

LIVING YES LIVES IN A NO WORLD

Matthew 15: 29-39

[Time after Pentecost, November 9, 2011, Augsburg College Chapel]

The hymn we sang this morning was written for the occasion of my inauguration as Augsburg's 10th president in fall 2006. The text by Gracia Grindal, '65, and music by David Cherwien, '78, were a gift to me and the college as the hymn evokes so much of the character – both historical and contemporary – of Augsburg. In particular, I would call your attention to Gracia's fun play with the beginning letter of each verse – A, G, E and S – a whimsical nod to the themes of my inauguration and to the central values of this college; abundance, generosity, engagement and service.

It seems appropriate that we sing the hymn this morning as the assigned scripture for today is Matthew's account of the feeding of the 4000+ gathered to learn from Jesus and to witness his ministry of healing and reconciliation. In this iconic story, we go to the heart of the gospel message of abundance, of generosity, of engagement with and service to our neighbor. There is enough, Jesus tells his disciples (and us) – you must believe and behave as if that is the truth. The world would tell you otherwise in practices of scarcity and greed and polarization and self-interest, but I tell you this, there is enough....

It doesn't take much effort or imagination to recognize this familiar dynamic between the ways of the gospel and the ways of the world in our lives each and every day. Just read the newspapers, watch the television news, listen to your co-workers and fellow students and neighbors. This is mine – don't take it away. I need more – money, time, friends, stuff. This may be yours – but I want it. Don't confuse me with your facts – this is what I think. You're out to get me – I'm scared.

Our lives are full of hand-wringing, dark clouds, dire predictions. I love this whimsical poem by Kaylin Haught for the way it jars me out of my worldly ways and on a path to explore God's intentions for my life, for our lives...

God Says Yes To Me

*I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly*

*what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes*

Yes Yes Yes. This morning, in this Time after Pentecost, we are on that mountain, listening to Jesus as he teaches us what God intends for God's faithful people and as he practices the way of abundance and generosity. Here, we learn from Jesus about God's Yes to the world's No!

Religious historian Martin Marty has written of the need for us to pay attention to the ways in which God is depicted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as abundant and generous, a generosity that runs counter to careful, rational, human calculations. From acts of creation to covenants with chosen people to presence in the midst of anguish and suffering, Marty argues, the character of God is marked with generous self-giving. Yes Yes Yes. And the appropriate response to this Yes is to give thanks and get to work – with glad and generous hearts and hands and minds.

But, of course, this is not easy for those of us who live in the world. We live in a No world and our expectations are based on what it takes to succeed in that world. Toe the line or face the consequences. You promised us we'd have what we need to thrive. You owe me what I've earned. It's hard to say Yes when everything around us seems premised on No.

What a rare gift it is for those of us who are part of the Augsburg community to have this gospel inspiration and challenge in our lives. In this community of faith and learning, we too acknowledge the gifts we have been given – the gifts of faith and education and community and service – even as we embrace our calls to pursue Yes lives in the midst of a No world.

So what might our Yes lives look like? Here are three brief scenarios of how we might pursue our lives of abundance and generosity – scenarios meant not to tell us what to do but to encourage us to live faithfully in the tensions between Yes and No.

The generosity of our place

The concept of the abundance and generosity of place is much on my mind these days in our work at Augsburg, especially as we think about our campus and its place in the neighborhood. The original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary and College is: "And the Word became flesh" – and so it does, here, in our midst, God with us. We believe that Augsburg College practices generosity most authentically when it lives as the Word made flesh – present, rooted, of service, faithful, in this place.

I have long believed that colleges are indigenous communities – that is, they are native to a particular place, a particular environment, a particular set of values and practices that define us – and that means something for the way we live our lives, it means something for the ways in which we understand the abundance and generosity of place and values and presence...

The poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, writes these wise words in his prose poem, "Damage" – "No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use."

Berry's good advice is extended by the work of friend and Sabo Center colleague, Jay Walljasper, whose *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking* (New Society Publishers, 2007) draws us into his "neighborhood love story" with lots of practical advice to live generously in our place.

