

WE ARE CALLED

Luke 19: 11-28

[Augsburg College Chapel, 19 November 2008]

This homily concludes the series of three comments I have offered this fall on the component phrases in the Augsburg vision statement: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*. Early in the fall, I suggested that the story of Job offers us a way of understanding how the firm and confident statement, “We believe” grounds all that we are and do as a college – our pursuit of knowledge, our teaching and learning, our lives together in community, our acts of mercy, are all possible because we believe that our lives already have been redeemed and thereby we are freed to explore all of God’s good creation, in its remarkable diversity of experience and awe and sadness and joy and beauty and messiness and wonder.

A few weeks ago, I turned to the outcome of our vision, “to serve our neighbor” by suggesting that our response as a community to Nur Ali’s tragic and senseless murder was an important declaration of how our faith and our calling lead us – in the face of commandments broken – to accompany our neighbors in building up community, in being of service to each other.

And today, we turn to the core of our vision, “We are called.” And we do so in the context of today’s assigned gospel from Luke. Parallel to the gospel most of us heard this past Sunday – Matthew’s account of the trusted servants who were given talents to invest on behalf of their master; some delivering, others not – we have this more difficult passage. Luke’s particular concern to position Jesus’ parable in the context of his journey toward Jerusalem means that the passage is pregnant with meaning around how the prospective king was rejected by his potential subjects. And yet we are left with the core message: Jesus entrusts his servants with gifts to be invested wisely, and when the master returns he expects that those gifts have been stewarded well. The lesson is clear: our God is active in the world, our God trusts us to be partners in God’s work by giving us gifts unearned and undeserved to use wisely, and our God expects us to use those gifts to further God’s will in the world.

One thing I find particularly intriguing about this parable is something that is unstated, except by implication in the behavior of the third trusted servant. The question that is raised by this servant’s (we might say) prudent contention that, given the possibility he might lose the pound he had been given he chose to bury it, what about the possibility that we return with nothing to show for the risk we take in investing our gifts (this possibility rings more than true in the current economic climate)? How would the master have responded if servants one and two had taken reasonable efforts to invest their pounds wisely and instead of the manifold return they earned, ended up with nothing? I think we are left to assume a meaningful part of the character of the master – of Jesus, if you will; of our God – which is given that he trusts us enough to give us these undeserved gifts, his expectation is that we will have the faith and courage and imagination to use them, even to risk them for the sake of serving God’s intentions.

This assumption about a gifting God then sets in place this faithful logic for us as individuals and as community. For Augsburg, in particular, the claim upon our college with a calling is to know that we are trusted and gifted through God's good grace and that we are called thereby to use all of our courage, ingenuity, intellect, passion and faith to use our gifts to be God's people and do God's work in the world. Simple, right? There is no place in this story for hiding our gifts away for fear of losing them. There is no place in this story for apologetics about our God who loves us and the world so much. There is no place in this story for the passive, the middle way, for mediocrity or modesty – this is about the joy and wonder and adventure of gifts abundantly and creatively put to work to serve our God

This notion that we are called then is a genuinely bold statement about the God who loves us so much as to trust us with remarkable gifts and about the world God has created that so needs these gifts deployed to serve our neighbors well. So what are the gifts entrusted to Augsburg College by our gracious God and how are we doing?

The first gift we have is an active faith, a gift we recognize in the first clause of the vision statement. We believe – and thereby we are free to live out our call in service to the world and neighbor; we are free for education and service. I want to be clear that the gift of this active faith is not bounded by existing ideas or images of church and religious doctrine, though we would be foolish not to explore and even embrace those ideas and doctrines to learn what God's faithful people through the ages have found meaningful as they live in the world. The gift of active faith means that this college is free to explore here and now (and in an ongoing way) how God needs God's people to be present, to organize their work, to meet the needs for education and community and service. The gift of active faith means a curiosity about life in God's world with all of God's diverse creatures, a curiosity that knows no bounds.

Our second gift is an immigrant sensibility, a perspective and a sensitivity shaped by our neighbors who have always been immigrants. We have the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of those who have made great journeys, at great peril, to build better lives. We have the gift of not taking for granted the freedoms won for us in great battles at great cost. We have the gift of learning new languages and customs and traditions so that our worldview might be expanded. We have the gift of friends and neighbors whose love for us is authentic and unconditional; whose hard work and enthusiasm for life challenges our complacency and cynicism; whose pursuit of justice and fairness and engagement in a new world is inspiring.

Our third gift is an accessible education, this remarkable legacy from our founders who believed that education should be for all, no matter their circumstances, and that the quality of that education should be of the highest order because that is what God expects of those faithful servants who have been given the gift to teach. This is our distinctive gift for the world, an educational experience like no other available to those who might otherwise not have the opportunity. This is our distinctive gift for students from many different backgrounds and experiences. This is our distinctive gift to have a community in which access to education is celebrated and encouraged and yes, even demanded. We dare not keep back any of the educational opportunity with which we have been entrusted because it is our distinctive gift from our gracious and loving God.

And finally, our fourth gift is an engaging urban place, the gift of our location in the midst of a thriving city. The city where God is in our midst, calling us to seek the welfare of this place, to settle here with our neighbors, to be generous, to struggle against injustice and poverty and violence. The city where God calls us to learn from our ancestors and elders and indigenous neighbors. The city where God calls us to be hospitable and gracious, to share our abundance with those in need. The city where God calls us to stand shoulder to shoulder with our fellow citizens to build community. The city which God calls us to love.

An active faith, an immigrant sensibility, an accessible education and an engaging urban place – the gifts of God for God’s faithful people here at Augsburg; gifts to be invested and used with joyful and faithful abandon so that we might stand before our God and proclaim that our love affair with God and God’s world is at the heart of all we do as a college.

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. So how are we doing? I actually think we’re doing pretty well – the return on God’s investment here at Augsburg seems pretty substantial given our almost 140 years of work in the educational vineyards. But, of course, it is not the point of this vocational business to assess our progress to date – there is nothing to be *earned* by a good report card! Following our call, using our gifts wisely and faithfully, is work that continues without ceasing, for our God has entrusted us with these gifts and sometime soon, we believe, the master will return and we must be prepared. But that is for another day! Thanks be to God. Amen.