

TEACHING AND CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

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Laying the Foundations

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth;
before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master workman;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the sons of men.

(Proverbs 8:22-31)

THE DIVINE ARCHITECT

What do foundations make you think of? Stolid, immovable masses, resistant to time and tide? A sense of security and permanence, of having a firm place to stand? A bulwark against frailty and change? If so, the Bible's use of building and foundation imagery might surprise you.

Our urge to build mirrors God's own creative work, and that work resounds with newness and joy. The grand poem of creation in the book of Job begins with this picture of an immense building:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
 Tell me, if you understand.
 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
 Who stretched a measuring line across it?
 On what were its footings set,
 or who laid its cornerstone —
 while the morning stars sang together
 and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7)

There is sheer delight among stars and angels as they watch the world under construction. God is at work, and it is good. The psalmists echo this joy as they imagine the divine architect creating his world:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
 and the heavens are the work of your hands. (Psalm 102:25)

He set the earth on its foundations;
 it can never be moved. (Psalm 104:5)

The selection from Proverbs 8, quoted above, invokes the delight of Wisdom constructing the world with circles, boundaries, and foundations. Such biblical passages undergird this spacious medieval icon of God as the divine architect.

We see the precision of a master geometer inscribing the circle of the earth with his compass. We also glimpse the loving care of a parent cradling the world as it comes into being, a world that bears an uncanny resemblance to a



child in the womb. These two images of creation — the design of a building and the birth of a child — are combined with good reason. Scripture often moves from images of construction to images of birth and swaddling cloths.

Almost as soon as God has given Job the picture of a sturdy, secure foundation, he shifts to the messy, warm, painful, glorious moment of birth, before returning to his image of creation as a house. Listen to the shifting word pictures in these verses:

“Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,

when I fixed limits for it
 and set its doors and bars in place,
 when I said, "This far you may come and no farther;
 here is where your proud waves halt?" (Job 38:8-11, NIV)

God looks upon creation as a newborn baby, lovingly swaddled in thick, warm clouds, and as a newly completed house, doors and windows secured against intruders. Psalm 104 also invokes the image of a newborn earth swaddled with the waters of the sea:

He set the earth on its foundations;
 it can never be moved.

You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
 the waters stood above the mountains. (Psalm 104:5-6, NIV)

And Psalm 102 chimes in with images that move from birth to death, reminding us that the world is not permanent; in fact, it is as fragile as a threadbare piece of clothing.

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
 and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you remain;
 they will all wear out like a garment.
 Like clothing you will change them
 and they will be discarded. (Psalm 102: 25-26, NIV)

These quicksilver changes from buildings to newborns to raggedy clothes and back again to buildings are not by chance. The Bible often uses multiple images, even within a single text, to teach us about God. God is rock and mother hen and shepherd and living water and lamb and door, and many more besides. The sheer variety of these images destabilizes the tidy mental images of him we too easily construct. We cannot nail God down to a single master metaphor; we cannot fit him neatly into our minds.

Here in Job and the Psalms, the cascading word-pictures persistently make

us look away from the buildings themselves and toward the person who builds and gives birth and swaddles and sets limits: “This far you may come and no farther.” It is not the strong foundations or sturdy buildings that in themselves offer stability; stability only comes from their creator. God can just as easily wobble the foundations of the earth as set them in place. And that, in fact, is just what we are told God will do when he comes in judgment:

For a fire will be kindled by my wrath,
one that burns down to the realm of the dead below.
It will devour the earth and its harvests
and set afire the foundations of the mountains.
(Deuteronomy 32:22, NIV)

The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry. (Psalm 18:7, NIV)

These biblical texts don't settle for picturing well-planned and well-executed structures that stand ever pristine and secure, even when God himself is the builder. The foundations of the earth itself will wobble and crack. And indeed, many central and iconic buildings in the Bible, designed or commanded by God himself, are insubstantial and temporary.

