

Turning the tables

Matthew 21: 12-13

(Augsburg College Chapel, Advent 1, 3 December 2013)

Here on the cusp of the new Christian liturgical year, in the season we call Advent, I am reminded of all the various new years we commemorate in our personal and social lives.

There are, of course, birthdays and anniversaries of various sorts for each of us. And then there is the calendar new year, where we put an old year behind us and resolve to be better in the days ahead. I know I'm looking forward to putting 2013 behind me and writing 2014 on my contracts and checks – 3s are not my penmanship strength! Here at Augsburg, we mark out new academic years with all the promise and excitement we feel as our community is extended with new students and we all get a fresh start with our various courses of study. And finally, for those of us who must worry about such things, there is a new fiscal year – which here at Augsburg begins each June 1st – a day when I like to exclaim that all sins are forgiven from the previous budget.

But what about the new liturgical year? If you were in church on Sunday or here in chapel yesterday, I think you have a sense that the advent season begins in a dark place, full of mourning and anguish and longing. The epistle lesson assigned for Sunday – from Paul's letter to the Romans – said something about putting off all licentiousness and debauchery – the reader at our church had a hard time even saying the words!

And then there is this gospel text assigned for this morning, the first Tuesday in Advent. Jesus enters the holy temple, only to turn violent, overturning the tables of moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves, decrying the ways in which the temple – his Father's house – had become a den of thieves and not a house of prayer. And in so doing, Jesus upsets the entire economy that has emerged within the temple walls, calling into question the means by which sacrifices are made to pay homage and to atone for sins. Jesus turns the tables, quite literally, and therein it seems to me is the central message of the Advent season, of this new year – Jesus calls us to be transformed of the world's ways, to turn away from business as usual, and to live as those who already know the end of the story.

And that, of course, is what makes this annual new year commemoration for God's faithful people so very different than our usual practices – this is a new year in which we have nothing to do except to live as those already redeemed. We have seen the Christ Child, the teacher, the healer, the Savior – we have known the manger, the masses gathered to hear God's word, the blind man made to see, the cross, the empty tomb, the road to Emmaus – we have experienced God breaking into our history for the world God loves so much. And now we have the reminder and challenge – the renewed call – to live as those who have nothing to prove, nothing to earn, nothing to resolve, except to follow, to be God's faithful people in the world, to be transformed so that we might

be agents of God's transformation and love for all of creation, to turn the tables on the world so that it might know the compassion and mercy and justice that is ours through our awesome God.

Now, I'm not in a position to say exactly what this transformation looks like for each of us. I suppose a little less licentiousness and debauchery, but beyond that, as Martin Luther taught us, our relationship with God is personal and the call we receive will take us down paths we cannot imagine. This Advent season might be a most appropriate time for you to listen and watch even more carefully for what God is calling you to be and do in the world. The light from the Advent wreath, signifying the love of God breaking into the darkness, may be just the place to start. Where are the light and the darkness in your life, and where is the light leading you? Where are the wellsprings of compassion and hope in your life, and how can you follow God's light even further into those places, turning the tables on the darkness that is so near by? Longing for transformation, where might we find that peace and justice and love that passes all human understanding?

What I am able to say is that God does not leave us alone or comfortless or without what we need for our vocational journeys, and one of the remarkable ways we know God's guiding hand is in the embrace of communities and institutions that have themselves been formed and transformed by God's saving love in Jesus Christ – communities and institutions like Augsburg College.

Our founders believed deeply that this college was meant to embody the Word made flesh – that is the reason why they chose John 1: 14 as our founding motto – “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Augsburg is an incarnational community, grounded in this place, attentive to the needs of the world, and called to equip our students with the education and skills they need to “turn the tables” on the world.

A few ways we live out that calling and help our students to “turn the tables”:

First, we educate “off the main road.” I first coined this way of describing our approach to education after a visit to our campus in Windhoek, Namibia. As you come into Windhoek on the fancy highway, you see what the local tourism council wants you to see – new and well-kept buildings, few signs of struggle or poverty, industrious business and business people. But just a few blocks off the main road, you get a different view – a view of vast tin villages, comprising thousands who have sought relief from meager existences in rural settings and have come to the city to find work, only to find a squalid life. A view of clinics and orphanages and other agencies struggling to meet the needs of too many with too little. A view of systematic racism, keeping people in their places according to the hierarchy of power based on the color of one's skin.

And it is in these places off the main road that we are called to be educated, to see Christ's face, and to be God's people fighting for wholeness and justice. I would argue that Augsburg's academic mission – and all of its programs – is all about education off

the main road, here in Cedar-Riverside and Phillips and wherever we are found. In the classroom, in the neighborhood, around the world, we believe that God calls us to those places where the tables must be turned, and where our faithful work is most needed. In the texts we read, the conversations we engage, the service we offer, the communities we help build and sustain, God calls us off the main road so that God's people might know God's redeeming grace.

Second, here at Augsburg we are a community that believes that hospitality is not enough and that we are called to the work of justice and compassion for all God's people. Professor Lori Hale from the Religion department offered this phrase "hospitality is not enough" in a chapel homily a few years back and it has haunted me ever since. It haunts me because it can be easy to comfort ourselves with the ways of hospitality – our expanding diversity as a college community, our commitments to being of service to our neighbors, our values as a place of welcome – these become excuses sometimes for not addressing the underlying reasons why hospitality is needed in the world. Strangers need to be welcomed because they have been excluded. Neighbors need our help because they have been discriminated against. The vulnerable long for justice because they have been marginalized.

But turning the tables means that hospitality is not enough – it is, in fact, just a beginning as we must fight for justice and safety and health and compassion and wholeness for all God's people. We must use our intellects and minds to name and understand injustice and violence in the world. We must use our hearts and spirits to accompany those whose journeys are disrupted by injustice and violence. And we must use our feet and hands to stand with and fight alongside those who suffer from injustice and violence. God calls us to turn the tables on the world and to embrace the work of both hospitality and justice – of breaking bread together so that we might know and share God's love and justice for all people.

Finally and simply, we are a community that is committed to the deep links between faith and learning. Our Lutheran heritage teaches us that faith and learning belong together, and we give away that gift each and every day to all of our students whether they share our particular faith or not. We should not take this gift for granted. Faith without learning is naïve, and learning without faith is foolish. Whether in the classroom, the residence halls, here in this sacred space, on athletic fields, or wherever our teaching and learning community gathers, we are called to explore and share our faith so that our learning might be redeemed. In this Advent season, this particularly Christian liturgical time, it seems most fitting that we lift up all of the ways in which God is present in our lives, reflecting our diverse experiences and faith traditions, informing our learning together, so that we might all know the call to "turn the tables," to be the light in the darkness, to be God's people and do God's holy work, and thereby to live as those transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.