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Jesscia: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life, because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. Today we're talking about literature. It's one way that we can express our theology. Here to talk about it are two of our theology professors who are avid readers, and each has brought a piece of their favorite literature to discuss. Dr. Kent Burreson is a professor of systematic theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He has been on faculty since 2000. He earned his Master of Divinity here and a Master's degree and PhD from the University of Notre Dame. His area of research focuses on the history of reformation and post-reformation worship. Dr. Burreson's love of narrative has inspired him to be a reader since childhood. Dr. Burreson, welcome to the show.

Kent: Thanks, Jessica. Good to be here.

Jesscia: Dr. Ryan Tinetti is a professor of practical theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He earned his Master of Divinity here and his doctorate from Duke University. Dr. Tinetti spent 14 years as a parish pastor, and he is the author of the book Preaching by Heart. He writes a regular column for the Craft of Preaching website. He loves words, sentences, and storytelling. Dr. Tinetti, welcome to the show.

Ryan: It's great to be here. Thanks, Jessica.

Jesscia: So the impetus for this episode was an article that Dr. Burreson wrote about a piece of literature for ConcordiaTheology.org. I read it, and I wanted to learn more. So I invited you to talk about it. Before we begin to start the discussion about the books that you've brought, I want to lay a foundation for the topic. Dr. Burreson, how can literature influence our understanding of theology?
Yeah, that's a good question. I think literature allows us to cross that divide between the divine and the human and to understand, you know, how do we live as creatures? How do we fully live as creatures in light of God's creation of us? What does our humanity look like? And how might our humanity be drawn to the fullest expression that God desires of us as His creatures?
Literature can be very helpful in terms of our own theology.

Jesscia: Dr. Tinetti, you wrote that narratives are not just sermon illustrations, but they can offer us more in our understanding of theology. Tell me more about that.

Ryan: Yeah. So I think one of the ways, a trap that we can fall into as not only

as pastors, but as Christians generally, is just to look at literature or books for illustrative material, things that we can use to demonstrate truths of scripture. And certainly it does that. But I think at the most fundamental level, the value of literature for theology is the way that it can transform our imagination and broaden it. I've long been struck by that well-known verse in Romans 12, when Paul says, be transformed and often says by the renewal of your mind. But the Greek word there could just as well be translated as something like imagination in that broader sense of, you know, C.S. Lewis says that imagination is the organ of meaning. It's the way that we're able to connect the dots and make sense of the world that we live in and also of the kingdom that's coming. And so I think literature can help to really broaden our imagination in that respect and help us to see more deeply into God's good world.

Jesscia: Dr. Burreson, you wrote that literature widens our perspective, sometimes narrative.

Kent: I think we often tend to see things as a flat line in a sense. through the back door of You know, we're seeing things only from the vantage individual existence. And so literature, you know, Dr. Kennedy was speaking point of our own to the fact that it expands our imagination. And I think, you know, so what literature does is then as sort of a backdoor, it brings us around to see things in new light, see things in ways that we wouldn't have otherwise seen them. And part of the way it does that is by expanding our imagination, you know. And so we can imagine things that otherwise we couldn't have thought of or couldn't conceived of our own existence personally without that sort of backdoor, without bringing us around to see things from a different perspective.

Ryan: Yes. No, I love how you put that because there's something about in this present age, we just our, our hearts and minds and imaginations can get kind of tired and worn out and we can become so familiarized with the beautiful transcendent truths of the gospel and of Holy Scripture, but we just say, oh, it's kind of old hat. Like, I mean, yeah, God became a baby. Like, we all know that. And yet one of the things that literature can do is help us to see it anew. As you say, to come in through the backdoor, to make strange things that were familiar, to give new eyes to things that we've seen a thousand times before. And I think for us as Christians, I mean, it can be such a blessing because even authors, the authors themselves don't have to be Christian. It's so interesting. They're still able to tap into some of the, of the meaning of and the intelligibility of God's world and help us to see things with, with fresh eyes that we should be able to see already, but for whatever reason can just become kind of tired and overly familiar.

