

Send us your Word

Luke 13: 10-17

[3 November 2010, Augsburg College Chapel]

I once belonged to a congregation where the pastor began his sermons, not with the traditional liturgical formula (“Grace and peace to you...”), but with this provocative prayer: “O God, we do not need another sermon. Send us a word. Send us your Word.” To which we would all respond, Amen!

I loved this delightful weekly reminder of the gospel promise – that God was in charge, that our human trappings and schemes could not contain God’s awesome presence, and that God’s faithful people were called to watch and listen for the Word that was about to break into our lives again. And I have to say, as an aside, that those sermons were some of the most mind-bending I have ever heard – full of Rumi poetry and quantum physics and the gospel of Jesus Christ, side by side, calling us to explore where God would have us go and what God would have us do.

Our gospel for this morning offers us a story from Jesus’s ministry that affirms the powerful claim that God has a plan for God’s people that surpasses our prideful longings for control and that clearly positions the good news of the gospel over laws that would inhibit God’s gracious intentions. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And there appears before him a crippled woman, who draws his attention. “Woman, he says, you are set free from your ailment.” Immediately she stands straight, healed from her ailments, and begins to praise God.

But all is not well in the synagogue. The leaders are indignant because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, violating the law that prohibits work on the seventh day. Jesus responds with equal vehemence, lashing out at the hypocrisy of those who would tend their animals on the Sabbath but would not set this crippled woman free from her bondage. And as the evangelist tells us, the opponents were put to shame and the crowd rejoices.

God’s plan is clear. Healing the human condition, freeing the oppressed from bondage, reconciling those who have been separated from themselves and each other, supersedes laws – human or divine – that would seek to restrict and compartmentalize God’s intentions for God’s people.

This gospel – this Word breaking into our lives – offers God’s faithful people a compelling narrative for our lives in the world. And it is a story that stands in stark contrast to the sort of prideful, arrogant and often polarizing behavior that characterizes the ways of the world.

How might this gospel message – this claim that God’s intentions for God’s people have a bias toward healing and freedom and reconciliation – provide a lens on some of our most pressing current experiences?

Let’s begin with a most timely experience, the elections (not quite yet) concluded this morning. No matter your particular persuasion in the political sphere, I know we all agree that all is not well in our public lives – our public discourse is fragmented and polarized and less than civil. We have settled into a pattern of behavior in our common lives that bears very little resemblance to the gospel message of reconciliation and healing. We head to our corners, sure that we are right and others are wrong. We attack, we demonize and we promote discord. And the early messages from those elected last night do not appear to offer much hope for a different way forward. Lots of law and not so much gospel.

What might the gospel say to our political situation? There are many credible arguments that faithful people should not attempt to impose the gospel on political decision-making and structures. That temptation – to create a Christian version of our political system – is itself a form of sinful pride and history has shown the often tragic results of such pride. That said, there is plenty to argue that the gospel provides a compelling vision of life together that calls us to seek a politics that has a bias toward reconciliation and healing. It is not “My God says this” and “Your God says this” and never the twain shall meet. It is that we seek to find the ways forward that recognize a wider context and common purpose, ways that exemplify God’s intentions for God’s people.

My heroine, the great social reformer, Jane Addams, modeled this gospel commitment to what I call “extraordinary conversations.” The myriad ways in which she engaged in conversations – at Hull-House in Chicago, with citizens of all stripes around the world, and on the stage of history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – with the likes of Julia Lathrop, John Dewey, Theodore Roosevelt, and WEB DuBois, not to mention countless other good people – politicians and business people and benefactors and neighbors – who shared her commitment to a stronger democracy, set the stage for intellectual and social movements that have shaped the world we know. The dining room at Hull-House became a veritable banquet table of conversations aimed at healing and reconciliation in her neighborhood, city and world. Here is a parable for healthy lives together in the world – come to what Martin Marty has called the great republican – small ‘r’ – banquet table, where all are welcome and expected to engage the conversation.

