

The Word Abides

Psalm 119: 9-16

[Augsburg College Chapel, 22 February 2017]

*“How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”
(Psalm 119: 9)*

I come before you this morning with two simple claims, interrelated and urgently important (I will argue), for our lives of faith in the world now. The first claim is that we need to attend to longer horizons – both into the past and into the future – to discern what we are called to do now. And the second claim is that if we attend to those longer horizons, the lives we are called to lead will be marked by a sense of humility, patience, forgiveness and hope because we will understand that we don’t know all and we can’t fix everything. Let me try and unpack these claims.

As some of you may know, I am a theological ethicist by academic training, which means I’m often asked how to resolve thorny ethical dilemmas (think the New York Times’ “Ask the Ethicist” column) – which can be daunting work because surely in our increasingly complex 21st century lives, we have only begun to scratch the surface of the ethical challenges and opportunities that will accompany new technologies, shifting definitions of roles and identities, deep political divides, diverse and new strategies to do our work, and heightened public skepticism of any attempt at drawing moral conclusions.

But then I was reminded of a lesson I learned well from my friend and colleague, the late Robert Payton – former college president, corporate foundation president, director of the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, and professor to all of us who study and care about our moral lives. The lesson always began with Bob reaching into his wallet and presenting “the card” for you to see.

Bob’s card had three lists on it:

- The seven deadly sins: pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, envy, covetousness, and anger;
- The cardinal and theological virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance; along with faith, hope, and love; and,
- Gandhi’s “seven deadly blunders,” which include (among others): wealth without work, knowledge without character, and politics without pride.

[An aside here. As a college president, I’m often asked by others what I am reading – as if I have time to read! Well, I do read literature on ethics and ethical theory for fun and I have special interest in books on the seven deadly sins. A few years back, a 90 year old grande dame of Rockford College, where I served as president before coming to Augsburg, asked me what I was reading, and it just so happened that I was reading a new series of short books on the seven deadly sins. I gave her the citation and thought

nothing of it until we were together a few weeks later at a cocktail party, where she took me aside and thanked me for the recommendation, remarking with a twinkle in her eye that she had just finished “Lust.” What do you do with that?]

For me, the lists challenge us to think about the moral horizons we share as human beings. The point is that the values and commitments reflected in our lists remind us that many have gone before us and many will follow. We do not need to reinvent the wheel.

For people of faith, our lists point to even more profound horizons and are grounded in a deep theological claim, illustrated in this morning’s reading from the Psalms: the Word abides. “How can young people keep their way pure?” the Psalmist asks, “By guarding it according to your word.” Or again, “I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” We believe that the word is God, creator, redeemer and spirit. We believe that the word was there before creation, that it guided the people of Israel in their many journeys, that it became flesh and lived among us, that it lives still in our hearts and in our communities of faith, and that it will live on in God’s eternal reign. Past, present and future, the Word abides.

As contemporary humans, buffeted by all manner of distraction and fear and greed and violence; by deep fissures in our social, political and economic lives; by truth claims without evidence; by a sense of hopelessness and despair, we are mired in, imprisoned even by, the sense of two competing dynamics. Either we are stuck and there is nothing we can do, or we are compelled to do anything we can to fix things, to resist blindly, to be our own saviors. And the truth is, of course, that neither course promises sure relief because we are stuck in a short-sighted and confounding cycle that lacks both the lessons of the past and the hope of the future.

As people of faith, surely we are called at this moment to come forward with a very different way of approaching our common lives. It is not some naïve claim that all will be well. It is a clear-eyed diagnosis of the reality of our lives in the world, framed by our very real experience of the Word that abides. The Word that creates, that guides, that teaches, that forgives, that saves, and that abides for all time. The Word that challenges us to live now with our eyes and hearts and minds attentive to God’s horizon, a horizon past, present and future, of love and grace and hope.

This, then, brings me to the second intersecting claim upon God’s faithful people. If we believe that we are called to attend to the horizons of the Word that abides – to horizons that draw us out of the world’s short-sighted and futile sense of what is important and possible – than how shall we act, what shall we do? This, of course, is the question of the moment. I don’t have lots of answers, but I would contend that whatever you choose to do – to resist, to retreat, to double down on your commitments and passions, to be a good neighbor – your actions should have wise guides and here are just a few.

First, educator Parker Palmer (our honorary alum!), who writes, "... you may be asking the vexing question, "What can I do?" For me, the answer begins within, then moves out into the world. I must own up to my fears, confess my ignorance and arrogance, seek forgiveness from those I've wronged, practice humility, and learn to listen beneath my own and other people's political rhetoric for what Howard Thurman called "the sound of the genuine" in each of us. Beneath the shouting, there's suffering. Beneath the anger, fear. Beneath the threats, broken hearts. Start there and we might get somewhere.

Does that sound like too much to ask of ourselves and each other? Perhaps. But if we can take at least a few steps in that direction, here's something I know to be true... When I draw my last breath, I'll be glad I tried to summon the better angels of my nature. Maybe you will, too."

Or, there also is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose civic nonviolence was grounded in his compelling claims that the "arc of the universe is long and bends toward justice," a horizon that calls each of us to be an arc bender! An arc bender.

And then I turn, as I have many times over the past several decades, to these remarkable words from 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who writes: "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." (from *The Irony of History*)

"I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." The Word abides – past, present and future – and therein is our strength and courage and foundation for faithful lives of compassion, justice and hope in the world. Thanks be to our awesome God. Amen,