Jesscia: Dr. Tinetti, you wrote that literature can help us overcome the curse of knowledge. Tell me about that.

Ryan: So I think one of the real benefits of reading literature, especially

for preachers, is it helps us to bridge the gap between our experience and the experience of other people. And social scientists have given us this really interesting phrase called the curse of knowledge, which it's so interesting. It has this kind of theological resonance to it. When you hear about the curse of knowledge, you can't help but think about Genesis and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it comes out of the social sciences. And simply put, it's this idea that once you know something, it becomes really hard to remember what it's like not to know it.

Jesscia: Isn't that true?

Ryan: And I've seen it over and over again with my kids as they've been learning to read. It's like once you know how to read, you don't understand, like, why can't my little sister read this? It's so obvious. And this is especially dangerous and devilish for pastors and preachers and Christians, because part of our calling is to be able to sympathize with other people, to practice compassion again, to suffering with others. And when we aren't able to understand their point of view or where they're coming from and we just speak out of our own experience, our own knowledge base, not only are we going to often fail to connect, which will certainly be the case, but also that will be understood and interpreted and experienced as judgment, as you don't care about me, you don't understand me, you don't get me. And so this curse of knowledge becomes especially problematic for pastors and preachers, because our job is to be able to proclaim the good news, to connect the heart of the Father to the hearts of his people. And there's a missed connection a lot of times when we just speak, you know, we've got we've got the knowledge, we've got the understanding, we've got the theology. But guess what? The people in the pew, they often do not. Literature can help us to deepen our experience, our understanding, our sympathy for folks from all walks of life and different kinds of experiences of life. You think about how many stories, think about Charles Dickens, right? And how many of his stories you've got orphans. I don't know what it's like to be an orphan. I was fortunate to grow up in a stable two-parent home. But you can't read a story of Charles Dickens without developing a deeper appreciation for what it's like to be an orphan, what it's like to be impoverished, what it's like to have a hardscrabble kind of existence where you're just trying to get by. And in that way, reading literature can help us to at least to combat, to push back against that curse of knowledge. I don't think any of us can escape it. In this life, but at least it can help us to push back on it a little bit.

Jesscia: I suppose it's easier to love our neighbor if we can understand our neighbor a little bit more.

Ryan: Yeah. And the understanding your neighbor is part of the loving your neighbor, seeking to understand your neighbor and not just say, well, you know, this is just be kind of jingoist with our own experience. This is my experience, right or wrong, right? This is where I'm

coming from. And if you don't like it, too bad for you. But part of that love for neighbor is to seek to understand as best we can get into their mindset and where they're coming from and then be able to speak to them in a way that's going to be more intelligible and understandable.

Kent: It's also an argument for reading across a variety of genres.

Ryan: Sure.

Kent: And reading across a variety of contexts in terms of where the author comes from. So reading translated things, you know, so *Babette's Feast* is an example of that. And that helps us to appreciate, especially in a globalized world, it helps us to appreciate the variety of neighbors that we have around us.

Ryan: Absolutely.

Kent: You know, it's just an advocacy for reading across a variety of genres and reading across authors from other ethnic and national contexts.

Ryan: Yeah. And time.

Kent: And time. Yeah. And time. Absolutely.

Jesscia: Now, each of you brought a piece of literature to discuss. Dr. Burreson and you brought *My Antonia*, a novel by the American author Willa Cather. Why was that your choice?