Noah's ark, Abraham and Sarah's tent, the “ark” carrying baby Moses down the Nile, the Tabernacle, the plant that shades Jonah, are all fragile, flimsy, contingent structures. They are not made to last; we should not look to them for our security. When King David wants to replace the Tabernacle with a permanent building, God allows his son Solomon to construct the temple, but only after wrenching David's attention away from sticks and stones to the “house” that God has already started building, a house made of people whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ. God does allow the construction of the temple, but he also approves its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (Jeremiah 25:8-9).

In the New Testament, Jesus provocatively announces that Herod's temple will be destroyed and points to his own body as the new temple: “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58, NIV). This temple is Christ and his church,

constructed with living stones, with Jesus as the chief cornerstone. Peter and Paul both echo the image:

As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him — you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (I Peter 2:4-5, *NIV*)

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19-21, *NIV*)

In both the Old and New Testaments, we see that buildings and building are central images, but also that they are more dynamic and fragile than we might expect. Buildings rise and fall, the very foundations of the world will be shaken, the earth will be folded up like a worn-out dress. Even the church, built on the cornerstone of Christ himself and constructed of living stones, moves and breathes and grows.

Joining together building and birth, firm foundations and worn-out clothes, sturdy temples and living stones can revive the somewhat tired metaphor, “teaching is like building”. What if some of the sturdy curricular edifices that we have constructed are ready for collapse or demolition? How might we imagine our vocation as teachers if we think of ourselves as midwives who “bring forth” rather than construct a building? What if we imagine ourselves not as the builders, let alone the architects, of our syllabi, lesson plans, and even students, but rather as living stones who, with our students, are being built up into a spiritual house? How, like God in the ancient icon, do we cradle our students as we mark out the span of the day’s learning?

TEACHING LIVING STONES TO TALK

In her essay “Teaching a Stone to Talk” Annie Dillard describes a neighbor who has dedicated himself to teaching a palm-size rock to speak. It is a task

that requires perseverance and precision: “Larry removes the cover [a square of untanned leather] for the stone’s lessons,” Dillard tells us, “or more accurately, I should say, for the ritual or rituals which they perform together several times a day” (86). As Dillard watches her neighbor devote himself to the rock, she muses about the significance of such work, and the dedication it takes to commit to what is clearly a meaningless, hopeless task. After all, the only response — the only possible reply to this man’s effort — is silence. For Dillard, such silence is not so much emptiness as a refusal. Nature simply refuses to communicate, to respond, to give any indication that the great vastness of the universe expresses anything at all. And yet the silence itself demands our attention: “There is a vibrancy to the silence, a suppression, as if someone were gagging the world. But you wait, you give your life’s length to listening, and nothing happens” (90).

There are times when we may feel that our classrooms are filled with silent stones, that we are engaging in rituals with little chance of success, that nothing will ever happen. Despite the healthy, scrubbed, vigorous, youthfulness that crowds the space, we encounter blank stares and mute lips. Even more frighteningly, we find ourselves encumbered with our own stony hearts, stranded in a gagged world that seems increasingly meaningless.

While it is true that usually “nothing happens” when you attempt to teach a stone to talk, there was once a time when stones almost cried out. If it hadn’t been for the hosannas of the multitudes who greeted Christ on that Palm Sunday as he rode the donkey into Jerusalem, the silence of the mute creation would have exploded into praise. “I tell you,” Jesus said, responding to the Pharisees, “if these become silent, the stones will cry out!” (Luke 19:40).

I’ve often wondered what sort of stones Jesus was referring to. As a child, I imagined him pointing to some rocks along the well-worn path. Perhaps they were like Larry’s stone pupil. But I tend now to picture his gesture as encompassing the whole scene: the rocky heights of the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion and all the surrounding hills and valleys. The noise would be deafening. But even more remarkable would be the fact that such stones cried out at all. “Nature’s silence is its one remark,” writes Dillard, “and every flake of world is a chip off that old mute and immutable block” (87). Perhaps Jesus smiled as he rebuked his seemingly wise but faithless critics. After all, wouldn’t we, as we were fleeing the scene, look back and laugh at such a spectacle?

