

TO HEAL THE WORLD: ON THE CALL TO BE NEIGHBOR

Philippians 2: 1-11

[Monday in Holy Week, 25 March 2013, Augsburg College Chapel]

This morning, I offer the fifth of five homilies reflecting on the charisms (or gifts) of our Lutheran Christian tradition that are at the core of our identity and work as a college. Previously, we have explored the theological concept of vocation, with its nuanced and narrative sense of a life unfolding as called; the promise of inquiry that is critical and humble, able to ask difficult and meaningful questions because God wants us to learn about all of creation; the engagement of otherness and difference in our lives, because there is in the diversity of God's creation the call to love each other as God loves each of us; and *semper reformanda*, our place in the reformation tradition and the commitment to loving reform of human institutions.

This morning, we turn to the call to be neighbor, the belief that we have been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we might accompany each other as neighbors in our journeys in this world. Here we affirm the belief that we have been freed, not so that we might do whatever we wish, but so that we might live for and with each other as neighbor. Here, surely, is a commitment at the heart of our life as a college of the church in this remarkable neighborhood and world.

And it could not be more meaningful to me to offer this word on our work as a college at the beginning of this Holy Week, these sacred days when we journey with our Lord through the final days of his life, through his death on the cross, to the tomb now empty, and then further on the road to Emmaus, where the Risen One is known in the breaking of bread.

Our text for this morning, assigned for yesterday (what we now call Passion Sunday) is to my mind one of the most powerful and poetic passages in all of scripture as it describes theologically what we might consider the ultimate act of human agency: the choice Jesus – though in the form of God – makes to empty himself, to not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, to humble himself unto death, even death upon the cross. And all of this so that every tongue shall confess Jesus as the Christ, the one sent from God to redeem the world. And this, as we read in the verses just before the theological formula, so that we – God's faithful – might be of the same mind, having the same love, looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. In other words, redeemed and called to be neighbor.

It is in the extravagant grace of the cross that we are called to lives of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called in his 1962 speech "On Being a Good Neighbor," dangerous and excessive altruism, lives of love and peace in the face of hatred and violence, lives of

abundance and promise in the face of scarcity and betrayal, lives of faith and courage in the face of anxiety and fear. Lives that turn the world on its head. Lives as neighbors to each other in a world of strangers.

Evidence of what this means for us here at Augsburg is found everyday here on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world. Being a neighbor – neighbor-love – takes many forms. In our Lutheran Christian tradition, these various ways of being neighbor are detailed in Martin Luther’s many writings and sermons, and summarized elegantly by Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a Lutheran theologian who teaches at Seattle University. Professor Moe-Lobeda suggests that for Luther, there are basically three forms of neighbor-love:

- The first is service to the neighbor, acts of kindness and charity and generosity, even if it requires sacrifice for me;
- The second is disclosing and denouncing oppression and exploitation of the neighbor who is vulnerable and needs to be empowered, the work of enabling our neighbor to live a full and rich life; and,
- The third is living in ways that counter the cultural norms that exploit the vulnerable and defy God’s intentions for the world, the work of justice and peace-making (Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church*, p. 24).

I might paraphrase further by suggesting that the call to be neighbor for Luther means “becoming the hands and feet of Christ” as we serve, empower and struggle for peace and justice for all of God’s creation. In this way, we are called to live faithfully with each other as neighbors, to heal the fractured world, to be the body of Christ here and now.

Now I have to say that I find all of this inspiring – surely Jesus (and the various other heroes and heroines of the faith) is a paragon of faithfulness and courage and love – and at the same time deeply troubling – how can I hope to live out my baptismal faith, my call to do God’s work in the world, when confronted with the messiness of the world and the many difficulties and obstacles in my path?

I don’t mean to be depressing, but there are real questions here for even the most faithful among us. And we must pay special attention to those questions, because they are the questions that you, our students, are asking, as you look out on a broken world. And I would suggest that they are questions all of us – God’s faithful people in the world – need to ask as we consider what we have been called to be and do. How do we love our neighbor, how do we love the world, how do we live as the body of Christ, even when...?

But then I return to our lives together on this campus and in this neighborhood and my faith is renewed as I witness – as we all do – the remarkable ways in which our students love our neighbors – it’s the main reason I come to work in the morning.

A couple of my favorite student stories – I apologize if you’ve heard them before – show how serving, empowering and struggling for justice for our neighbors is at the heart of our work as a college.

First, there is Mary (not her real name), a young student at first questioning her faith and purpose in the world, until she becomes active in our Campus Kitchens program, and begins to deliver and eat meals with our neighbors who are Somali immigrants—serving those in need. And then she is tutoring the Somali children, invited to meals in the nearby Riverside Plaza apartments with Somali families, even learning a bit of the Somali language—surely this is what it means to empower and to be empowered as she entered into a deep relationship with neighbors who do not share the same experiences or faith. And then after graduation she was off for a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and then to further schooling so she can work to ensure justice for immigrants in the Twin Cities and beyond. Called to be neighbor.

And then there is Steven, a student out in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood with a group of us doing a service project, and I see him watching a Somali woman in traditional Muslim garb, toting a suitcase, attempting (and failing) to get a cab to stop and pick her up. Now, as I reflect on this scene, I can imagine a variety of responses from Steven. He simply could have kept on with his valuable service work and left the woman to fend for herself. He could have stood and watched as the neutral observer, gathering data for his research, waiting to see if a cab would stop or if someone else would help the woman. Or he could do what he did, which was to cross the street, to engage the woman in conversation, to offer his help, to make sure she was safe on the sidewalk, to step into the street and hail the cab himself, and then to ensure that the woman was safely in the taxi with instructions to the driver to take her to the airport.

He acted with neighbor-love – love that builds up – and through his act of love, he connected with another of God’s people and learned important lessons about the experiences of his neighbors, about his own life of power and privilege, about what God intends for God’s people. Through his act of love, he gained knowledge that is the foundation for serving the neighbor and the neighborhood, the foundation for striving for justice and compassion, the foundation for seeking to change policies and behaviors, the foundation for faithful discipleship. Called to be neighbor.

As we embark upon our Holy Week journeys over the next few days, may we know the remarkable faithfulness and courage of our Lord and Savior, the Word become flesh, who was sent by God to redeem the world God loves so much. May we be of the same mind during these sacred days as we hear once again the call to be neighbor and to heal the world; the call to serve, empower and seek justice for all of God’s creation; and the call to be a community of the faithful who are the hands and feet of Christ, the only body of Christ in the world here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.