

Loving the other

1 John 4: 18-21

[Augsburg College Chapel, 28 November 2012]

This is the third of five homilies exploring the distinctive gifts of the Lutheran theological tradition that help shape the identity and character of Augsburg College. Previously I have considered the gifts of the Lutheran concept of *vocation*, with its nuanced understanding of human experience in the world, and of *critical and humble inquiry*, our belief that no human knowledge is complete and that our God calls us to ask difficult questions about our experience and all of creation so that we might continue to learn and fulfill our calls in the world.

Today I turn to the expansively ecumenical nature of the Lutheran faith, which challenges and inspires us to *engage with otherness*, to seek to know the stranger in our midst, to not fear difference. There is considerable evidence of this ecumenical spirit in the many alliances and full communion relationships our church body enjoys – we can be proud of those efforts even as we seek to understand more fully what difference this call to engage the other means for the identity and work of our college.

To more fully appreciate this gift of our tradition, it is perhaps helpful to consider just how counter-cultural this call to engage the stranger is for good people like us, who live in the world.

Let's begin with the situation of the early Christian community – the folks that the writer of John's letter is addressing. If you read the entire letter (it's only five chapters long), you recognize that the community is struggling with the very real fear of diversity and otherness in their lives. Remember, these early Christian communities believed that the apocalypse was just around the corner. Now, here they were, decades after Jesus's death and resurrection, living in the world and trying to figure out how to remain faithful when faced with those who do not share their faith, how to overcome their fear of difference and otherness.

The epistle writer's response is to remind them of the commandment they have received from the beginning, the commandment to love one another – no matter what! In the third chapter, we read "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Love, the author argues, casts out fear. Loving the other in truth and action is what we are called to be and do as God's faithful people in the world. Now that is truly counter-cultural.

But this, of course, is not a situation faced only by our ancestors. We might argue that our fear of the other is the central tension in our 21st century lives – whether the other

is defined by political position, ethnic identity, socio-economic status, race, religion, or sexual orientation. We're afraid and our fear polarizes us, leads us into what Robert Bellah calls "lifestyle enclaves," separates us from each other, keeps the stranger as stranger instead of neighbor.

This fear of the other actually gets canonized, if you will, in one of the enduring myths of the American experience, neatly summarized in Robert Frost's ubiquitous poem, "The Road Not Taken," in which he writes,

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

For many of us, these words—uttered at commencements and noted in personal journals—stand for the choices we make in our lives, the choices that supposedly make all the difference to the sorts of people we are, the work we pursue, the lives we make. I took the road less traveled by—and that has made all the difference.

Or has it? Is it the case that the discrete choices we make in our lives truly separate us from the alternative decisions we might have made? Did my decision to take a job as a college fundraiser when I left graduate school separate me from the life of ministry or the life of a college faculty member that were the alternatives I might have chosen? Or do I still face the call of those alternative pursuits even as I go about my chosen vocation? I chose not to live my father's life as a Lutheran minister—I took the less traveled by path—but his ministry still informs my life, instills me with faith and fervor. I chose not to be a religion professor—I took the other road—but the life of scholarship and teaching still fills me with joy and meaning, while challenging me to be more reflective about my chosen work.

The myth of the choices we make—the notion that we can separate ourselves from the choices we did not make, the belief that we need not face the other—truly impoverishes our personal and common lives. The richness and adventures of the many divergent paths never taken are the stuff of which authentic and honest lives are made. We must never leave behind the lessons and insights of roads not taken, because they keep us honest, they challenge the status quo, they guide us to new ways of seeing and practicing our duties in the world. In other words, loving the other helps us learn.

Wendell Berry reminds us, "Having chosen one way, we are never free of the opposite way...Such choices are not clean-cut and final, as when we choose one of two forks in the road, but they involve us in tension, in tendency. We must keep on choosing." ("The Obligation of Care," *Sierra*, September/October 1995).

How remarkable it is to imagine the lessons we will learn from the choices we have yet to make. How liberating to know that the choices we have made are never final. How daunting to consider the adventures that lie ahead of us as we learn to love the other.

The Lutheran theological basis for loving the other is neatly summarized by Martin Luther in *The Small Catechism*, in his explanation of the 8th commandment. The commandment, as you remember, says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” to which Luther adds, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” In other words, we are to love the other, no matter what!

And that leads us back here to Augsburg College, whose identity is shaped by this theological gift of the Lutheran tradition – the call to love the other – even as we live in a world of scarcity and fear and anxiety, a world of choices that too often lead us to turn our back on the stranger, the path not taken, the experience of the other.

At the heart of our academic mission is the call to love the other – no matter what – and the central obstacle to living faithfully in the world is our fear of otherness, difference, the unknown, the stranger...

To overcome this fear, we must...

Accept that all of creation comes from our gracious and loving God. This is a theological claim about God’s intentions for God’s people. Engaging and loving the other is at the core of accepting the diversity and richness of God’s creation. The commandments – all of the commandments that we have known from the beginning – then become the moral contours of a good and healthy community. When we fear, commandments are all about punishment; when we love, the commandments help create and sustain a beloved community.

See these diverse brothers and sisters. We must name them and their gifts, their calls and their accountability in our midst. When we first moved to Minneapolis, I was out and about with the kids and a man approached us in a mall parking lot, pointed to Thomas and said “Vietnamese boy.” Which is who he is – not simply another generic “Asian” kid—Vietnamese boy. God names us all in creation and as we call each other by name, we take the critical first step to accepting that otherness and learning to love them as God loves all of us. On a more social level, I have always been struck by the work of Jane Addams and her colleagues in Chicago, who when they moved into the neighborhood to offer their services, first researched and wrote *Maps and Papers*—seeing, naming and knowing her diverse neighbors before being of service.

And finally, love these diverse brothers and sisters. love the difference, love the stranger. This is not about evangelizing – winning them over to our side – or about

minimalizing our differences so that we can all get along—those are both extensions of our fear. Instead it is about embracing the messiness of who we are and who our neighbors are, enriching our own learning and lives, finding ways to be even more faithful, seeking a new way ahead in love, celebrating our differences and similarities, learning not simply to tolerate but to love each other. This is why I am so proud of the work of our Augsburg Interfaith Scholars and their efforts to engage all of us in our richly diverse religious experiences. They are inviting us to love the other, and we accept that invitation because we are a Lutheran college, not in spite of that heritage.

Here then is another of the gifts of our Lutheran faith heritage – the call to love the other. “And the commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.