Here we are, at the launch of a school year like no other. This is likely the only time all of us will be able to gather in person in one place until the pandemic is under control or this time next year, whichever come first.

Students, you are here because you have heard a call, a vocation, and you have been impelled by that call to get on with your theological education to prepare for ministry in the church, whether lay or ordained. And one can hold off a call for only so long.

Faculty and staff, we are here in the middle of this extraordinary year because—well, because where else could we be? We have been called to the work of helping prepare others for lay or ordained ministry in the church. And that work, that need, does not go away, even in a global crisis.

And so here we all are, setting out on another year of learning.

What kind of learning will this year bring? Paul, writing to Timothy… except not really Paul, we don’t think, as the historical critics have shown… but anyway, *someone* writing in Paul’s name, set forth an image of godly learning, in which we are brought up to know our sacred writings, and to hold fast to them even when others turn away.

All scripture is, as the letter put it, inspired by God and useful to us—“inspired” being a term of art with a bit of poetic flexibility. These are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and more importantly about God’s love for God’s people—God’s love for us. They are stories that shape our identity, stories that bear deep meaning. And so they are inspired and useful—stories that make us who we are.

And because they are stories that tell us who God is, who we are, and just as importantly who we are *called to be*, they are, as the letter put it, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Training in righteousness.

That’s a way of thinking about what this year is supposed to be about—training us for righteousness. Now, righteousness is not *self-righteousness*, nor does it mean the sort of uptight hyper-vigilance of those afraid lest they put their foot wrong and violate some rule somewhere. Righteousness is not a label one earns by avoiding sin, but a distinction one receives by acting as God would have one act—which is to say, with justice and loving-kindness towards others. The end goal is, as the letter puts it, that “everyone who belongs to God may be equipped for every good work.” So seminary is, in its way, not just about being grounded in the tradition, or even acquiring the practical skills for ministry, but about training for loving-kindness—about bending our imaginations and wills to encompass God’s will for us, and developing what has been called the “pastoral imagination”[[1]](#endnote-1) sufficient to do the work of living it out in our vocations. Seminary is about transformation.

It was for John Lewis, the civil rights leader and congressman who died last month. Lewis is mostly known as an activist and politician, but he was an ordained Baptist minister of the gospel, and it was the gospel that impelled him to his work. He didn’t just use the rhetoric and imagery of faith, didn’t just use the cadences of a preacher— his work was fundamentally theological. Go and read Jon Meacham’s book, *His Truth is Marching On*, that came out yesterday, to see exactly how.

It was Lewis’s time at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville that got him started down his path. Tuesday evenings, Lewis attended workshops led by the Reverend James Lawson, workshops about how nonviolent action could bring about the Beloved Community.

Beloved Community, a concept first mapped by the theologian Josiah Royce, was at the center of what Jim Lawson and Martin Luther King taught—the Kingdom of God breaking in on earth,[[2]](#endnote-2) a life together in which all people see themselves and others as beloved children of God.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the 1950s and 1960s, it was an alternative vision to the violently segregated society in which they lived.

We, too, live in a fractured, fallen world. Of course, the fallenness of the world is no surprise to anyone who has read either the Book of Genesis or Augustine of Hippo! But the degradation of our planet and the depth of human depravity has been brought into high relief since last winter and spring, when human pillaging of nature created the conditions for and then unleashed a deadly pandemic, and when white racism was finally recorded on too many iPhones to be ignored. And lest anyone think these things are not connected, remember that this pandemic has been cruelest to communities of color, because of the systemic failure of this country to promote the health and well-being of *all* of its citizens. All the while, a national leader preens as the country burns, and a portion of the electorate rejects reality. It looks like something straight out of dystopian fiction— and we are living it now.

Our task is to offer a different vision. To offer an alternative path to the one that this country seems to have been walking lately, in which each person is in it for the self, and “devil take the hindmost.” To be transformed by what we study here, no less than John Lewis was transformed by what he studied in Nashville sixty-some years ago.

Your task is to use your time at the School of Theology to prepare yourselves to build Beloved Community in the places you will serve. And then, when you get there, as the writer urged Timothy, to “be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, [to] convince, rebuke and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching.”

And there is no better place to start than right here. We prepare to do these things in the future by practicing these things now. We start by practicing the kind of righteousness, the kind of benevolence and loving-kindness, that following Jesus demands.

That will mean simple practices, like looking our for each other’s well-being by taking those steps that will keep everyone in our community safe—wearing masks, keeping six feet of distance, and following public health rules. Because you can’t build Beloved Community when you put your neighbor at risk.

And it will mean hard work, like looking at ways to make the School of Theology more reflective of the diversity of the people of God. The university as a whole, and the School of Theology within it, have been reckoning with our past entanglement with racism and the ongoing structures of white privilege, as a necessary step toward building a future that is welcoming and inclusive of all of God’s children. We will continue and deepen that work this year.

We do these things because they are good practice, for those who want to serve the church and build Beloved Community in the places they will go. But most importantly, we do these things because they are right. We are a Christian community, called to follow the teachings of Jesus, called (as the catechism reminds us) to Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world, bringing everyone to unity with God and each other. So let us embark on this extraordinary year, under these difficult circumstances, with the well-being of each other on our minds, with the words of the scriptures in our ears, and with the example of all those who have sought to build Beloved Community in our hearts. And may we emerge from this year a stronger community for it.

1. Craig Dykstra, “A Way of Seeing: Imagination and the Pastoral Life” *The Christian Century* 125 no 7, April 8, 2008, pp. 26-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998),78-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [https://episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community#](https://episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community), accessed 8/22/2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)