



His Teaching

By Allison Duncan '07

Dr. Cary begins our first Faith and Philosophy class by laying out the rules. “Rule number one,” he booms. “Coffee is allowed.” He holds up his blue mug as if he is toasting the class, and we chuckle. “Rule number two: interrupt me. This class is not about my ideas and what I think is true as the professor, but it’s about you exploring your own ideas and finding out what you think. We have to learn from each other, so feel free to interrupt and tell me why you think I’m wrong. Just be aware that I will probably try to tell you why I think you’re wrong, too.” Dr. Cary punctuates his sentence by banging his coffee mug on the table for emphasis.

Depending on the texts we are studying, he sometimes shouts out ideas and questions to the class and other times lowers his voice to an

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awed whisper. I love to hear him read a psalm or proverb to us with an earnest, hushed wonder at its meaning. The pages of his Bible are dense, heavy with insights and cross-references packed into the margins. And yet, for all his knowledge, he is not afraid to admit his ignorance in the face of mystery. “I don’t know,” he sometimes tells us. “I’ve spent 45 years with this question, and this is as far as I’ve gotten.”

Despite these deep questions, Dr. Cary does not let the complex theological arguments we discuss eclipse the purpose of theology. “Some preachers preach only about proofs and starve their congregations,” he tells us. “But theology is not about proofs. It’s about preaching the Gospel.” In his role as a philosopher, Dr. Cary explains intricate proofs to us; in his more crucial role as our teacher, he aims with all of these explanations to point us to Christ. His teaching makes clear that proofs and arguments are never ends in themselves. They proceed from and direct us back toward the Gospel.

A few weeks into the semester, we start studying Peter Berger, a philosopher who ponders why a mother comforts her child by saying, “Everything’s okay.”

“The mother is affirming order,” Dr. Cary explains. “But why is there an ordered universe? On what basis can the mother tell her child that everything is okay when lots of children in the world are abused and raped and killed? Why isn’t the mother lying?”

The class is silent. Dr. Cary continues, “A belief in a just, merciful God justifies the idea that everything is okay. Otherwise this is a lie. Why is it a lie if we don’t believe in God?”

Dr. Cary waits, searching for someone who will dare to answer. “Come on, people. Somebody tell me why it isn’t a lie that everything is okay.” His voice is taking on urgency. “As Christians, we believe in a God who defeats death,” he says. “But this is too abstract—we have to tell a story to know this. And please don’t just use the word ‘God’ in your story. Somebody tell me a story to say why it’s true that everything is okay.” He paces tensely.

My friend Dan risks a simple reply. “Christ died for us on the cross and rose from the dead.”

“Yes!” Dr. Cary explodes, nodding with his whole body. “We tell a story and we sing at Easter.” He breaks into a hymn with a roaring volume that swallows up the room, “Christ died and is risen again!” If this is not at the center of your faith and your thinking about God, then put it there. Give me Jesus Christ or give me nothing! I don’t give a hoot about all this experiential garbage that the churches are teaching nowadays.” He slows the tempo of his speech and his voice draws back from its crescendo in sound but not in force. “Julian of Norwich was a wonderful medieval woman who had visions of Jesus in which He said, ‘All is well. I will keep My word and all will be well.’ Don’t be surprised that terrible things happen. This world is a terrible place. That’s why Christ died on the cross.”

An abrupt rustling of papers and zipping of backpacks signals the end of the class. The students file out. I linger, watching Dr. Cary sit down and thrust his elbows forward on the table, resting his head in his hands.

He turns to me suddenly. “Allison, was I too hard on people by yelling at them today?”

I remember for a moment the wisdom that the octogenarian pastor emeritus at my church taught his parishioners once. Pastors should never preach at or even to the congregation, he told us. “We preach for them,” he said, “for their good.”

“No,” I answer Dr. Cary. “You weren’t yelling at us; you were yelling for us.”

After the service is over at our church on Sunday, the congregation funnels out of the sanctuary. The silence gathers as the organ postlude fades. I see Dr. Cary move closer to the front of the church and sit down alone in a pew. He rests his fingers under his chin, apparently in quiet meditation. He gazes beyond the altar, arrayed in its draperies of green and gold, and looks at the carved image of Jesus dying on the cross—stark, severe, and beautiful.

The image of my professor looking at the cross fills me with regard for him. I am tempted to marvel at his deed, his devotion, his character. But he knows that he must decrease and Christ must increase. His contemplation invites me and all his students to follow him in marveling at our Savior. The aim of his teaching and his example is to point not to himself, but to the man on the cross.