

Sermon: Working on Our PhDs

Year C, Proper 13

[Hosea 11:1-11](#); [Psalm 107:1-9,43](#); [Colossians 3:1-11](#); [Luke 12:13-21](#)

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Most of you know that I have another job, since this is just a part-time gig. I work for [edX](#), E-D-X, a joint venture founded by Harvard and MIT. We partner with universities and colleges, and some businesses, to offer on-line courses. So if you would like to take *Introduction to Computer Science* from MIT, you can do so on line with 30,000 of your closest friends. In my other job, I work with more PhDs than I have ever done in my life.

I know there are a number of you who have your PhDs so let's get some basic facts out of the way, so we're all on the same page. No one gets their PhD by mistake. It takes years of determined work. Your dissertation has to expand the field of knowledge in your discipline. Think about that for a second. When you get your PhD, it is because people in your field agree that you have helped us understand the world more clearly.

In my business career, competition always came down to money. We had one standard of comparison that could instantly rank projects and people and ideas, not just today but over time. Your team is more important, your boss is a bigger fish, you are a more highly valued employee because somewhere there are piles of money that you can compare.

For people in the upper echelon of academia, the competition never ends, in part because there is no single metric that allows comparison. I thought competition in business was brutal until I saw behind the curtain in the top flight universities across the world. You can win the Nobel Prize and the competition doesn't end. I know that people often think of PhDs as being kind of dreamy, theoretical, not entirely practical people. And, sure, I can see that. But they are in many ways more ferocious competitors than anyone I worked with on Wall Street.

But they don't see it that way. They have fallen in love with the discipline that they have chosen. Indeed if you ask them about it, it honestly sounds like there was a moment when they realized that the discipline had chosen them.

If someone, usually me, unwittingly steps within 2 feet of their area of interest, it just explodes out of them. They can't wait to tell you why measuring babies' haptic responses is both so vital and so cool. They're not showing off. They're in love. They have to tell you about it or they'll explode. They don't care that you don't know. Indeed, they're delighted to have the opportunity to share this profoundly cool thing with you. And if you never realized that magnetic-shape memory alloys were key for that robotic actuator, they have and they can't wait to share what they know.

In today's reading from Colossians, we get not one list but two, of behaviors we need to set aside: *fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)* (Colossians 3:5) and then *anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language* (Colossians 3:8). Working our way through one of those lists would take a life time, let alone both lists.

We have this image that you are a better Christian if you have eliminated all 10 behaviors. Or maybe, secretly, we have this image that you aren't a Christian *until* you have eliminated all 10 behaviors. And since there is no way of comparing one behavior with another, it never ends. You can't be 10% less greedy than someone else, or 10% less greedy than you were two years

ago. You can't be more angry than someone else, but have that be ok because they're more impure and impure is 6.7 times worse than angry. It never ends.

So what if being a Christian isn't how angry or greedy or slanderous you are, but how in love you are with the process of moving away from who you were by default and closer to the *life that is hidden with Christ* (Colossians 3:3)? What if there is some point when you become a Christian, maybe your baptism, or the first time you profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, or the first time you invite someone to come with you to church, or the first time you encounter the Sermon on the Mount? What if you become a Christian and it's at that point that you commit to loving the journey that's taking you away from *fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language*, even if any one of those things is more fun than the part of the journey you are currently in? Because then the question, "Are you a Christian?" isn't asking you to assess how you feel today (well, today I'm running about a 3 in malice and a 6 in greed, but compared to yesterday when I was pegging the needle on wrath, yeah, today I'm averaging out as a Christian).

So let's say we make that commitment to take the journey. How do we manage what the PhD's have done and stay in love with the journey? That's where the reading from Luke comes in, about the rich man building a barn to store his harvests in so he could tell his soul to *relax, eat, drink, be merry*. (Luke 12:19)

Now, I know you guys are already clear about Jesus' lesson that we don't know when we will meet our end and that we need to be in the right relationship with God now, today. And I know that if I talked about how much stuff we have and how little of it we need to remain in right relationship with God, ev-ery-one would have a story to tell me about stuff that they had and didn't need. How the stuff was getting in the way of letting their souls relax, eat, drink and be merry. Let's just take that as a given.

Why do the Colossians get told to put aside all those behaviors? Yes, because it's keeping them from their lives hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). It's keeping them from realizing *that there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free*. (Colossians 3:11) It's keeping them from really knowing that *Christ is all in all*. (Colossians 3:11)

How is it keeping them from that right relationship with God? Because *fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language* is what they are putting in their barns for later. It's what we all put in our barns for later. It's as if by having access to weapons grade slander, purified for years in the barns of our hearts, we are better equipped to win a war that can never be won. Of course, we never intend to use it, but if we have it, we can win the competition when we come up against it in someone else. Somehow we act as if we are better Christians because we have more precise gradations of evil desire than anyone else, so we are better equipped to judge who is winning the competition to be more Christian.

As smart and hungry for learning as they are, my PhDs know that if you care passionately about infants' haptic responses, you're not going to win a competition against magnetic-shape memory alloys. So that let that go. Their barns are full of what they love, what makes them even more excited about the journey they are taking in their discipline. They don't try to win competitions that have no sane form of measurement.

We stay in love with the Christian journey by acknowledging that we don't need wrath to combat wrath. We don't need greed to combat greed. We can empty our barns of all that *stuff* because it is weighing us down and holding us back. We have made the commitment to love the journey to Christ. Let's just keep the stuff we find interesting about that. For me, I love finding new Sabbath practices, I find exploring what role perfection does and doesn't play in Christian life deeply compelling. For others of you, it's the connection between what you experience in worship and the higher power you lean on to maintain sobriety. For others, it's how you experience the divine through music, both sacred and secular. Still others are working on finding ways to keep drawing from the well of cool, deep peace you find when you are with your community of faith.

When I tell my colleagues with PhDs how much I admire them for the smarts and down-right grit it took them to get their degree, they almost always say the same thing, "You know what PhD stands for, right?" Piled higher and Deeper. Jesus is cautioning us against filling our barns with toxins that don't lead us to God. What if we piled them higher and deeper with the elements that cause us to fall ever more in love with our journey to God?