If even silent rocks sing out their hosannas when Jesus passes by, how much

more boisterous will be the praise of living stones. It was doubtless with a rueful glance back at his own name, as well as these silent rocks, that Peter writes: "And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Combine these pictures: silent stones gaining a voice, living stones being built into a spiritual house, and then consider the classroom. Whether we give a lecture, lead a discussion, assign group work, or use any other pedagogical technique, reminding ourselves that we are not handling lifeless bricks but rather living stones being built together, keeps us from both despair and arrogance.

First, we are reminded that teaching requires patience and reliance on the Spirit of God. No amount of enthusiasm or professorial acrobatics, not even the most expert use of technology, will get us very far outside of God taking hearts of stone, both ours and those of our students, and turning them into hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). So we should neither be overly self-congratulatory when a lesson goes well or self-recriminating when it seems to collapse.

Second, after all our own talking, arguing, correcting, and making of points, we are reminded that what matters most is that we wait and listen. We are not the neighbor talking to an inert rock, we are ourselves one of the living stones, being built together with others into something more beautiful. We *want* to hear these living stones speak, to be part of their conversation. We want to enable and to amplify their voices. We want the noise they make to shake the earth to its foundations. So we will take and make the time in both our preparations and our teaching to listen for God's voice speaking to and through our students.

Finally, I think we can learn from Dillard's assessment of her neighbor's posture towards his stone. She writes, "I assume that like any other meaningful effort, the ritual involves sacrifice, the suppression of self-consciousness, and a certain precise tilt of the will, so that the will becomes transparent and hollow, a channel for the work" (86). As I prepare for the next class, I aspire to obtain that "certain precise tilt of the will" that allows God to work through me, enabling me to teach God's precious living stones to cry out and not be silenced. The "will" part of that phrase reminds me that I have responsibilities to study, work, and generally get ready to teach well; but the "tilt of the will"

also reminds me that all that preparation will mean little unless I am oriented toward God, unless in my teaching, as in my life, I am aware of doing what I do *coram Deo*, before the face of God.

THE CRYSTAL CASTLE

Imagine this. A woman sits at a table, eyes smudged purple with weariness, face deepened into shadows by the flickering oil lamp. All day long she has counseled, taught, encouraged, and prayed with the younger women who live in her house; she has agonized over the fate of friends pressured to conform to church rules in which they no longer believe; she has worried over the progress of her students, noticed a growing tension between two strong-willed housemates. Now she sits staring at a sheaf of papers, pen in hand. She writes a curriculum, beginning in this way:

While I was begging our Lord today to speak for me, since I knew not what to say nor how to commence this work which obedience has laid upon me, an idea occurred to me which I will explain, and which will serve as a foundation for that I am about to write. I thought of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions.

The tired woman is St. Teresa of Avila and these are the opening words of *The Interior Castle*, written in 1577 for the instruction of sisters in the sixteen monasteries she had founded. St. Teresa herself had joined a Carmelite monastery when she was only 19 and had quickly distinguished herself as both a spiritually sensitive Christian and a gifted leader. Grieved over the lack of discipline and spiritual integrity among her fellow nuns, she established the order of Discalced Carmelites, who observed strict rules of poverty and obedience. They lived in the simplest of houses, subsisted on a meager diet, and wore wooden sandals rather than shoes even in winter — hence the name “discalced” or “those without footwear.” Yet when she sat down to write a manual of spiritual instruction — a curriculum — for her sisters, the image she drew of their souls was that of a splendid crystal castle, shimmering with spacious rooms, a miniature heaven on earth.

This castle of our souls must be beautiful, she insisted, because it is the very place where God himself lives. “We shall see that the soul of the just man is but a paradise,” she says, “in which, God tells us, He takes His delight. What, do you imagine, must that dwelling be in which a King so mighty, so wise, and so pure, containing in Himself all good, can delight to rest?” What indeed but a splendid palace? In her curriculum of spiritual instruction, St. Teresa calls her students to look not downward at their sandaled feet or coarse clothes or the turnips on their plates, but rather both inward and upward, to imagine themselves as a beautiful diamond castle, fit to welcome God himself. *The Interior Castle* is thus a handbook for the curriculum of prayer, the central subject matter, practice, and vocation of the Discalced Carmelites.

