Love Thy Students

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I. Introduction

The key to being a good teacher, more important than introducing innovative pedagogies, utilizing integrative technologies, preparing compelling lectures, designing engaging assignments, or having clear and reasonable student expectations, is to love one's students, or so I will argue. Drawing on resources from the Christian tradition on the nature and value of love, in this essay, I discuss why we as university professors should love our students and what it might look like to do so. I defend the claim that the commandment to love one's students is neither too demanding nor inappropriate but exactly what should be expected of any university professor who takes his or her vocation as teacher seriously.

II. Love's Desires

I once asked a colleague whether he loved his students. "I love them like I love my enemies," he replied. That was meant as a joke, of course, but there was also something sincere about his reply. For Christians really are called to love their enemies (Matt 5: 44). Indeed, love is the central commandment of the New Testament. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Christ tells us:

> You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. (Matt 22: 37-40)

And in the first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul says:

> If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. (I Cor 13: 1-3)

But what does it mean to love? What would it look like to love one's students? And is that even the sort of thing to which we should aspire? How can one love one's students in such a way that it becomes neither too demanding nor inappropriate?

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, love has two key components: one must desire the good of the other and one must desire union with the other. A love lacking in one or both of these desires is either a severely deficient love or no love at all.[1]

To desire the good of another is to desire some actual good for that person, something that contributes to his or her objective flourishing. Here objective flourishing can be understood as the sort of happiness of which we are capable in this life, which consists in the realization of our natural human capacities (including our capacities for wisdom, virtue, and friendship), and that sort of happiness which we await in the next life, which consists in the beatific vision.

Importantly, to really love another person I must desire some good for the person for his or her own sake. To love another person is not to desire some good for that person so that I might benefit. I can't be thinking about what's in it for me.[2]

To desire union with another is to desire to be united or joined to him or her in some particular way. Unity between persons need not, and in many cases absolutely should not, involve any kind of physical contact or even physical proximity. As Aquinas explains, one person can be united to another in intellect by coming to learn or contemplate the same truth, or by coming to appreciate or be concerned about the same sorts of things. And one person can be

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[1] See, for example, Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, Q. 27, A. 2, Co. For help in understanding of Aquinas's account of love, I am indebted to the following works: Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) (especially chapters 5 and 6); Eric J. Silverman, *The Prudence of Love* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2009) (especially chapter 3); Alexander Pruss, *One Body* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) (especially chapter 2); and Anthony T. Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2018) (especially chapter 1).

[2] See, for example, Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, Q. 23, A. 1, Co.

united to another in will by coming to love what he or she loves or by coming to share some of the same goals.[3]

To love, then, is to desire the good of the other and to desire union with the other for his or her own sake. When that love is reciprocated, a friendship is formed. And when it is made a habit, it becomes a virtue.

But whom should I love? Christians are commanded to love both God and neighbor. Indeed, we are commanded to love our neighbor out of our love of God.[4] For to love God is to love what He loves. And, since God is perfectly loving, He loves all of his creatures. Human beings, in particular, are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1: 27), and so in that sense are especially beloved by Him. And so we are commanded to love not only ourselves, not only our friends and family, not only those with whom we share certain interests, or history, or nationality, or ethnicity, or geography, but everyone: strangers, criminals, outcasts, and even our own enemies. Every one of these is my neighbor. Everyone one of these is someone for whom and with whom I am commanded to desire good and union.[5]

But how am I to love my neighbor? What form must that love take? There are numerous examples in Scripture, in the great works of the Christian tradition, and in the lives of the saints of what it looks like to love another person.[6] In the Catholic tradition, many of these are formalized as the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. One can love one's neighbor by

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[3] Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, Q. 28, A. 2, Co. See also Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love*, pp. 7-8 and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, chapter 6. Stump emphasizes two key components of personal union: personal presence and mutual closeness, neither of which require any kind of physical contact or physical proximity.

[4] See, for example, Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, Q. 25, A. 1, Co.

[5] See, for example, Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, Q. 25, A. 4, A.6, and. A. 8.

[6] With respect to Scripture, there are, perhaps, two obvious examples. First, there are St. Paul's remarks in the first letter to the Corinthians (which immediately follow the quotation cited above and which are often used in wedding ceremonies): "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (I Cor 13: 4-8). Second, there are Christ's words in the Gospel of John: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15: 13).

addressing his or her physical needs (by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, burying the dead, and giving alms to the poor) or by addressing his or her spiritual needs (by counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing the sinner, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving transgressions, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead). Understood rightly, each of these involves a desire for some good of the other and a desire for some kind of union with the other, either in this life or the next.[7]

III. Each and Every

We as teachers have an obligation to love our students. This obligation stems not only from the universal obligation that we have to love everyone, or even from the particular contractual obligations that we accept as terms of employment by our universities, but from a special obligation we have to those individuals who are in a state of dire need and who have been placed in our care.

