

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

NOVEMBER 2017

Dear Friends,

Earlier this month we set our clocks back one hour and enjoyed an extra hour of sleep. But that slight adjustment in our clocks signaled a big adjustment in our lives. Darkness settled in. The days continued to grow shorter, colder, wetter. We winterized our gardens, our yards, our houses. We had to let go of our illusions that a few more days of summer might yet appear. We hunkered down, brought out the tea pots, cozies, and hot chocolate, and put the comforter on the bed. And we turned in earnest, if not in full consciousness, to finding as many ways as possible to bring more light into our daily lives and routines.

This shift illustrates a simple truth: there is a thin line between hope and despair. One of the great preachers of the 20th century use to say that “hope is always held close to the things that seem to deny it.”¹ Resurrection seems harder to embrace in the waning days of the year than in the waxing days of spring. And yet we must, not only because of the changing seasons, but also because of the changing times, and most of all, because as followers of Christ we of all people are most to be pitied if we cannot live a faith rooted in resurrection.

These are challenging times. We have become at once more connected and more fragmented. Rapid globalization, driven by daily revolutions in technology, has reshaped the world around us, without asking our opinion or noting our reaction. In less than a generation, the nature of work has undergone a sea-change, the global economy is now so interwoven that almost nothing is made in a single country, farming as we now know it may disappear, money now moves at the speed of light, and ideas zoom around the world so fast that the notion of intellectual property is becoming anachronistic. And yet, the same technology that facilitates our interconnection also permits our fragmentation into tiny enclaves that reinforce our own narrow interests and perspectives. And the same global economy that produces such fantastic wealth also leaves millions of people on the verge of starvation and mired in poverty.

The world is a mess. Our country is a mess. Christianity itself is a broken brand in the United States. The problems we are facing are becoming more and more complex and seemingly intractable. Reading the newspaper, watching or listening to the news underscores the same thin line between hope and despair. The flow of bad news, near and far, is nonstop. Sometimes you just have to turn it off, take a break, take a walk outside, take in the beauty of God’s world, a starry night, a blue-sky day, the scurry of squirrels, the soaring of hawks, the playful flutter of a swallow or sparrow in a puddle of water. Sometimes you just have to visit with a friend, hug your child, read some good literature, listen to some gorgeous music, write a letter to someone, volunteer for something, embrace the goodness of life and the grace of God.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenfranchise ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” Today, of course, it is more than our country that we must be concerned about; it’s our world, God’s world, a world of enormous suffering, immense goodness, and vast possibility.

To disenfranchise means to set free. It means letting the Spirit of God work in fresh, powerful ways, in and through each of us, and in and through our communities. As Paul exhorted the Galatians: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” We have a great opportunity in such times to demonstrate the power of faith communities to make a positive difference in the world, to make the world a better place.

What can theological education contribute to this enterprise? Ministry in the twenty-first century has become increasingly complex and demanding. It requires those answering God’s call to have the best preparation possible. That includes spiritual formation as well as a deep grounding in the Bible and theological reflection. It means providing the skills of personal reflection, interpersonal relationship, social analysis, and cultural sensitivity that will translate to many different environments, and last a lifetime. Our desire is not simply to educate students to fill a pulpit or administrate a church. Our mission is to develop effective Christian leaders capable of transformative ministries whether they serve in pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, nonprofit service, business, social work, teaching, law, medicine, or any other vocation.

We need congregations dedicated to transforming the world, to the doing of the gospel. We need worshipping communities that are motivated to be a blessing, not just to their own members, but to the larger community, even to the world itself. We should be equipping our graduates to carry out ministries in such a way that years from now people will remember what they did to manifest the love of God for the world.

All this requires us to rethink our curricula. It doesn’t mean throwing out everything we now do and starting from scratch; there is much of value in what we now teach at SFTS. But the curriculum of 1997, or even 2007, doesn’t match the nature of ministry in the complex, complicated world of 2017, much less the world that might exist in 2027, a world we can’t fully imagine. Over this next year we are going to consider afresh what we teach and how we teach it in light of the emerging opportunities and difficult challenges facing the church and the world. And we will hold our hope close to the things that seem to deny it.

We begin with this affirmation: that in Christ, the future is open. That means we should open our hearts and use our imaginations to consider the impossibilities that God will make possible and bring to life through the spirit of Christ working in and through us. Imagination is the tool of those who believe in resurrection. And if we believe in resurrection, if we live as people with resurrection faith, then we will not wait for God’s final intervention in human history to set things right. We will act in hope now, incarnationally, as members of Christ’s Body.

Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life

P.S. – In this season of giving thanks, I am filled with gratitude and joy for the SFTS community and for your steadfast and generous support of SFTS over the years. Because of you, we are able to accomplish abundantly far more than any of us could ask or imagine!



San Francisco
Theological Seminary

In Christ. A New Creation.

1. Edmund Steimle, *From Death to Birth*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia PA, 1973), 99.