In this handbook St. Teresa imagines her students as mysterious and lovely buildings, whose splendor can never be fully described or understood:

Nothing can be compared to the great beauty and capabilities of a soul; however keen our intellects may be, they are as unable to comprehend them as to comprehend God, for, as He has told us, He created us in His own image and likeness. As this is so, we need not tire ourselves by trying to realize all the beauty of this castle, although, being His creature, there is all the difference between the soul and God that there is between the creature and the Creator; the fact that it is made in God’s image teaches us how great are its dignity and loveliness.

St. Teresa’s description of the human person as a beautiful building recalls the descriptions of the lovers in the Song of Songs: her neck is an ivory tower (4:4; 7:4); his legs are “pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold” (5:15). She develops this image, imagining the “many rooms in this castle, of which some are above, some below, others at the side” through which the Christian soul progresses in order to come at last to the central, seventh room, “the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse.”

St. Teresa’s vision of her students is remarkable for its sheer beauty. Your soul, she says, is not just a building, but a castle. Not just a castle, but a crystal castle, as bright and enduring as a diamond. Not just a crystal castle, but a crystal castle with many rooms, a castle where God resides.

To see the beauty in another’s soul protects against intellectual and spiritual jealousy. The many rooms in the castle of our souls St. Teresa takes to be

the “different kinds of graces God is pleased to bestow upon the soul.” And because there are so many rooms, “no one can know all about them,” least of all, she says, “a person so ignorant as I am.” So when we see the gifts and graces God has given to someone else, when we glance around their spacious and well-appointed rooms, furnished with costly rugs, and leather armchairs, and walnut bookcases full of first editions and are tempted to compare them to our own apartments, decked out in garage-sale bargains, we will instead have our hearts turned to “praise Him for His great goodness in bestowing [these favors] on others.”

St Teresa’s cascading vision of a breathtakingly beautiful castle counteracts our tendency to employ the building metaphor in more utilitarian terms: first we lay the foundation, then we set up the scaffolding, then we mortar in the bricks, then we shingle the roof. The crystal castle displaces the image we may have of ourselves as the master teacher-builders. Our students are already gorgeous crystal castles, built and lovingly inhabited by God himself. What we — and they — most need is to open our eyes to see the beauty that is already there, to see them as God’s work, God’s building, God’s delight. This, of course, is the language of Paul in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (RSV).

What might be the effect on our teaching and in our classrooms if we imagined our students, particularly the ones we see as more challenging and recalcitrant, as beautiful, spacious castles through which God is making his patient way? How much more care might students take of themselves and each other if, as they looked at their jeans-and-sweatshirt-selves, they saw instead a crystal palace, a castle where God himself lives?

Building the Walls

THE GARDEN AND THE CITY

The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city.

Like many simple statements, this familiar summary of the biblical narrative, stretching from Genesis to Revelation, points to an important truth without telling the whole story. The Bible actually begins not in the Garden of Eden, but rather with the construction of an entire cosmos, understood as a grand and immense building. “For every house is built by someone,” the writer of Hebrews reminds us, “but God is the builder of everything” (Hebrews 3:4, *NIV*). And while the Bible does conclude with the vision of a splendid city, it is a heavenly Jerusalem that is remarkably garden-like, with a flowing river and tree of life placed at its very center (Revelation 22:1-2). Cities and gardens, along with deserts and vineyards and pilgrim paths, intersect throughout the story of scripture.

When the prophets encourage the people of Israel that God stands ready to redeem them, they often intertwine images of restored gardens and rebuilt cities:

Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now inhabited and fortified.” Then the nations that are left round about you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it. (Ezekiel 36:33-36)

The trajectory from garden to city, however, does draw our attention to the steady outward movement from the splendid intimacy of God, Adam, and Eve in the original garden to the vibrant congestion of worshippers gathered around the Lamb's throne in the heavenly Jerusalem. God the architect has big plans in mind: cities and their buildings are meant for people — lots and lots of people.