Kent: Well, honestly, it was my choice because I read it recently. So I had not read any Cather. I have a readers group at my congregation here in St. Louis. And so we read a different novel across various genres nine months out of the year. And so we had just we had read. So *My Antonia* is part of her *Prairie* trilogy. It's the second volume in the trilogy. The trilogy is not does not need to be read in sequence because the novels are sort of independent of one another. The commonality is that they're all based in the Nebraska prairie and in the base basic same context and setting. So we had read a number of years ago the first novel in the trilogy, which is *O Pioneers*. And then my group decided that we would read the second one, which is *My Antonia*. I resonate with her connection between her characters and the land. Land is such an important biblical, which is not even a biblical, it is a biblical metaphor, but it's also a basic datum of the biblical story. The land, the earth is important. It's important to God. It's important to the people of God. It's important to the vision of what Christ will establish when He returns again. So land is critical to the biblical narrative. And so her connection to the land, her understanding of the land, the land is basic character in her in her *Prairie* trilogy. So that's one of the reasons why I brought it today is to dialogue about her character development and also understanding the role of the land, because we become detached from the land in many ways in the modern period.

Ryan: So I'm Midwestern, but I'm Michigan Midwestern, Great Lakes Midwestern. And so I'm

not as familiar with Nebraska. So how does she kind of render it and how would you describe it? Because I'll just be honest in my mind, I just think of Nebraska as the I-80 pass through on my way to Colorado. What is it about Nebraska that she really picks up on or how does she speak about the Prairie?

Kent: Yeah. And I'm not a Nebraska boy either. I have relatives who are. So this is one of the places where the pioneers went in Nebraska to establish new homesteads. The government had provided land that you could purchase very cheaply. And so they settled on this land, the great divide. And it's a very it's like it's like the prairie in Kansas and other places, very windswept, very flat. Generally speaking, I mean, there's some rolling undulations and that kind of thing. You can grow crops there, but obviously the winters tend to be harsh because of the nature of the patterns of the climate moving across the prairie. So it can be a very, very difficult existence. And so she's writing about her. She grew up in the great divide. Willa Cather did. So she's writing in a sense, to a certain degree, these three novels are autobiographical, not directly per se, but obviously they're reflecting upon her own experience growing up as a child on the great divide. Her family had immigrated from the east or at least moved from the east to Nebraska. And so a lot of her many of her characters are reflecting upon that kind of immigrant experience and also the nature of dependency upon the land, how dependent the pioneers were on the land. One of her characters in My Antonia is the father of Antonia. He dies relatively early in the novel, but he dies basically because of despair. Her family were immigrants from Czechoslovakia today, Czech Republic, Bohemia. And he had been, I forget what he was in Bohemia. But not a farmer.

Jesscia: No, he was a skilled tradesman.

Kent: Skilled tradesman of some sort. Yeah, not a farmer. And so he had no experience with farming, but that's what he that's what he had to do when they immigrated to Nebraska. So this relationship with the land, he never develops a relationship with the land and that causes him to become despondent and he ends up taking his own life in the novel. So it's about facilitating the relationship with the land, what that looks like, how that contributes to your livelihood, to your own identity. In many ways, what's going on in the rest of the novel then is what is the relationship with the land? And it's it's conflicted at times. You know, it's not it's not as though it's a pristine kind of thing in terms of understanding the relationship with the land. But you're called back, at least Cather calls us back to the recognition that we have to deal with the relationship, our relationship with the land, because it's so formative in terms of our own experience, in terms of our own living. So that's really what she's up to.

Ryan: Well, and it reminds us that creation is groaning, right? That it brings forth thorn and thistles. And so we live

with that groaning, too. It's very easy to kind of romanticize, especially rural America. That that will happen sometimes where you get these stories where, oh, it's just so peaceful. You think of Little House on the Prairie. Then you read the Little House on the Prairie books, as I'm sure you have with your kids.

Jesscia: Absolutely.

Ryan: The Longest Winter I was thinking of when as you were talking.

Jesscia: Oh, yeah, they're battling.

Ryan: Brutal is hard. Yeah, it was a fight between man versus creation. And so it's it's beautiful, God's good world. But at the same time, we're still living under the curse.

