

An invitation...

Luke 24: 12-24

[Augsburg College Chapel, 10 November 2014]

The early 20th century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once said that he did theology with the Bible in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other. How about you? How do you “do theology?” Maybe you think that task belongs only to the professional or expert class – like members of our religion department, those who have devoted their lives to scholarly research and reflection. Or maybe you believe it is the work of those called to ordained ministry, the clergy who teach and preach.

This morning, I want to explore with you the Lutheran idea of “the priesthood of all believers,” Martin Luther’s contention that the work of “priests” or “clergy” and even theologians belongs to all the faithful. And that the work of “doing theology” is actually another way of describing vocational reflection, discerning what God is calling you to be and do in the world. So here we go...

A little over a year ago, I was appointed by then ELCA presiding bishop Mark Hanson - now a member of our community - to something called the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Charged with exploring the ecology of theological education within the ELCA, the Council quickly became a target for those who thought our primary role was to consider how to streamline the professional theological education in the eight seminaries of our church (including our friends at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul). And those folks were nervous!

Soon, though, it became clear that our charge was not primarily about the scarcity of resources for the preparation of clergy and other rostered leaders - and there are very real challenges in that realm of theological education, a topic for another homily - but more so about the vast and abundant resources for theological education that exist across our church - in colleges and universities, in lay training schools, in congregations and synods, in camps and so on. In fact, I have come to see my role on the Council as someone who reminds my colleagues that theology is being done day in and out in settings far and wide - and our job should be to tell the story of this expansive network of theological education rather than wallow in our challenges.

Most days we get this work right, but to get it right clearly requires a different understanding of what it means to do theology and who is charged with the work of theological education. And here we have our Lutheran Christian tradition to thank for a more expansive understanding of theological education. For those of you here who went through the confirmation program in a Lutheran church, remember that key question: "What does this mean?" A question that invites us into the work of "doing theology."

One of the joys for me in serving on TEAC has been the opportunity to share the remarkable theological education happening on the Augsburg campus every day - it's happening in the classroom and residence halls, in locker rooms and cafeteria, in this sacred space and out in the community, in Urban Plunges for middle and high school students and Spring break service trips and interfaith projects - and it belongs to all of us!

So what does "doing theology" look like? What are we invited to do when we talk about theological reflection and education? As Martin Luther also taught us, we need to work out our own relationships

with God - there is no mediator in the person of a theologian or a priest or a church - and that is the work of doing theology.

And so I invite you to join me in doing theology this morning. Let's start with theologian Karl Barth's instructions to have the Holy Scriptures in one hand and the New York Times (or some similar arbiter of world news and social realities) in the other. And then let's add another critical component of doing theology – situating our theological reflections in the context of communities of memory and practice (like faith and academic communities). The Bible, depictions of what is happening in the world, and our experiences within community.

We've got this remarkable passage from Luke's gospel as our scriptural foundation. I've got this morning's New York Times right here. And here we are in this particular community of faith and learning known as Augsburg College. That's all we need and here we go!

First, here are three themes from Luke's gospel that offer us insight into the nature of the God we know in Jesus Christ:

- Ours is an inviting God, not a command and control God. We are invited in - and then the choice is ours whether to come to the banquet or not.
- Ours is an inclusive God, urging us to invite not simply those who will feel obligated to come (and return the favor) or those entitled to come, but those vulnerable and forgotten whose place at the table is not secure.
- Ours is a God of fellowship and hospitality - a God who understands that feeding our bodies also feeds our souls, that the banquet table is a compelling metaphor for our lives together in the community. Ours is a God who wants the banquet hall filled with those who hunger for nourishment of all sorts.

And then there is the New York Times - or the Star-Tribune - or some online news source, pointing to the realities of our lives in the world:

- We build walls – to keep people both in and out. Even as we read about the 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, we are surrounded here in our neighborhood by the “walls” that have been built to separate us from each other – walls in the guise of freeways and concrete jungles and other less tangible means of walling ourselves in and out.
- We argue over whether and how to welcome the stranger to our country and community and banquet table. All of this struggle over immigration reform boils down to our fears – of losing control and jobs and power and safety. The experiences of our immigrant neighbors here in Cedar-Riverside and Phillips are daily reminders of a fearful world.
- People are going hungry and homeless when there is plenty to go around. When food and homes become weapons, we surely have reached a low point in our humanity, refusing to feed bodies and souls. We don't need to go far to witness this barbarism in our own community.

And finally, we have the values and commitments of our Augsburg community:

- I believe that we are a community with an “immigrant sensibility.” Surrounded by immigrants in this neighborhood for most of our history, we have the gift of living alongside neighbors who

don't take for granted the freedoms and opportunities most of us enjoy. What difference does that make for our educational work in this college and for our commitments in the world?

- One of the central tenets of our campus ministry program and I would argue for our entire college community is our core commitment to radical hospitality. So what does that look like in daily practice? Why do we have too many students on this campus and fellow travelers in the neighborhood who bear the burden of bias and prejudice in their daily lives? And what are we doing about it?
- Which points to my final thought about the character of this community. We have to believe that, as important as it is, hospitality is not enough. We must believe that gifts of education and community and faith demand of us more than inviting people in; they demand that we fight for the justice that evades too many of our fellow citizens in their journeys in the world – journeys in pursuit of safety, nourishment, meaningful work, a better life.

Here is what doing theology looks like – we discern the character of our God and the nature of God's work in the world in the scriptures that have been passed to God's faithful over two millennia; we seek to understand the realities of the world that challenge God's good intentions for God's people by our vigilance in study and experience; and we discern our vocations as co-creators of God's will and plan for the world in the midst of this particular community and beyond.

So I ask you these simple theological questions that flow from our reflections this morning:

- God invites us in - will you accept the invitation and will you invite others to join you?
- God loves all creation - will we be good stewards of that inclusive impulse?
- God believes in hospitality and justice - will we join in the work to be done?

Here is an invitation – into the work of doing theology, into the practices of loving God's good world, and into the wonder of community where we know God's grace and love in the work of compassion and reconciliation. What a remarkable gift. You are now all deputized and commissioned as theologians. Get to work. Thanks be to God. Amen.