God's generous, expansive grace is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the crowded corridors of heaven imagined by the Apostle John in his apocalypse. In the beginning God makes a man and a woman; in the end he welcomes their progeny — as many as the stars in the heavens or the sand on the seashore — into his city. So to say that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city is to understand something of God's grand intentions for all that he has made. Perhaps the Apostle Paul is thinking of this creative-redemptive trajectory when he intertwines the two images of cultivation and architecture in his letter to the Corinthian church: you are God's field, he says, you are God's building (I Corinthians 3:9).

Understanding the integral unity of this biblical trajectory from Eden to New Jerusalem helps us counter the still prevalent romantic notions that put images of gardens and buildings into opposition with one another. It is tempting, for instance, to think of gardens as free, innocent, natural spaces, unencumbered by design or toil and to consider buildings merely the result of human engineering, manipulation, and work. After all, it is Cain, following the murder of his brother Abel, who first builds a city (Genesis 4:17).

But a garden is not a wilderness untouched by human hands: God's command to tend Eden is given immediately after his creation of Adam and Eve. This command demands cultivation, the beginning of human culture. Nor are buildings inert objects devoid of creativity, beauty, and life. Gardens and buildings both require construction and are meant to be inhabited and maintained. When we think about gardens and buildings as complementary metaphors, we recognize that they often share one feature in common: they both have walls.

In the Bible, one of the surest signs of God withdrawing his favor is his removal of a protective wall from a garden or vineyard: "So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground" (Isaiah 5:5). A walled garden is emblematic of God's grace and his provision for spiritual growth and renewal. Similarly, a walled city signals that God is among

his people, redeeming and protecting them. Before anyone can even think about constructing a new temple, the bedraggled band of returning exiles must gather around Nehemiah and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. To build such walls, in the biblical narrative, is to participate in the very work of God himself.

THINKING ABOUT WALLS

Walls are important to traditional gardens, necessary to ancient cities, and often serve as positive images in Scripture; what might they tell us about teaching and learning?

In our everyday conversation, we often associate walls with something negative. An athlete may talk about “hitting the wall” to explain the sudden loss of energy that occurs midway through a race. A similar feeling assails almost everyone who undertakes a long writing assignment. Students working on a research paper, whether they are first-years, seniors, or post-docs, commonly report the sensation of “hitting a wall” as they face mounds of information and no clear direction for sorting it all out.

Walls may hide, limit, and constrict in our common ways of speaking. We say that someone has “walled up his emotion” or that it’s like “talking to a brick wall” when we feel frustrated at our inability to communicate with a friend, colleague, or lover. Walls keep secrets. “If only these walls could talk,” we say longingly, as we look around the rooms of our great-aunt’s house. But when we are afraid of being overheard, we warn each other: “Be careful; the walls have ears!” In educational circles, we talk about breaking down walls that divide students or keep them from learning.

In fact, most of our common expressions — our everyday metaphors about walls — are vaguely threatening. Walls are frustrating barriers or ominous enclosures. They prevent us from doing what we would like to do or they cut us off from other people. When the man in Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall* says that “good fences make good neighbors,” we understand that “good” here means “not too close or intimate,” and we mistrust the sentiment.

Of course, after a moment of reflection, we also recognize that real walls are often very good things, where “good” means helpful and even necessary. The walls of our homes and schools protect us from cold, heat, rain, snow, and (usually) insects. A retaining wall in our backyard keeps mud from sliding

down into the rose garden or basement. The wall around a medieval city kept intruders and wild animals out and the citizens safe and secure inside.

Thinking of a medieval or ancient city may help us understand why walls are almost always positive images in the Bible. They speak not so much of confinement as of protection. Think, for instance, of Nehemiah supervising the construction of Jerusalem's walls — with men, women, and children all pitching in to haul stones, smear mortar, and watch out for enemies. Or the walls of a sheep cote that keep away thieves and robbers (John 10). Or Isaiah's vision of restoration: "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: 'We have a strong city; He sets up walls and ramparts for security'" (Isaiah 26:1). The secure salvation of God's people in the new heavens is pictured by their dwelling in a great city whose walls are made of precious stones.