As a college community, we have the rare gift of this same faith that it is possible to create a framework for conversation that follows certain rules, considers and respects different perspectives, and that leads to common purpose and action. I’m reminded time and again of the extraordinary efforts that go on here at Augsburg in the classroom, in the residence halls, in this chapel and in our neighborhood, to promote a different vision of life together – a vision that honors our different experiences and opinions and ways of being even as it reminds us that we share this space and time as a community of teaching and learning, a community of shared

values and practices. It is possible to share our faith in such conversations with the wider community.

Our gospel – the gospel – calls us to stand firm in our faith that civil discourse and extraordinary conversations are possible and that healing and reconciliation should be the hallmark of our public and political lives. May we work to make it so for the well-being of all God’s people.

Another example of this commitment to the gospel message of reconciliation was evident in my recent travel to South Africa. As I spent time with colleagues in Johannesburg and learned of their experiences, I began to understand how the various tensions of daily life in South Africa are, at their core, tensions between personal identity and memories, on one hand, and public history and narrative, on the other. The efforts of the South African people (and the others in places like Namibia who suffered through the violence and hatred of apartheid) to reconcile the personal and the public – efforts that take shape in the dynamics of daily life on the street as well as in large-scale public settings such as we witnessed in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – offer all of us important lessons about how we shall live together in our interrelated and complex world.

I met Professor David Thelen, retired from the history department at Indiana University and one of the world’s foremost public historians. He took me to Sophiatown, a neighborhood where he and colleagues from the nearby University of Johannesburg are working at reconciling deep personal and common conflicts. Once the teeming hub of Black cultural life in Africa with an integrated population, Sophiatown was targeted by the Afrikaaner government to be bulldozed, rebuilt and renamed “Triomf” (Triumph in Afrikaans) as a symbol of their White supremacist ideology. All of its former residents were resettled, most to communities in the Southwestern townships (aka Soweto). Again, lots of law and not so much gospel.

After the elections of 1994, Sophiatown reclaimed its name and began to rebuild a community, but has struggled to develop the sort of social fabric that it once enjoyed and that was the source for its creative energy. Thelen and his colleagues recognized that neighbors in Sophiatown did not know each other and had little occasion to be together. Their public history project is focused on helping residents to share their personal identities with each other so that they might begin to rebuild a public memory and story that links back to the community’s heyday and that offers a framework for a sustainable future.

Their methods are intriguing. Knowing that if neighbors were inclined to talk with each other, they already would have done so, Thelen designed a photo-conversation project that recruits neighbors from particular areas, gives them a disposable camera and asks them to take a picture of one thing in their community they love and one thing they would like to change. After the pictures have been taken, neighbors gather informally to share the pictures and reasons why they chose their subjects.

A Black resident, for example, takes a picture of a formerly segregated bridge across railroad tracks and tells about how she once took the whites-only bridge instead because she was

frightened of the quality of construction of her assigned bridge. She recounts how she was caught and fined by the police. A white neighbor, hearing the story, quips that she was lucky she wasn't arrested. Potentially an explosive moment in the relationship, instead it serves as the opportunity for those gathered to remind each other of a painful history that must be named and not hidden away behind walls.

With these sorts of conversations as a starting point, Thelen and his colleagues hope to help neighbors begin to recognize common needs and aspirations, and with some help from community organizers, begin to work together in various interest groups and clubs to create a sense of solidarity and social fabric in Sophiatown. It is still early in the project, but here is the sort of concrete effort that seeks to reconcile personal memories (both good and ugly) with a public narrative that has a past, present and future.

Here is the gospel at work, saying no to those who would keep God's people bound.

Dear gracious and loving God, we don't need a sermon, we need a Word. Send your Word among us so that we might know the healing and freeing and reconciling power of your gospel. And now send us forth, equipped as your people to be instruments for love and reconciliation and healing in a world that so needs your Word made flesh in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.