A few of his principles of placemaking are relevant to our Yes lives in this neighborhood:

- (1) The community is the expert (no, consultants aren't better than your neighbors when it comes to good ideas for our neighborhood!)
- (2) You can't do it alone (look for the right partners)
- (3) They'll always say "It can't be done" (take it as a good sign when others tell you why it won't work – you're probably on the right track)
- (4) You can see a lot by just observing (look for what works)
- (5) Make the connections (working together adds up to more than the sum of the parts)
- (6) Start with petunias (sweat the small things because they set the stage for real change)
- (7) Money is not the issue (a spirited community will find ways around financial obstacles)
- (8) You are never finished (managing after a project is finished will ensure that great places abide.)

Walljasper quotes Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who says "The citizen takes his city for granted far too often. He (and she) forgets to marvel." In other words, we forget to say Yes!

"The Word became flesh" is both a theological and practical claim. How can we be even more generous in our whereabouts and place as the body of Christ here and now, as the Word made flesh in this place, as Augsburg College here in Cedar-Riverside and everywhere we are found?

Co-creating our common life

Let us now turn to lives of abundance and generosity right here on campus where we daily live and work and bring our faith and gifts to bear. Allow me to confess, as a lifelong organizational person, we need all of our glad and generous hearts to help our college live up to their better natures! We need to discern and embrace our vocations to do God's good and generous work – to do the work of Yes – in the midst of settings too often shaped by the demands of No.

These days, I'm very excited about the work of Public Achievement, a program of Augsburg's Center for Democracy and Citizenship, that focuses on teaching the skills and habits that accompany and sustain a change in individuals from spectators to citizens

As CDC director Harry Boyte reminds us, quoting an important hymn of the civil rights movement, "We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For," we are those called to say Yes when the world says No. We have both that power and that obligation.

I've watched with great pride our Augsburg students and faculty and staff begin to embrace the Public Achievement work – in our Special Education curriculum, where our faculty are training student teachers to work with their high school students to give them the voice they never thought they had; in our Enrollment Center, where staff are identifying obstacles to serving students as well as they would like and are offering up their solutions, instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do; and in our work with youth from the neighborhood, where the Public Achievement model is offering them a way to take back control over lives that are too often buffeted by circumstances controlled by others.

We are called to lives of faith in this community where we live and work day in and out. How will you live Yes lives by becoming a partner with each other – by offering your all, your mind and knowledge and experience – to say Yes, to be a co-creator of God's abundant intentions for God's people and world?

Interfaith living

Finally, I challenge all of us to consider what it means to be generous in living alongside our neighbors who do not share our faith. We live in diverse communities where our various faiths demand of us a generosity of spirit and means, where we are called to lives together in support of healthy and just and compassionate communities. We are called by the God we know in Jesus Christ to say Yes Yes Yes alongside those who know God in other ways – to proclaim that we have been freed for lives of generosity in service to all God's good creation and creatures. While the world divides and polarizes and demonizes the other, we are called to find common purpose, to live as God intends, to live with and for each other.

As we consider our interfaith work in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, we are convinced that dialogue and service must be interwoven in all we do. We believe that what we learned through recent efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue with our neighbors is something we must do each day. We are working hard on safety, youth activities, infrastructure plans, and economic development to model interfaith living within our neighborhood (Concrete example in Urban Scrubs Camp).

We live Yes lives in a No world when we learn that this sort of hospitality, this sort of interfaith living, is at the heart of our lives as God's faithful people. Eboo Patel, who founded the Interfaith Youth Corps in Chicago – and who is a regular visitor to Augsburg – challenged some of our Augsburg colleagues with this question in a recent presentation, a question we might

address together here at Augsburg: "What is it in your experience of the cross of Jesus Christ that calls you, that calls us, into the generous work of interfaith living?"

Yes Yes Yes, God says again and again. What say you? Thanks be to our abundant, generous, engaged and servant God. Amen!