Kent: That's right. That's right. And she and she develops that kind of awareness. There's there's this one scene where Antonia and I'm going to forget the the primary male characters, Jim, Jim, where there's there's the scene where when they're young and Antonia and Jim go out and they lay on the they lay on the prairie, lay on the ground, and they're watching the prairie dogs going around and scuttling around and all this kind of stuff. And then all of a sudden, a snake, a rattlesnake is right by Jim right next to him. And so then he has to deal with this rattlesnake and prevent any harm from coming to them. But there's a sense of beauty and just viewing things from a different perspective because they're laying on the ground, looking up at the sky and watching the prairie dogs scuttle around and reflecting upon what the prairie dogs are doing and all this kind of stuff. And then the snake comes along and obviously there's danger and there's a threat to them and he ends up killing the snake. But and of course, you know, snake is not surprising that that would be the primary the primary threat, you know, going back to Genesis. So you've got this this kind of dialogue between evil and good, beauty and darkness, beauty and ugliness going on within the novel. And it allows you to reflect upon that that dialogue theologically through the narrative, through what's going on in the story, you know, and through the interaction with the land and seeing the beauty of the land and all that kind of stuff.

Jesscia: In all three of those books, even though they're battling the land, the land is where you become more transcendent. When they move to the cities, that's always where sin kind of overtakes them and the story goes down. But when they need to return to something that's pure and clean or good, always back in the... Yeah. Yeah.

Kent: And that's basically how she constructs the story, because at the beginning of My Antonia, it's a dialogue between Willa, although she never identifies herself as such, but it's clearly her, Willa and Jim Burton about this primary character that draws them back to the land. And

that primary character, primary person is My Antonia. So she has him write the story of his relationship with Antonia back in Nebraska. And now he lives in New York City, which is where Cather is as well, you know, and where Cather moved to. So there's a sense of being drawn back to the land and what the land. So remembrance, memory and what the land, you know, what the land brings to you, a certain sense of enlightenment and transcendence. There was a scene at the end where he has come back to see Antonia and her family. It's a very, very loving kind of empathetic scene that develops there. But then he goes to the city, to Blackhawk, and he observes the road now that has basically deteriorated. But it was the road that took you out into the prairie from the town. And he's standing there looking at the road. And basically his memory has come full circle now. And he realizes that this was the point at which their future was charted in terms of their direction, their identity and all those kinds of things. And so that this was the place in which that identity was forged for him and for Antonia and for everybody else. That's that's part of the novel. And that's what she's doing, basically, in that scene.

Jesscia: It was at the crossroads where Antonia's father was buried.

Kent: Right. Right.

Jesscia: He could never bring himself to be in the new land. He's always the motherland. So he killed himself. And that's at the crossroads. That's where his grave is.

Kent: Which, you know, which also his relationship to land. I mean, back in Bohemia would have been the relationship to land. And he couldn't ever adopt a new land, you know, as a place in which to live and forge an identity and forge life for his family and that kind of thing.

Jesscia: So you can see all these ways that this book helps us transcend our own small perspective, seeing a connection to land that we might not have, that really it's very hard to have now. It can rain or snow or be hot and it doesn't change my day. I still come to my air conditioned, heated office and get to do what I do. And then how would I understand the promised land? How would I understand the significance of of Genesis and the pure creation? So, yeah, excellent example.

That makes me think of another story that probably many of our listeners will be very familiar with. We have our students read here at the seminary, which is *The Hammer of God* by Bo Giertz. And if you aren't familiar with it, it's essentially kind of three novellas across one hundred and fifty years or something like that. It has a variety of characters, very vivid characters, the pastors and the people. But it really is a story of a parish of, you know, rural area, a plot of land in rural Sweden and seeing how God continues to work. His grand drama plays out in just the little lives of this little place over a number of years. And you're right, it's an overlooked and

underappreciated theme, but how God is faithful to places, not just to people and abstract locales, but in particular places and parishes, congregations and communities that He meets us there, those physical places.