Conversely, think of the biblical image of a broken wall as the emblem of undisciplined and self-destructive behavior: "Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit" (Proverbs 25:8) or of God's judgment against wickedness as the breaking down of protective walls: "So now let me tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground" (Isaiah 5:5).

When we consider the positive roles that walls play in the biblical narrative, we realize that it may be time to reconsider our modern prejudice against them and let these biblical images reshape our "walled off" imagination.

THE WALLS WE CONSTRUCT

Consider how the different walls pictured below might activate your pedagogical imagination.

The walls on the right hand side of the page suggest some creative possibilities for teaching. In the top and bottom pictures they delineate spaces, but don't appear to be holding up their respective buildings. We might imagine using these images to evaluate different sorts of arguments as we think through key questions with our students: Is this argument a load-bearing wall? Will an entire theorem collapse if it is removed or modified? Does this argument function more aesthetically, to clarify rather than to convince? Is this argument — load-bearing or not — intriguing, persuasive, beautiful? Is it functional

(as in the top picture) or eye-catching (as in the bottom picture)? We might also imagine helping students understand that some arguments are matters of taste and judgment rather than of truth and falsity; you may prefer the cool minimalism of the top wall and I may prefer the bold lines of the bottom walls, but both of them serve to mark out one space from another.

The middle picture, however, suggests a different use for walls. Here a cement façade becomes the canvas for expressing dissenting opinions in artistic and graphically arresting ways. A utilitarian structure is transformed, via graffiti, into a public building.

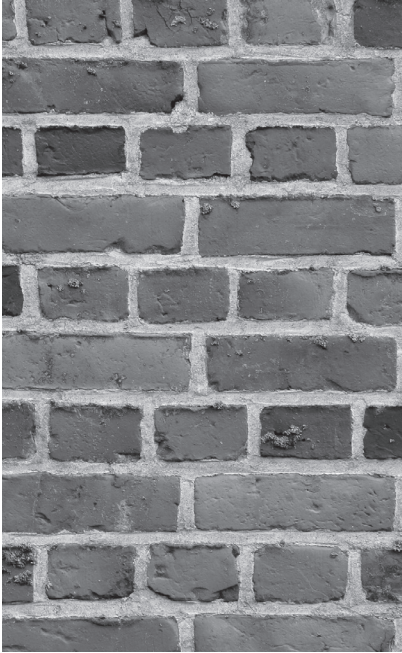
Hmm. If I think about my classroom as not just a physical but an imaginary space surrounded by four walls, might I allow or even encourage my students to spray it with graffiti? Do the walls of my class provide a canvas on which students can work out their responses to the material I present, sometimes in unexpected and even rebellious ways? What would happen if I designed a “graffiti assignment” or just handed out cans of spray paint (metaphorical or literal) after a lecture? In what ways do the walls of my classroom open out onto the public square?

Although I haven’t distributed aerosol cans of paint, I have asked students in literature classes to draw, as a way of jarring their words loose from conventional written responses. I think of this as my own version of creating graffiti. Recently, during a semester-long project in which students in an Environmental Literature class visited the same tree each week and described their experiences in a blog, I gave this prompt:

Return this week to your tree, pen or pencil in hand. Look at it — see it, attend to it — with your hand. You need not be an expert artist to draw your tree; this is not actually an exercise in drawing, but rather an exercise in seeing. Draw continuously for 20 minutes — set a timer. In your blog, discuss these questions: What did you notice as you were drawing your tree? What did you see when you spent 20 minutes actively engaged in seeing with your hand? What did you learn about your tree? about yourself? about the very act of seeing?

Not unexpectedly, most students found the task difficult. Despite my caveat that “You need not be an expert artist to draw your tree,” many concentrated more on their inability to draw than on using their pen as a way to see. They were also a bit disconcerted to be confronted with a drawing assign-

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ment in a literature class. Some, however, found that the exercise yielded some unexpected insights.

