

We are called

Luke 5: 1-11

[The first of five chapel homilies on the gifts of the Lutheran tradition that ground the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education in the 21st century, Augsburg College Chapel, October 3, 2012]

As many of you know, I had the rare privilege last summer to be away from campus for a sabbatical – literally, to enjoy Sabbath time away from the roles and routines of daily life for renewal and refreshment. During the six weeks we spent in Chicago, we had two objectives. The first was to spend good time as a family exploring Chicago, a city we love. Mission accomplished, I can report, as our bucket list was filled lots of time in museums and neighborhoods, on beaches, and with family and friends. My second goal was to engage in research on the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education. I explored the literature written during the past fifty years about Lutheran higher education in America and set out to test a hypothesis that the charisms (or gifts) of our Lutheran theological tradition have helped to make us institutions with particular identities and character that are more needed than ever in our world.

Beginning this morning and continuing into the spring semester, I want to use the privilege of this pulpit to reflect on the five gifts of the Lutheran tradition that I named as essential to our identity as a college and say something about why I believe they make us relevant and sustainable. The five gifts are vocation, critical and humble inquiry, engagement with the other, commitment to service and justice, and *semper reformanda*, our place in the reformation tradition.

This morning, the “V” word – vocation, of course.

You already know, even if you have just joined the Augsburg community, how central the theological concept of vocation is to Augsburg’s academic mission. There are required religion courses entitled “The Search for Meaning” – 1 and 2, just in case you miss it the first time! There are capstone courses before you leave us. There are special programs in this chapel, around campus and around the world, seeking to help you discern and live your callings in the world. There are signs that proclaim, “We are called – Auggies.” – everywhere, it seems. Well, you get it. We won’t let you forget it.

And there is a simple reason for that. As Lutherans, we believe deeply that one of, if not the greatest, contribution our tradition has made to the world is this theological concept that says simply that God calls you and me and all of us to lives of meaning and purpose and significance in the world. And our vocations matter, because they implicate us in God’s work in the world. In other words, through our vocations we

become co-creators of the world, working to ensure that God's will is done, that God's love is known to all of creation.

Luther himself put it this way, commenting on the Christmas gospel in Luke 2: "...For we are unable to give to God anything, in return for his goodness and grace, except praise and thanksgiving...Faith teaches such praise and thanksgiving; as it is written according to the shepherds that they returned to their flocks with praise and thanksgiving and were well-satisfied, even though they did not become wealthier, were not awarded higher honors, did not eat and drink better, were not obliged to carry on a better trade." In other words, being a good shepherd was its own vocational reward!

This is all well and good, but why is the concept of vocation, developed some 500 years ago, relevant to my life today? To answer that question, we need to go back another 1500 years to our gospel lesson for this morning.

In this familiar tale from Luke's gospel, we find Jesus in the early days of his ministry, already pressed upon by the crowds – and perhaps in need of some help, we might surmise. So he engages with Simon and the other fishers – and we all know the end of this story, so why don't we move on? But wait a minute. Let's look again at the story itself.

Here is Jesus engaging with men already working hard to earn a living, to make a difference. You see, Jesus doesn't wait until they are resting on the shore or back in their homes, to call to them. He comes to them in the midst of their work, in the midst of their busy and hectic lives, in the midst of the mundane practices of throwing nets to catch fish, in the midst of messy and difficult times where the fish are not biting – and he calls them not to come out of the water to talk about the days ahead, but to return to their work, to cast their nets again, and to reap the harvest of nets overflowing.

Too often, when we talk about vocation, we seem to think that our call will come to us in some mysterious, perhaps even supernatural way. But in our tradition, what we believe is that God is already here in our midst, in our history, and that God's call to us may very well be to continue on the journey we already have undertaken, to follow our passion and talents, to return to work, aware that God has a plan for us – and that our nets may well soon be overflowing.

There's more to the gospel story. Recall how Simon followed Jesus's instructions to pull up the nets, but he couldn't do it by himself – he needed help. And so he called for his colleagues and friends to come and help. And then there were four or five of them working together to follow the call. Only then were they able to do what Jesus asked.

So often we seem to think that this vocation stuff is all about me. I get a call and set off on my own to live it out. But both Jesus and Luther knew well that by its very

definition, vocation is social. It calls us into community, into the complementarity of gifts that together, help to do God's work in the world. Every once in a while, I will hear someone say that they were called to a particular role, but that they could not live out their calling because the community or institution would not allow them to do so. The problem with that conclusion is that callings are always a dialogue between my gifts and roles and the needs of the community and the world that I am called to serve. Our callings only make sense as they serve others. God calls us into community, into the company of those who together are able to haul those heavy nets into the boat.

And then, of course, there is the conclusion to this story – the call we all remember – the call to give it all up and follow Jesus. The key here is not to forget what comes before in the story. First, Jesus comes into the midst of the disciples' lives. Then, Jesus called them into community. And now, now, Jesus calls them to sacrifice what they know to do the work that needs to be done. First, there is trust and fellowship. And then there is taking up the cross.

And that, too, is part of the story of vocation. The call we receive may very well ask us to give up our own notions of what counts as success. We may very well have to sacrifice in order to do what needs to be done. We may have to leave it all behind. We cannot sugarcoat this thing called discipleship. It demands all of us, but it does so having given us all we have. That is what we call love.

Here, then, is our Lutheran understanding of vocation. In a world where vocation has become part of common parlance, and where Christian theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner's lovely formula – "your vocation is that place where your deepest gladness intersects with the world's deepest need" – has been misappropriated to suggest that vocations are upwardly mobile journeys to always more meaning and success in the world, we now come with this perhaps never more relevant and urgent message from our faith tradition.

Your vocation – your calling – may very well be found in the messy, mundane details of daily life, where we believe God is present and active, even when we don't believe we'll catch another fish.

Your calling has a history, which unfolds like a story with twists and turns, where there is no one single destination but many stops on a life-long journey. A fisher one day, a healer the next. A carpenter and then a teacher. A student and then a nurse.

Your vocation is not a solitary undertaking, but is inextricably bound up with those whose own callings complement and inspire yours. God does not leave us comfortless or without the help we need to do God's work in the world.

And yes, there may come a time when the call you receive demands of you sacrifices the like of which you cannot imagine. And in that moment, you will know a love that

surpasses all human understanding, the love of our God who loves the world so much, so very, very much. Will you follow? Amen.