

Prophets for life

Matthew 13: 53-58

[Augsburg College Chapel, 6 November 2013]

We continue this morning with our theme of “from death to life,” celebrating the remarkable example of the saints who have gone before us proclaiming the gospel of grace and love and life in the midst of a world that would have us embrace greed and violence and death. And we have, in the scripture assigned for this morning, this rather odd passage from Matthew’s gospel detailing Jesus’s homecoming, which does not go well.

It is important to set these verses in the wider context of the 13th chapter of Matthew, which are the familiar litany of parables concerning the kingdom of heaven. You will recognize the parable of the sower, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast - all meant to offer to the disciples and the crowds that gather at Jesus’ feet images of a kingdom of great value, a kingdom where the believers will be separated from the unbelievers, a kingdom to which Jesus is inviting us to enter with him.

And then at the end of this long chapter, Jesus goes home, leaving behind his wide-ranging ministry to visit his hometown and the family and friends there who knew him well as he grew up. Jesus goes to the synagogue to teach and those gathered are initially astounded by his wisdom, but their astonishment quickly turns to anger and confusion. How could this lowly carpenter’s son have this wisdom and power? We know him and his family well, and surely he is not greater or wiser than we are. To which Jesus responds with this familiar phrase, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house,” and then departs, we’re told, without doing many deeds of power because of their unbelief.

Quite the juxtaposition of adoring crowds gathered to learn from this remarkable prophet and teacher about the kingdom of God about to burst into their midst and the hometown folk who can’t comprehend how one of their own could have such wisdom and power, such insight into God’s intentions for the world.

It is, though, a juxtaposition that strikes me as particularly relevant for our own vocations as God’s prophets and teachers in the world. From the moment of our baptisms, we are offered the gift of faith that calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. (Maya’s baptism story) But Jesus’s own pilgrimage in the world illustrates for us just how fraught with both promise and tension the call to discipleship, the call to be God’s prophets, will be.

The double meaning in my title for this morning, “Prophets for life,” gets at both the promise and tension in our prophetic vocations.

As we proclaim and practice in myriad ways here at Augsburg, “we are called,” called to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders; called to be prophets of hospitality and justice; called to be neighbor; called to be faithful. In other words, prophets for life means just that – a lifelong commitment to following our calls no matter the cost and obstacles and messiness.

The privilege to be educated at a place like Augsburg, along with the call to be faithful people, means that we have obligations to use our education to make the world more fair and just and compassionate. The education you receive in this college is meant to equip you with the knowledge and skills and sense of community to pursue your calling, wherever it leads. The example Jesus offers in our brief gospel vignette this morning is how, even when we might think we are in friendly territory – let alone among those we may not know or trust – there are many who will doubt and challenge and criticize our work as prophets for life. A prophet may find honor hard to come by. But we know the rest of Jesus’s story and it doesn’t end here in Bethlehem.

And it can’t end here or there, because we are called to be prophets for life, to proclaim the messages of God’s intentions for God’s people, to live as disciples carrying on the work of the kingdom in the midst of human history. Three simple themes arise in our gospel for this morning:

Teaching in the sanctuary – Jesus comes to his hometown and goes to the synagogue to teach. This, in the end, must be our abiding commitment – to believe that we are called as prophets for life to lift up this bold claim that we live out in this college – that faith and learning cannot be separated. Theologian Douglas John Hall, who visited our campus in fall 2006 to deliver the Christensen lectures remarked that he believed the church would look very different in 40 years from what it looks like now because faithful people would need to be much more reflective than they have been about why they are part of the Christian community. Hall thought the church would look more like a synagogue, a place in which study and worship intersect and gain from each other. Learning that is informed by faith (even by other faiths), that asks tough questions about the world and human beings and what God intends for us, that celebrates and ritualizes and understands that faith and learning together provide a basis for responsible and faithful lives in the world – is the legacy of Augsburg College, a legacy that is central to the education you receive here and that we entrust to you for your vocational journeys so that you can proclaim life abundant in your prophetic lives.

The challenge of unity – But, of course, even with Jesus’s example of proclaiming the words of life and love, there is the reality of disunity and fragmentation, of being rejected even by those we are seeking to teach and serve. The real world is full of fragmentation, neighbor from neighbor, country from country, religion from religion –

and in our disunity the ways of scarcity and fear win out. I have been working on an essay about Augsburg's history and that tension between unity and disunity is found throughout our history – it was in the early Norwegian-American community in our region (why do you think there are so many Lutheran churches and colleges in our region – it wasn't necessarily because of need, it was because we didn't agree). And even today our lives are full of tensions – paradoxes even – between the liberal arts and professional studies, between diverse student populations, between access and excellence, between serving ourselves and serving our neighbors. We live in those tensions but we also live with the gospel promise of unity. And like Jesus – realist that he surely was as he named his relationship to his family and friends – we are called not to give in to our divisions, but to celebrate the promise of unity that is ours in the gospel of life. At once both sinful and saved – that great Lutheran doctrine – we are freed to live in the tensions, to learn from each other, to celebrate our various gifts, and then to go forward as Jesus himself did, as prophets for life.

Stewards of God's many gifts – And finally, ours is a message of stewardship for the many gifts entrusted to us - gifts of faith, gifts of knowledge and truth, gifts of neighbor and neighborhood. In the verses immediately before our scripture reading for this morning. Jesus asks his disciples if they have understood all that he has taught about the kingdom. When they answer "yes", Jesus then charges them with finding in the treasures of the kingdom all that is new and old and of value to God's work in the world. We have examples abundant here on campus and in our neighborhood of this call to stewardship. One of the leaders of the Faith in the City partnership of which we are a part said that he loves our partnership with our Lutheran colleagues because it was our common ancestors who came to this place and who, over the course of a century and more, built institutions to serve the people – hospitals, seminaries, colleges, social service agencies, homes for seniors, businesses and so on – and now we have the special obligation as their successors to ensure that these neighborhoods where we are planted have all the best that we can give so that we might pay back and forward the gifts of our ancestors. That is why our work here includes all of our neighbors in Cedar-Riverside and nearby because these have always been our neighbors (though their identities and concerns have changed over the years), and our mission must include them and their many gifts so that we might proclaim life in this place. This is why Campus Kitchens and our partnership with Trinity to do after-school programs for the Somali youth and our efforts with the Native peoples who live nearby are all so essential to our identity and purpose. Our neighbors are gifts to us as we are to them, and together we share in the work of building community, seeking justice, and being prophets for life.

If honor is what you seek in your life, Jesus has a difficult message for us. But if life abundant is what you believe in and seek to share with others, then Jesus offers us a path forward, a path that leads to redemption and life. We are called to be prophets for life. Thanks be to God. Amen.