Kent: And those places shape who we are, how we live, our relationships and the grounding of our relationships, our stories, which is primary to Cather. So the land and the location and the place have a significant impact upon the characters in the novels, but then also our own understanding of who we are. My, my I have a story about my grandfather, my paternal grandfather, which is similar to what's going on in *My Antonia* with Jim, the story at the end of the novel. So my grandfather grew up in Texas and grew up in an area in the Bosque Valley in Texas, which is an area that was inhabited by a lot of Lutheran, Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in the in the 19th century. And his parents had immigrated. And so we would usually, at least every other summer, go back to Texas. And the last time we went, we got to the town where where his sister lived. And my grandfather was he was a very reserved man. And he was he didn't get emotionally worked up. You know, he gets out of the car and he immediately starts to do a dance on the front lawn of her house. I had never seen my grandfather dance, you know, and he's doing this dance sort of jig around the front yard, just rejoicing in the fact that he's back home. And that's essentially what and part of what's going on there is identity, you know, his identity, who he was. He was back at home. He was back on the land that had forged him and shaped him back in relationship with his family and those kinds of things. That's what's that's what's essentially going on with Jim Burton in *My Antonia*.

Jesscia: It's beautiful. Thank you. Wonderful.
Dr. Tinetti, you brought *Babette's Feast* from the collection of stories called *Anodotes of Destiny*, written by Danish author Karen Blixen under the pseudonym Isaac Dennison. Why was that your choice? Well, one thing, first of all, it's a short story and I think short stories are super valuable for pastors, preachers to read. And others have pointed this out, not least because a short story is almost like a sermon in the sense that, OK, I want to try and say a lot in a few words. Poems can be like this, too. And so I enjoy reading short stories. And this one in particular is really well known in part because of a wonderful film that was made. And it's one of the rare cases where there are people who argue that the movie's better than the story. I disagree, but they're both great. They're both tremendous. Yes. And one of the reasons that I love *Babette's Feast* is because it evokes grace and the new creation in a way that can be hard for us, again, to imagine our imaginations. We can see sin and all of its effects very easily, all too easily. But to be able to understand and see how the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and the new creation, what that looks like, what that feels like is a lot harder. And that's what I think is one of the great triumphs of *Babette's Feast* is it gives us a foretaste of the feast to come, as it were. Just to back up for those who aren't familiar with the story, it tells the story, first of all, for Lutheran

readers in particular, it resonates because the two main characters are these two kind of spinsters, Martine and Philippe, named after Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon by their kind of pietist father. This is 19th century Scandinavia, Norway. And they have lived this very pious, faithful, but ascetic existence. They have tried to completely remove themselves, almost monastic, in the way that they they're not enjoying any of the pleasures of the world.

Jesscia: Their father wouldn't let them marry the two girls.
They couldn't get married. Exactly. They're too busy serving the Lord.

Ryan: They're too busy serving the Lord. And there are these incidents early in the story. We learn about how the one was this beautiful singer and she had this opportunity to sing with this world renowned soloist from Paris. And yet just the fact that she started to feel delight and joy in it, she cut off the relationship. Didn't want to have anything to do with it. And so you have this this context of this this couple of sisters, sweet, God fearing women, but who have also in some ways only experienced the barest bits of God's good creation so that they have not allowed themselves to be given to delight in the things that God has given us to to delight in. And so then when you have later on in the story as it unfolds. So they encounter they they receive this woman, Babette, who is in her own right. We learn as the story goes on this world class chef from Paris and because of some political turmoil in Paris ends up having to flee. She becomes kind of a political refugee or her husband, her son are killed back in France. And so she flees to Norway and she now this world class chef becomes basically just the maid for the house cook for these two women.

Jesscia: And they don't know.

Ryan: They have no idea.

Jesscia: No, no.

Ryan: And they couldn't appreciate it.
And so the story is kind of building toward this great feast. And I could tell more about the circumstances of that, but that's part of that contrast and why it is so powerful because of the life, the chosen life of poverty and simplicity and asceticism that the women had had.

Jesscia: Yeah, a theme in that
book that struck me was the difference between the two great artists, the opera singer who is the greatest artist, great artist. Yeah, that's right. Who had realized the potential of his skill and had gone on and then Babette as well as this renowned chef and then the two sisters who had these great skills, the one as a singer. And they kind of kind of hid those skills.

Ryan: Right.