In most cases, I do not choose my students. My students are given or assigned to me, they are placed in my care, either deliberately by others, or by accident of circumstance. A mentor of mine once compared the experience of welcoming a new class of students to discovering a basket of puppies left outside your door. It would be cold-hearted and cruel, even vicious, to simply ignore those puppies and go on with my day. And it would be similarly cold-hearted and cruel, even vicious, to reach out with care and concern to only some of those puppies and leave the others behind. In an analogous way, each semester I discover a new basket of students at my door, each at varying levels of immaturity and helplessness, none of them quite fully independent, and all in need of goods that I have in my possession and which are available for me to share. To simply ignore those students, to not reach out with love to persons in such a

[7] For more on the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, see here, here, and here.

state, or to reach out with love to only some of them and leave the others behind, would demonstrate a serious defect in my character.

We as teachers, then, have a moral obligation to love our students. And, indeed, for that reason, we have an obligation to love *all* of them. I must love not only those students who perform well, those who show interest in the class, those who visit me during my office hours, those who contribute to class discussion, those who are polite and appreciative, those who laugh at my jokes and praise my teaching style, those who turn their work in on time, those who work hard, those who show marked improvement through diligence and determination, and those students who have chosen to major in my discipline. If I have an obligation to love any of these students then I also have an obligation to love those who struggle, those who seem disengaged or disinterested, those who rarely attend class, those who are quiet and inattentive, those who are rude and dismissive, those who sleep or sigh loudly in class, those who criticize me openly or behind my back, those who show disregard for due dates and class start times, those who come across as lazy and unmotivated, those who disappoint or underachieve, and those who have no interest whatsoever in my discipline but who are taking the course to fulfill one of their general education requirements.

Even more than that, we as teachers have an obligation to love *each* of our students. Now, if to love another person is to desire the good of that person, then to love some particular person is to desire some particular good for that particular person. Love requires being attentive to the particular needs and desires of the other, so that I might desire the particular goods that would be most conducive to that individual's flourishing.[8]

To love each of one's students, then, requires, I think, knowing each by name, knowing their relevant strengths, struggles, successes, and shortcomings, and knowing enough of each

[8] This is a point emphasized by Pruss in *One Body*, pp. 19-20 and 23-27.

student's story to be able to tailor individualized feedback, recommendations, and accommodations. I need to know my students well enough to know whether, on some particular occasion, they are in need of scolding and stern advice or support and encouragement. I need to know them well enough to know whether the reason for their turning in an assignment late or missing class is a legitimate issue that needs to be attended to or something that they need to work out on their own. I need to know their goals and their aspirations well enough to be able to advise them accordingly. It is true that this sort of individualized care may not be possible in large lecture halls or with an increased course load. To that I would say: in such contexts it may not be possible to adequately love each of one's students, which is to say that, in those conditions, it may not be possible to completely fulfill one's vocation as a teacher. Class size and course loads matter.

IV. Office Hours

If we, as teachers, ought to love our students, how might we do that? What sorts of goods ought I desire for my students? To what sort of union with them should I aspire? The sorts of goods that one should desire for another person and the sorts of union that one should desire with him or her depends crucially on several factors. First, it depends on facts about the other person. What sorts of goods does this particular person actually need or desire? Are his or her most pressing needs physical or spiritual? Which specific physical or spiritual needs does this person have? Here I might run through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to determine which are most relevant and which are most urgent for the particular person.

Second, the sorts of goods that one should desire for another person and the sorts of union that one should desire with him or her depends on facts about me. What sorts of genuine goods do I have in my possession that are available to be shared? Here I should look to

determine which material goods I have in surplus and which gifts or talents I have that might be used to tend to others' spiritual needs. But I should also note which of those goods are available to be shared. If I have already committed my time or my money or my attention to others in my care, then the time or money or attention that I have in my possession may not be available to others who might ask for it.

The sorts of goods and the sorts of union that should be desired also depends on the particular "offices" that each party occupies. By office I mean the particular type of relationship that the two persons already enjoy and the particular positions in that relationship that each person already occupies. Different types of relationships carry different kinds of benefits, responsibilities, and expectations, and involve different kinds of interactions. It would be a failure to love as I should if I were to desire the very same sorts of goods and the very same sorts of union with both my daughter and my primary care physician, for example, because I occupy very different offices with respect to each. I occupy the unique and demanding office of parent with respect to my daughter, and only the more general offices of patient, client, neighbor, and fellow citizen with respect to my doctor.[9]

Finally, the sorts of goods and sorts of union that should be desired depends on a proper ordering of one's relationships. Not only are there different types of relationships and different forms that love can and ought to take in those differing relationships, some relationships should

