A sermon for the inauguration of
Dennis C. Trotter
as the fifteenth president of
Hastings College

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Texts: Proverbs 2:1-10; Mark 12:28-34

These words of Jesus are undoubtedly familiar to many of us because three of the New Testament gospels report that Jesus quoted these verses from the Old Testament, albeit with wording that is slightly different in each occurrence. In what is known as a “controversy story,” an account of Jesus’ confrontation with his opponents that is told in such a way as to highlight the clever way in which Jesus responds, Jesus is asked about which of all the commandments, which of all of God’s instructions, is the most important. And he responds by quoting these verses from Deuteronomy, sometimes known as the *Shema*, from the Hebrew word meaning “Hear,” the first work in this verse:

According to Mark’s version of this encounter, Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these. After that [we are told], no one dared to ask him any question.”

My friends, the balance implicit in that quote – loving God with all of our being – heart, mind, soul, and strength – lies at the heart of the liberal arts education here at Hastings College. Our pioneer predecessors on the Nebraska plains knew the importance of the balance implicit in that quote; they, too, knew the importance of loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. They knew very well how to love God with heart and soul – within just a few years of the founding of the City of Hastings, Congregationalists and Lutherans and Presbyterians were all holding regular worship services, sometimes in sod houses, or primitive dugouts, or covered wagons, or – later – in borrowed schoolhouses.

For those early pioneers, the life of the spirit was alive and well here on the prairie. What was missing for them was the life of the mind. At the end of the nineteenth century, the founders of Hastings College sought to add a balance to their lives by establishing the intellectual rigors of a liberal arts education to supplement a then-flourishing frontier spirituality; spirituality abounded in the nineteenth century, but learning was often in short supply.
In the month of August 1873, the First Presbyterian Church of Hastings was established, and that same month, the church proposed to build a Presbyterian college here in the city of Hastings. As one early history of Nebraska Presbyterians puts it, these pioneers recognized that “good education and true religion must join hands to secure the best citizenship.” In 1882, Hastings College came into existence with a service of worship in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church. For those early pioneers, then, the life of the spirit was inseparably linked to the life of the mind.

And that’s as it should be. As people of faith, we affirm that God has created our minds. God has given us inquisitive minds to grow and develop to learn more about the world God has created. As we learn about the sciences, we learn more about the nature of the universe God has made. As we learn about the social sciences, we learn more about the various ways that the children of God work together as part of the human family. And as we learn about the arts and humanities, we learn more about the rich cultural diversity of a humanity created in God’s image. Ultimately, the more we learn about the world, the more we learn about the One who is God and Creator of us all. For, ultimately, all knowledge leads back to God. The writer of the Old Testament book of Proverbs knew that. God is the source of all true knowledge and wisdom. As Trina Johnsten read this morning, “If you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek wisdom like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures -- then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.”

In an outstanding sermon given here at this week’s Alumni Chapel service, my friend and colleague Bill Nottage-Tacey quoted the medieval theologian, Anselm of Canterbury, who spoke of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” and I believe that’s a good description of the life-long learning to which all faithful people should aspire. Now, more than ever, we need faithful, well educated people to guide us through the uncharted waters that lie ahead. Neither a faithless education nor an uneducated faith is enough for the living of these days. We need, now more than ever, citizens who can bring together the life of the mind and the life of faith, citizens who can unite both faith and understanding. Like our spiritual forebears here on the Great Plains, our faculty and staff here at Hastings College are concerned with the whole person – not only as students learn about the whole curriculum of the liberal arts, but as students grow and develop as individuals, in mind, body, and spirit.

In my time at Hastings College, I have learned that Hastings College is a very special place, because many of the faculty and staff care very deeply about our students as a whole person, as we watch them grow and develop, not only in the classroom, but outside the classroom, on the athletic field, or on the theater stage, in the concert hall, or in the chapel. In a profound sense, then, the concern that we have here at Hastings College for the well-rounded wholeness of our students reflects the concern of the Jesus that we might all grow as we seek to love God with heart, mind, and strength. Hastings College is dedicated to the ideals of loving God not only with our mind, but also with heart and soul, as we seek to live lives of meaning and purpose.

Years ago, in the early 1920s, a young woman arrived at Hastings College from a small Nebraska town. That young woman went on to serve two terms as the president of the national YWCA organization, and she later described her gratitude for Hastings College. Those four years at Hastings College were, as she said,
the “age of the Flapper, Jazz Prohibition, and the Speak Easy, Scott Fitzgerald and the Scope[s] “Monkey Trial.” “In the sheltered life at Hastings College,” she recalled, she was “not aware of any of those trends.”

“During those years,” rather, she and other students “were given a ‘ground on which to stand’ for life in this rapidly changing world. We were exposed to values and attitudes,” she went on to day, “to a religious faith and to commitment to service, to a respect for decency and acceptance of all people and to a curiosity for learning, all of which truly changed the course of my life.”

She appreciated “the faith and commitment” that became a deep part of her life, recalling the words of missionary Joseph Oldham, who said “that we find the good life, not by who we are, not by what we do, nor by what we have. We find the good life by what we give ourselves to.”

“We find the good life by what we give ourselves to.” Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends, and Dennis – to what will you give yourselves, heart, mind and soul, during this new era at Hastings College?

One of the scribes asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’” If we understand this, Jesus says, we “are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The Rev. Dr. David B. McCarthy serves as Associate Professor of Religion and Chaplain to the College at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. He earned a B.A. with a double major in French and Religion from Carleton College, a Master of Divinity from Harvard University, a Master of Arts in French from Duke University, and a Ph.D. in Religion from Duke University.

Before coming to Hastings in 2001, he served churches in New York and North Carolina, and taught at Harvard and Duke University. He has written thirty book chapters and articles, and has served the Presbyterian Church (USA) in a variety of capacities; he currently chairs the Ecclesiastical Relations Committee and the Collegiate Ministry Task Force for the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. He is married to the Rev. Joan LaFollette McCarthy, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs at Hastings College, and they have two daughters, Julie and Laura.

1 Julius Frederick Schwarz, History of the Presbyterian Church in Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1924), 66.