

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor

Luke 10: 25-42

[Lent 1, 17 February 2013, King of Glory Lutheran Church, Tempe, AZ]

Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.” But, of course, as much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to avoid the surprises, the call to service, the promise of abundance – it is impossible to do! Thanks be to God!

I think of this story often as I navigate all the tensions of running a college, being a loving spouse and raising two children, and generally just trying to be a faithful guy, a good citizen even, in the midst of a world that seems often bent on bringing me down, tearing us apart, destroying what God has given us to care for. And yet this is the world that God loves so much... What do we do with that tension as God’s faithful people, called to follow Jesus, to live out our baptismal faith, to do God’s work to love and heal and steward the gifts entrusted to us.

I wonder about this tension as we read our familiar gospel story of the Good Samaritan. Here is this remarkable comment on what we are called to do and be in the world, even as we are challenged to think differently about who is our neighbor and what we owe each other. The priest and the Levite are not necessarily evil folks. Like us (perhaps often), they may have been too busy, too scared, too worried about how it would look to their peers, to step across the road and help the victim. And then there is the Samaritan, the foreigner, who surprises us all with his courage, his compassion, his counter-cultural acts of hospitality and kindness.

I find passages such as this both inspiring – surely the Samaritan is a paragon of persistence and courage and resilience – 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 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 I pay special attention to those questions, because they are the questions that college students are asking. 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, even when...?

Last summer, I had the tremendous gift of a sabbatical, time away from my work at Augsburg, which I spent in Chicago with my family and which included precious time to explore a simple question: What are the gifts of our Lutheran heritage that are especially relevant to our life as a college in the 21st century? The lessons I learned in my research have become a wonderful framework for discussions, not only on campus, but in congregations and other settings, about the gifts of our baptismal faith that equip us to follow Jesus and to live out our callings in the world – even when, even when...

At Augsburg, we are navigating these important questions as we ponder our institutional vocation, which we state this way: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. In other words, we are called to be good Samaritans, no matter what. How do we make sense of this calling and this claim, even when the world tells us to do otherwise?

A few words about the gifts of our Lutheran Christian heritage and the ways they are relevant to our lives of faith in the world each and every day as we answer God's call in our lives.

I. First, what our students call the "V" word – vocation, of course.

The theological concept of vocation is central to Augsburg's academic mission. There are required religion courses entitled "The Search for Meaning" – 1 and 2, just in case they miss it the first time! There are capstone courses before they leave us. There are special programs in our chapel, around campus and around the world, seeking to help students discern and live their callings in the world. There are signs that proclaim, "We are called – Auggies." – everywhere, it seems. Well, you get it. We won't let them 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!

I think of the remarkable vocational stories that unfold on campus. There is Cody, who came to us as a young man sure that he was called to the ministry. Active in campus ministry, a leader in lots of student organizations, he even won a contest to be president for a day (which certainly dissuaded him from that line of work! And then he took a tax accounting class – and he loved it – and soon he began to imagine a path toward a very different sort of ministry (focused, as he reminded us in his senior chapel talk, on April 15th!) Vocations are full of surprises.

And then there is Beth, a young woman 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. 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. After graduation she was off for a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and then to law school so she can practice immigration law in the Twin Cities. Vocations are journeys, not destinations.

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 can go on.

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 or even a tax accountant – surprise!

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. And then calls us to join in the work. Will we follow?

II. A second gift is our commitment to serving the neighbor and seeking justice.

One of my favorite experiences in my time at Augsburg is a simple illustration of how the call to serve the neighbor is not simply a call to charity, but perhaps more so a call to self-knowledge and mutual love. I was out in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood with a group of our students doing a service project and I witnessed one of our students 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 the student. 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 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.

We have wise guides in our tradition to this understanding of serving the neighbor – to love as the foundation of knowledge in service to our neighbors. The German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler, wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: “...it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ...that is how one becomes a human and a Christian.” In other words, for Bonhoeffer, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing. We are called to serve our neighbor and love the world.

III. And finally, the gift of semper reformanda, our place in the reformation tradition that believes that all human knowledge and institutions are incomplete and imperfect – read I Corinthians 13! – that only God sees fully and is permanent!

Consider the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part. We do not believe in change for change’s sake, as if novelty is our goal. Instead, we embrace the

stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg College (and King of Glory!) is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform.

Perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) this passage that summarizes how we might live in these tensions – how hope can be found and pursued, how hope creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator, how we can live as faithful people in a world that so often seems antithetical to our faith: *“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”*

Here is the creative tension at the heart of a Lutheran vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to recognize that we don’t know it all, that we do not have all the answers, and that we are called to be of service, to follow our calls to be God’s co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God’s people and do God’s work. This vision of reform is pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

But this is tough stuff, because the world doesn’t much care for change – and we live in the world. The priest and the Levite did what the world expects – only the Samaritan stepped across the road to help his neighbor. Here in your congregation, in our college, in our personal lives, we face so many obstacles to reform, because we know best, we’ve always done it this way, don’t rock the boat, it’s just a fad and this too will pass. We know all of the excuses.

As Lutheran Christians, part of the reformation tradition, we have a gift, the gift of the call to loving reform, and we cannot turn back. We find in the gospel accounts countless examples of why we are called to be loving reformers. My favorite gospel word on loving reform is found in the familiar story about Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding at Cana. And we have this astonishing outcome as Jesus turns water to wine. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you

do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God's way.

This, then, is why we follow the call to do God's work in the world, no matter the consequences. This is why we are committed to serving our neighbor and fighting for justice. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come. Or, as the songwriter John Ylvisaker puts it in his iconic anthem, "Borning Cry." Because God has in mind one last surprise for the faithful. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor and the best is yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.