[9] For more on the offices of love, see Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, pp. 98-100. It is worth noting that because each of us occupies multiple offices at any one time, it is possible to be related to another person through more than one office at a time. So, for example, my daughter could also be my primary care physician. Many of the offices that we occupy also change over time, and so I might not be related to the same person through the same office over the entire course of our relationship. Over the course of my life, I might shift from being the care-giver of my infant child as a young adult to being the care-recipient of my adult daughter in my old age. In such case, the particular goods and mode of union that each of us desires might shift naturally over time.

be rightly seen as more important than others. I should not desire to give more of my time and energy to my coworkers, for example, than to my wife and children.[10]

What sorts of goods, then, would it be appropriate to desire for one's students? As experts in particular disciplines with distinctive gifts and talents for sharing the most important insights found within those disciplines, the primary goods that we should be desiring for our students are the goods of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and the habits of mind that facilitate the acquisition of those goods.[11] University professors can desire other goods for their students, such as career success, healthy relationships, the maximization and proper utilization of their unique gifts and talents, and, ultimately, loving union with God, but it seems to me that it is the role of a professor to desire the acquisition of those other goods by means of the primary goods that belong to our office. For those are the goods that we have in our possession, those are the goods that are available for us to share, and those are the goods that are expected from us by our students, by their parents, and by the universities that employ us.

But what sorts of union would it be appropriate to desire with one's students? It is crucial to reemphasize that the desire for union with another person need not, and in many cases absolutely should not, include a desire for any kind of physical contact or even physical proximity. Indeed, for a teacher to desire any kind of physical union with his or her student would be a serious failure to appreciate the proper office and order of love which the other occupies. But it also seems perfectly natural and appropriate for a teacher to desire other forms of union with his or her students.

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[10] See, for example, Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, Q. 31, A. 3. I have chosen here an uncontroversial example to illustrate this general point. It is much more difficult, perhaps even ill-advised, to try to spell out in precise detail the complete ranking of all of my relationships with respect to their priority or importance. For Aquinas's take on the "order of charity", see his *ST*, II-II, Q. 26.

[11] With respect to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, then, the most relevant for our profession would be "instructing the ignorant," though as anyone with at least a few years of teaching experience will report, over the course of a semester, there are also plenty of occasions to "counsel the doubtful," "admonish the sinner," "comfort the sorrowful," "forgive transgressions," and "bear wrongs patiently."

So, for example, a teacher can and should desire some kind of union in intellect or will with his or students. A teacher can and should desire that his or her students come to learn or contemplate some of the same truths and come to appreciate or be concerned about the same sorts of goods, namely those pertaining to the life of the mind.

If one is supervising graduate students or aspiring undergraduates, then a professor might also desire a kind of union of profession. He or she might desire that those students might come to join him or her in the discipline, as co-author, as interlocuter, as fellow promoter of some particular view, author, or approach, or even as critic and rival. On this last point, I am reminded of a passage from C.S. Lewis's great work, *The Four Loves*: "If we [university professors] are any good we must always be working towards the moment at which our pupils are fit to become our critics and rivals. We should be delighted when it arrives, as the fencing master is delighted when his pupil can pink and disarm him."[12]

When one teaches students who are still searching for God or are struggling with their religious convictions (which is many of them), then a professor might also desire a kind of union of faith. A university professor has to be especially guarded against pressuring or manipulating his or her students into accepting some particular doctrine or religious tradition. But a teacher might desire that his or her students, by their own volition and in their own time, come to believe in God and in the truth of Christianity and so be united to him or her in the contents of their belief and in the outward expressions and practices of those beliefs. For, if the professor truly believes that those propositions of faith are true, then he or she should want his or her students to come to believe them as well, at least inasmuch as the professor desires that his or her students come to possess the fullness of truth.

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[12] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960): p. 51.

Finally, for any students one might have, a professor can also desire a kind of union of joy. A teacher might desire that students not only come to learn or contemplate some of the same truths, but also come to experience the same sort of joy that the contemplation of those truths has brought to the teacher's own life.

V. Conclusion

Preserving a healthy, professional, and fruitful relationship with one's students is a delicate matter. A university professor must exercise constant vigilance in directing each relationship to its proper ends, and in making sure that the student maintains a firm understanding of the proper goods and forms of union that are appropriate for the relationship, given the relevant offices and orders of love. I often find myself reminding my students that I am not their therapist, I am not their physician, I am not their priest or pastor or confessor, I am not their parent or sibling, and I am not their coworker or peer. I am their teacher, and the primary goods that it belongs to my office to desire for them are the goods of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and the habits of mind that facilitate the apprehension of those goods. I am happy to direct my students to trusted individuals within those other offices who can tend to those other needs, but it is beyond my office to do more than that. I think that it is when the teacher or the student (or both) fail to remember the proper office that each occupies, and the proper goods and forms of union that are appropriate to those offices, that unhealthy or inappropriate attachments develop. But our response as professors to these legitimate concerns should not be to refrain from loving our students altogether. Our response should be to work toward a better understanding of why we should love our students and what form that love should and should not take.