- Jesscia: Because maybe they were too earthly. But then at the end, both of the main characters said, and then in heaven, you will use your gift as God intended. It was kind of the contrast. Did Babette and the opera singer use their gifts best or did the two sisters?
- Ryan: The story doesn't give simplistic answers to that. I will say, you know, it gives us this character of the general, General Lewenhelm, who had been this love interest of one of the sisters at the beginning. And we learn how he has gone on and he has been a vanquisher of worlds. He has achieved all of his grandest ambitions. And yet he comes to realize for what? Right. It meant that he renounced the possibility of real love. It meant that he wasn't able to enjoy what some people will maybe condescendingly call the simple pleasures of life. But what we all know is really where it's at in terms of relationship, place, people and delighting in good work. And so we do see how that kind of unchecked ambition can ultimately be unsatisfying. But like you say, it also shows how neither is it great to hide your gifts under a bushel basket and that the goal is somewhere in that meld of giving of yourself fully, using your gifts to their fullest capacity, while at the same time recognizing that even in this life, if they are not recognized, if you're toiling away as a maid of all work in rural Scandinavia, still you can be enchanting the angels, being a blessing to your neighbors and ultimately anticipating that full realization of it in the age to come and in the new creation.
- Jesscia: And so interesting that there would be this Christ figure of Babette for a bunch of reasons that people will have to read to find out. But the author was not a Christian.
- Ryan: Yeah, I mean, it's just another example of how the way God has spread his truth abroad, That the incarnation, we read in John Chapter one, the light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. And it is truly the case that Jesus in ways that the world doesn't even realize has enlightened everyone. Which is not to say, of course, that everyone has that kind of saving faith and knowledge of Him, but that nevertheless, there can be a kind of, sometimes we would say like a first article understanding, referring to the first article of the Creed, that God as the creator, the one who reigns and rules over all people, Christ who has come into the world. And it says in Colossians one, in whom all things hold together. Yeah, even a non-Christian author is able to tap into some of these powerful truths.
- Kent: In that sense, words are part of the Word. All of our words ultimately find their resolution in the Word.
- Ryan: Right. Yeah.
- Kent: Colossians one, it's all creation.

Ryan: That's right.

Jesscia: So our final question on the show is always this?
What do you want our listeners to remember?

Kent: I want them to remember at least, well, two things.
One, that there is benefit to reading literature, even if you aren't going to read across a variety of genres, find a place in which you can locate yourself in terms of reading, because reading will enrich your own sense of vocation, your own sense of who you are as a child of God, your own sense of how you relate to others, how you serve the neighbor. It's going to enrich all those things. And then from specifically from Cather, I spoke to the issue of memory or remembrance, but the importance of developing that sense of memory, not allowing it to, even though there are painful things, presumably in your past, but allowing that experience of who you were in the past and your relationships and how those may be grounded in particular places and particular times, allow yourself to reenter that environment, to remember and to recall things that will help to focus you toward the calling that God has on you and the new creation, the eschatological vision that He is going to bring in Christ, allow it to pull you toward that vision and toward that reality. So those would be the two things I want people to remember.

Ryan: I would just say that
maybe taking a page out of Babette's book, if I may, to delight in God's good creation is worthwhile in itself. And literature is one of those good gifts. And reading beautiful stories and poems and narratives of all types is time well spent until Jesus comes again.

Jesscia: You don't need to feel guilty about reading.

Ryan: Please don't.

Kent: No, definitely not.

Jesscia: That's it for today. I'd like to thank our guests.
Dr. Burreson, thank you for being on the show.

Kent: My pleasure. Thanks, Jessica.

Jesscia: Dr. Tinetti, thanks for being here.

Ryan: Thank you so much.

Jesscia: And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of Tangible on all the major hosting apps or on our website, ConcordiaTheology.org. You can also find Dr. Burreson's article about My Antonia there. We have a lot more free resources on that website. Check it out. If you'd like to see the show continue, you can subscribe for free share, leave a review. I'm your

producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.