A Celebration of Ethics
Remarks By Robin Lovin
January 24, 2013

Thank you for your kind welcome. My special thanks to all of you for coming, to President Turner for welcoming you, and to Charlie Curran, Rita Kirk, and Dean Lawrence for their remarks. I'm honored by what they had to say.

And I'm honored to be a part of this "celebration of ethics" and to have my little occasional paper included among the publications that are central to it. Certainly, this is the Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility at its best—looking at difficult questions of policy, not only for government, but also for museums, and churches, and medicine; and addressing those questions of policy by setting contemporary issues in a larger context of history, faith, and philosophy. I've always thought that "ethics and public responsibility" is the right way to name the mission of the Maguire Center. There are lots of centers that focus policy, and on telling the public what policy ought to be. But ethics, as Aristotle noted a long time ago, is about educating people to take responsibility for those choices for themselves, for their communities, and their institutions.

That's what an ethics center in a university ought to be about. We might even say that, in that sense, that the university itself ought to be an ethics center: a repository of the traditions and wisdom that enable people to be responsible in their choices, and a safe place to raise hard questions about what responsibility means in relation to the problems we face today.

Back when I was an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, I began meeting with a group of people who wanted to read some classics that they had somehow missed during their education. We read Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and Plato's *Republic*, and also more recent authors like Reinhold Niebuhr, John Rawls, and Martha Nussbaum. We met once a month for lunch in one of the downtown law firms in Chicago. Thirty years later, we still meet, when we can—next up is Michael Walzer's *Politics in the Hebrew Bible*.

What those people had in common thirty years ago was that they were all about six or eight years out of first-rate law schools and they had recently become partners in major law firms. And what they wanted to know was "Now what?" Now what, not just in the sense of "What do I do when I no longer have to work eighty hours a week to make partner?" But now what, as in "Where do I look for direction in my life and direction for all the other lives for which I suddenly have so much responsibility?" Is there anything beyond win/lose, profit/loss, cost/benefit by which to measure choices? That seemed to be another on the list of things that they don't teach you in law school. (I should add in light of my vocation and our present location that most of these people were in church every Sunday, and they weren't getting all that much help there, either.)

I have thought ever since then that my task in the classroom was not just to prepare people to preach their first sermon, or face their first day on the job in business, or teach their first class at a college or university, but to give them at least some of what they would need after they had done that job for five or six years, when they would begin to ask themselves, "Now what?"

As I said, I came to that way of framing my own vocation about thirty years ago, and some people would say that perhaps that is another indication that it's time for me to retire. The "now what" questions are not high on the list in higher education today. We in the universities are instead working hard at becoming "market-smart," intent on demonstrating that we offer good value for money, measured primarily in terms of working skills that will produce a good job upon graduation and solve the immediate problem that the employer had in mind when it went looking for a new hire.

That's important. A university, like a computer chip maker, or a symphony orchestra, or a manufacturer of chocolates or plastic trash containers, survives in part by demonstrating that it produces something that other people find immediately to be delightful, or useful, or both. We have tended to forget that in higher education, and we are appropriately being called up short and asked to account for ourselves in those terms.

But that cannot be the whole story, in the university or anyplace else. If it's just a matter of providing immediately needed working skills, many large employers could do that as well or better than we do by doing it themselves. Some of them are going that route. There are even megachurches that are bypassing seminaries to train their own clergy leadership.

Marketing oneself to the needs of others is not enough. The basic institutions that make up a society—the institutions of education, commerce, religion, human services, and even government—have to be able to tell a story that justifies the claims that they make on society for the resources that sustain them in their own mission and purposes. Individual businesses, individual congregations, even individual colleges and universities come and go as they succeed or fail in marketing themselves to the needs of others. But social institutions—the university, in general, the ecumenical church, the corporation as a social institution—all of these live by claiming what they need to survive as well as by offering what they have immediately to offer.

By what right do universities hold the enormous resources that they do hold in our society, if all they are is purveyors of marketable skills? Unless society *needs* a repository of the wisdom that enables us to make responsible choices and a safe place to raise hard questions, we might as well become wholly owned subsidiaries of the corporations, churches, hospitals, and government bureaucracies that hire our graduates.

The university today is in some danger of forgetting that. In the rush to say clearly and cleverly that they are engaged with the surrounding environment, they may be losing the ability to articulate what kind of institutions they are and why they exist in the first place. That's why the humanities are in some trouble in most universities today. They are the disciplines that are in the first place responsible for that

statement of purpose, and whether it's because they are neglecting to say it or because nobody wants to hear it, all of a sudden nobody is quite sure why we need them.

I speak of universities in general. No doubt some of you are wondering whether I have any particular university in mind. Well, the question is different for any particular university. Higher education as a whole has responsibilities that no individual college or university can fulfill; and every individual college or university faces market challenges that are specific to itself and more urgent in that place than the questions about higher education as a whole.

SMU has faced the challenges that are specific to itself over the past century, and we certainly have learned to listen to what is happening around us. In the eighteen years I have been here, we have transformed our relationship to the Dallas community, in large part by building partnerships with the businesses and civic institutions that have grown up and become world class with the help of SMU graduates. That, as President Turner reminds us, was part of the original idea a hundred years ago, quite as much as educating learned clergy.

At the beginning of our second century, we know what we can do. We have not thought so much about what a university is supposed to be and what it would take to make that idea take form in this place. We have become an important university by telling the world what we have to offer; but we will not be a great university until we summon the courage to tell the world what we need.

And don't think that's because there's nobody in Dallas who is ready to hear that. The truth is that we're not asking for what we need to be a great university, because we haven't even set up the mechanism to figure out what that is.

It would be an interesting development in the world of higher education if the faculty of an important university could claim that task for themselves. And a Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility might just prove to be a place where some of those ideas could be developed, and tried out on the public.

I, of course, will be watching you tackle those hard questions from a safe distance. I'm going to spend this spring at the Library of Congress, supported by an endowment that Cary Maguire and his beloved wife Ann have established there; and then I'll be spending the first few years of my professorial retirement in Princeton, New Jersey, as Director of Research at a repository for traditions and wisdom that we call the Center of Theological Inquiry. But I will not be uninterested or unavailable, if any of what I have imagined for you to do begins to come to pass.

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