As I was sketching my tree I began to realize just HOW intricate trees are. First I started by just sketching a 1ft by 1ft section of the trunk of my tree that included the maple syrup tapping hole. That alone took me about 10 minutes and I know I didn't do it justice. Bark itself is so detailed! There are furrows, crevices, cracks, splits, layers, moss, stains, and shades of all sorts. Unless I had done some super awesome shading, it would be really hard to portray the detail in just bark. (Joey)

What I learned about myself is that I am not a great artist, but I also learned that by simply trying to draw something you can see so much more. . . . Getting the right attitude about a task, I learned, is a key factor, I wasn't thinking I would get much out of this drawing beforehand because drawing isn't my thing, but then I changed my attitude about the assignment and I think I learned a lot because of that. (Austin)

It's incredible how many more tiny details you can see if you're actually looking for the details. Of the many times that I have visited my tree, I never noticed some of the nooks and points on the truck of the tree. This has showed me to actually *look* not only with my eyes, but with my whole self. (Courtney)

For these students, moving outside the literal walls of the classrooms and the metaphorical walls of a literature course, as well as inscribing their encounters on the public walls of a blog, where they took responsibility for what other people might read, pushed them toward significant discoveries not just about their tree but about themselves. In addition, when expected pedagogical walls were broken down, or at least cracked, they were forced to build their own structures of learning. And since persistent, guided practice hones construction skills, we repeated the assignment after we had talked in class about its challenges and opportunities. This time the students were better prepared. One of them wrote:

I revisited my tree tonight, and it went much better than the last time. I brought nothing with me but a notebook, pencil, and an open mind. I found that when I focused on just the tree itself, not the drawing, I had an easier time just being still. I had never really studied my tree, despite all the times I've gone to look

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at it. My dad told me once that when you love someone, you study them. You want to drink in every detail about the way they move, talk, smile, the very way they breathe. You absorb yourself in what they like and don't like, what they dream about, every inch of every facet of their being is waiting to be explored. . . . The branches of my tree are thin, so it sways in step with the wind, but its roots are strong, and keep it from flying away in the dance. The leaves rustle with the wind, in a sort of song that promises freedom and ultimate joy. How did I miss this before? How could a measly drawing even begin to capture how utterly breathtaking this tree is? When you love something, you stop looking at it, and you begin to really *see* it. (Kelsey)

Another simply wrote: "It is one thing to read *about* being attentive; it is another to be forced to *be* attentive." What began as a "graffiti" assignment became a significant building block in learning, through experience, what it means to see and love the world.

In contrast to the walls on the right hand side of the page, the three on the left are more obviously utilitarian. But here, too, we can raise questions of beauty and taste: we see the rough texture of the brick, the solid bulk of the castle enclosure, the open glass expanse of a contemporary office. Noticing the aesthetic features of these walls may slow us down and keep us from moving too hastily to rigid conclusions: a brick wall can be the thing against which you beat your head, but it can also keep you warm, when it houses a fireplace. A castle can wall you off from the world or protect you while you contemplate new ideas. An office building can feel sterile or provide efficient, comfortable working spaces.

The multiplicity of walls and their functions, in the scriptures as well as in our daily lives, reminds us again not to invest any one image with a single meaning. As you looked at the six walls in this teaching moment, your thoughts may have traveled along entirely different paths to particular classes or assignments or syllabi that you might construct. That's okay; in fact, it's good. When you activate an image, such as buildings or walls, it can help you evaluate old practices in new ways, see connections that you had overlooked, or develop new ways of teaching. But the expansiveness of imagistic thinking also points out a potential danger — its boundaries are virtually limitless. That is why once we've let our imaginations be sparked by a set of images — say of six walls — we also need to let them be disciplined in conversation with scripture and the Christian tradition.

In the six pictures we've discussed, only the middle two include people and only in the right middle picture does the person seem to be integral to its composition. But in the Christian imagination, walls are not just pretty or useful structures; they are made for people. Walls allocate places; they protect; they make possible all those human activities that require a secure space. When used properly, walls promote human flourishing. The positive role walls play in the scriptures supports a rethinking of our often too-ready impulse to dismantle barriers or to encourage freedom *from* without considering at the same time freedom *for what*. The building metaphor reminds us to consider what can be learned only within the security of clearly defined spaces, even while we think creatively about the kinds of walls that need demolishing.