

## TO SERVE OUR NEIGHBOR: MOSES AND MINNEAPOLIS

Exodus 20: 13

[13 October 2008, Augsburg College Chapel]

*"You shall not murder" (Exodus 20: 13)*

*"We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way." (Martin Luther, Small Catechism)*

Earlier this semester, I promised to offer homiletic comments on the three component parts of the Augsburg vision statement: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. In September, I reflected on how what we do here as a college, our core academic work, is grounded in the belief that faith is the gift, call and promise from God that offers us (like Job and countless other witnesses to the faith before us) the freedom to ask our questions, to learn from our experience, to explore the riches of creation, to engage the messiness of the world with confidence in God's redeeming presence. Though logic would argue that I next comment on the second clause of the vision, "we are called," life is often illogical and the events of the past couple of weeks suggest that it is timely that I consider instead the object of our vision, "to serve our neighbor."

I was a fairly precocious Sunday School and Confirmation student, and when your Dad is the minister and thus your teacher, there was a good chance that I would regularly push the envelope on Dad's good lessons. I was thinking about that when I turned to our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures: the sixth commandment as found in the story from Exodus about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

One of Dad's confirmation assignments was to write an essay on the Ten Commandments in the context of the interpretation of the commandments in Martin Luther's Small Catechism. I remember writing page after page about each of the commandments, extending their reach to create a complete moral code. My Dad smiled and patted me on the head.

But that was just the beginning. I went on to college and then to graduate school in theology and social ethics. I studied with Martin Marty and let me humbly tell you that I know a lot about ethics and moral codes. Professor Marty smiled and patted me on the head.

And then my Dad and Professor Marty sent me into the world to live and work with God's faithful people, to follow my calling as an educator and a college leader, and now I know what I didn't know before. These commandments are pretty simple and if you break them, bad and messy stuff happens.

I know this because I now live here with you, God's faithful people who have experienced the bad and messy. Just three weeks ago, our friend and colleague Ahmednur Ali was murdered outside a community center in our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children. Someone broke the

commandment, “You shall not murder,” and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments.

Let’s be clear. The Ten Commandments fit into a very specific context for the ancient Israelites. It was a cultural context that we may not be able to understand very well from our 21<sup>st</sup> century perch. But they also fit into a theological context that may be more relevant than ever to our lives as faithful people in 2008. The commandments are a gift from God that create and sustain a community. For the Israelites, the commandments were a radical new way of being in relationship with God. God spoke these commandments directly to God’s people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God’s will, God’s reign, God’s intentions for God’s people. What a remarkable gift.

And it is God’s gift that I am firmly focused on right now as I lead our mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and now we must live in the aftermath. It has become so clear to me during the past couple of weeks that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner – we all get that, we’re broken, we don’t live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together. God gives us the commandments for our neighbors and our neighborhood.

Martin Luther is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” when he says: This means that “we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way.” Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder – the law covers the murderer – it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice – it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don’t believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us.

At the neighborhood meeting a couple of weeks ago to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, we all experienced first hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were “God is good,” and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood – I think that is what Martin Luther meant as he explained the commandment!

In a more contemporary comment on commandments, journalist and former war correspondent, Chris Hedges, writes in his *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* that “The commandments hold community together. It is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity...The commandments call us to reject and defy powerful forces that can rule our lives and to live instead for others...(The

commandments) lead us to love, the essence of life.” Hedges makes the critical point that the commandments call us out of ourselves, toward our neighbors, and into the community of God’s good and faithful people, into the world, and into God’s reign in creation.

Here at Augsburg, where we spend a good bit of time exploring this theological idea of “calling” or vocation, we all seek to find ways to listen for, wait upon, discern what God is calling us out to be and do. We know that vocations arise from a wide range of sources – from scripture, from personal experience, from life in community, usually from some combination thereof – and the main challenge we face is how open we are to trusting that God does indeed speak to us of God’s will and intent for our lives.

This concept of vocation, which has become central to our entire educational program at Augsburg, is important both for our individual lives and for our lives together in community. In this sense, then, what happened with the shooting death of our student could be seen as a challenge to our institutional vocation. Dozens of us are sent out into our city neighborhood every day to learn and serve. If the streets are dangerous, how can we responsibly continue to put our students in harm’s way? Let’s pull back into the safety of our campus and go on about our business. I think we all can recognize the allure of that sort of response to a vocational challenge – that is what the world would have us do.

But we have the gift and challenge of God’s word in our midst, the commandments that offer us a vision of life with our neighbors, a call to defy and reject the forces that rule our lives, the command to love each other. And that is the foundation upon which our vocation is understood and practiced. God has called us to be here in Cedar-Riverside, the urban neighborhood where we have been with our immigrant neighbors for 137 years. God has called us to educate students here who are skilled and reflective and committed to service. God has called us to be faithful here, to learn from those who are different from us even as we are firm and confident in our belief that God is good. God has called us to be neighbor here, to do acts of mercy and to make this a place of hospitality and mutual respect.

What a tough message for the world to hear. The world chooses death and darkness and despair. And we live in the world.

Professor Lori Brandt-Hale recently reminded me of some very wise words from a most wise guide to life in the world, the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: “...it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ...that is how one becomes a human and a Christian.”

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. God is good. And our good God calls us to live faithfully in the world even when bad and messy stuff happens. God calls us to serve our neighbor. Listen to the commandments for God is here, in our midst, offering all of us

the grace, the faith, the love and the hope we need to be God's people in the world. We choose life. Thanks be to God. Amen.