, O Lord, and that I [and they] may carry out Your holy and true command, [to love all with abandon].³⁸

Endnotes

- For the original quotation, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 29.
- Plato, *The Republic* 425c. I slightly adjust the translation found in Plato, *Republic*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA : Focus Philosophical Library, 2007).
- Esther Lightcap Meek, *A Little Manual for Knowing* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 9.
- Wendell Berry, critical of this typical way of thinking, deftly writes, "The big idea of education, from first to last, is the idea of a better place. Not a better place where you are, because you want it to be better and have been to school and learned to make it better, but a better place somewhere else. In order to move up, you have got to move on." Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkley, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 112.
- Matt Croasmun, quoted by @MiroslavVolf on Twitter at 8.15p on November 17, 2014.
- Pope Francis, Homily for Holy Mass on *Evangelium Vitae* Day, section 3, 16 June 2013: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130616_omelia-evangelium-vitae.html.
- See: <https://www.dordt.edu/about-dordt/our-mission-vision>
- Philosopher Esther Lightcap Meek refers to this as knowledge-as-becoming human; see, for example, Meek, *A Little Manual*, 39 and 49; or, in another place, refers to this as "transformation;" see Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 75-76.
- Meek calls these "wonder-full" questions; see Meek, *A Little Manual*, 2.
- Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 90.
- L. Robbie Griggs, tweet on Twitter, 4.55a on October 20, 2014.
- I draw upon Colin Gunton's work for the notion that image-bearing is rooted in relationality, especially *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), but also his *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) and *Christ and Creation: The Didsbury Lectures, 1990* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005).
- Saint Augustine, *The City of God* Book XVIII, 54. I slightly adjust the translation found in Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012).
- See Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, for the notion that love is at the core of the created order.
- In a personal email conversation, philosopher Roger Henderson remarked after my address that I should have emphasized this point more, and I wish I had. In that conversation, I remarked, "Perhaps, if I had to do it again, I would stress even more that one is contingent upon a creator who is love—who pours out his love into our very being in order that we might share that love, and to participate in the kingdom work of loving all, including the least of these, as well as one's enemies—and that meditating upon our contingency

upon this Being who is love provides a foundation for flourishing whether or not one is struggling to survive or is financially stable.” E-mail correspondence, 20 May 2022.

16. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 71.
17. “The Valley of Vision,” in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotion* ed. by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2012), xxiv-xxv.
18. Chuck DeGroat, *Falling Into Goodness: Daily Readings for Lent* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 77.
19. David Tracy quoted in DeGroat; see *Falling into Goodness*, 102.
20. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44403/the-wreck-of-the-deutschland>.
21. As DeGroat puts it, “...our command, our call, our vocation”; see, *Falling into Goodness*, 99.
22. DeGroat, *Falling into Goodness*, 103.
23. Wendell Berry, “Leaving the Future Behind: A Letter to a Scientific Friend” in *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings* (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2019), 85.
24. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 121.
25. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky, 12th ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 307.
26. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 64.
27. As Berry writes, “It takes years, maybe it takes longer than a lifetime, to know a place, especially if you are getting to know it as a place to live and work, and you are getting to know it by living and working in it”; see Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 91.
28. “O Holy Night,” Placide Cappeau (1808-1877) and translated by John S. Dwight (1813-1893).
29. Berry, “Introduction,” in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 8.
30. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983) 168.
31. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 69.
32. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 338. A beautiful meditation on Dostoevsky’s ideas is in Terrence Malick’s film, *Tree of Life*.
33. Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (North Point Press: San Francisco, 1981), 274.
34. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 117.
35. Henri Nouwen talks about this remaining who one is even in the openness to love the other absolutely; see Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 69-70.
36. T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” II, from *Four Quartets* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1975).
37. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2019), 1, 1.1.
38. St Francis, “A Prayer Before the Crucifix,” in *The Writings of St. Francis*, trans. Ignatius Brady O.F.M (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 2013), 19. I slightly adjust the translation found there.