

## Called to know and be known

Sirach 4: 11-19

Mark 9: 38-40

[Augsburg University Chapel, 13 March 2019]

This morning, I continue with the second of a series of chapel homilies focused on the theological and scriptural threads that have shaped Augsburg's identity over its 150-year history. Earlier this semester, I lifted up the influence of Hans Nielsen Hauge on the founders of Augsburg – an influence that has shaped our commitment to meaningful work. Today I want to share some reflections on the core of our academic mission – how we are called to know and be known.

To be honest, there are some who see a significant tension between the Haugean tradition - with its focus on the practical skills of building healthy economies and communities – and the historic intellectual tradition of our Lutheran faith – with its deep commitment to education and the teaching ministry of the church. In fact, some would argue that the Haugean tradition was anti-intellectualist, eschewing the traditional standards of a rigorous and excellent education, a learned clergy and a belief in objective truth. I want to counter that argument with the claim that Augsburg's academic mission has been informed by a more expansive understanding of knowledge – knowledge that reflects our attention to God's wide-ranging work in our midst, knowledge that is grounded in our belief that we know because we are known.

The logic of my argument is illustrated in our scripture readings for this morning.

The brief encounter between the disciple John and Jesus, found in Mark's gospel, goes to the heart of God's abundant and generous work in our midst. John, quite literally playing the devil's advocate, arrogantly claims that this other person casting out demons in Jesus's name must be stopped. The sub-text here, of course, is that only we – your disciples – have the power, the knowledge, the right to heal and minister and rule. The rebuke from Jesus sets the record straight, "Whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, the work we are called to do should be informed by and supported and complemented by what others say and do and believe. Why would God limit the sources of knowledge and experience that help us heal the sick, free the captives, work for justice and love each other – God's intentions for God's people and all of creation? There is indeed a wideness in God's mercy – and knowledge.

And then we turn to Sirach (sometimes known as Ecclesiasticus), where we find this soaring love letter to the ways of wisdom. For those known by God comes this invitation to follow the ways of wisdom wherever it leads – to love life, to be filled with joy, to live secure. To walk on tortuous paths, full of fear and dread, tormented by discipline and governed by her ordinances. And then to be brought back to the straight ways. For me, this describes the journey of learning for those who are known. It is a journey that takes us not to one form of knowledge –

to one way of knowing – to some objective truth once and for all. It takes us where the ways of wisdom lead – to places both tortuous and difficult and frightening and at the same time joyful and life-giving. This is a vision of knowing that knows no bounds, of knowledge that seeks after the wideness of God’s creation.

So what does all of this mean for the educational experience and academic mission we pursue here at Augsburg?

I believe that one of the most significant gifts of our scriptural and theological heritage is our commitment to humble and critical inquiry.

We are humble because we have been called by the divine, the One who knows us, and we understand that our own knowledge and actions are never complete, that there are many truths yet to be uncovered, that the truths that others have found may help inform ours, that we may be wrong and need to amend our knowledge. What a significant challenge this is to the competing ideologies that too often claim truth once and for all and thus polarize and stymie conversation and genuine learning. Our late colleague at Capital University in Ohio, Tom Christenson, has written powerfully of a Lutheran way of knowing that is grounded in wonder, openness, recognition to connectedness, freedom, critical faithfulness, engaged suspiciousness – these are the ways of humility.

And we use our critical skills because we are not afraid of the answers we may find and live into. As those already known, we believe that God calls us to lives of asking questions, of seeking an ever more full and accurate understanding of the world and our experience, of giving away our minds and hearts to serve our neighbor in whatever our vocational journey. Martin Luther taught all of us to ask “what does this mean?” The late Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, has argued provocatively that the purposes of a liberal arts education in a Lutheran institution is to “annihilate innocence” about the realities of the world and human experience, so that we might live authentically as God’s people, awake and vigilant to what we are called to be and do.

Our humble and critical inquiry then leads us to seek the ways of wisdom wherever they are found. I have learned so much from educator (and Augsburg honorary alumnus) Parker Palmer about this journey toward wisdom. Palmer talks about the community that gathers around a particular challenge or issue or what we might call a “wicked problem.” He describes how when a community gathers to explore the challenge, we must seek to bring all perspectives, all ways of knowing, all sources of knowledge to bear. It is when we do this, Palmer claims, that we experience what the poet Rilke calls “the grace of great things.” The grace of great things – the wideness of God’s mercy and knowledge.

This journey to the grace of great things, the ways of wisdom, thus challenges us to never put limits on what and where and who might be sources of knowledge and perspective that enhance our understanding of God’s work in our midst.

I think especially about what we have learned in recent years here at Augsburg through our various interfaith efforts. Grounded firmly in our Lutheran faith and intellectual tradition which calls us to ask “what does this mean?” and to watch for what God is doing in our midst, we have engaged our diverse students and neighbors in exploring how the pluralistic faith traditions of the world have so much to learn from each other as they imagine how to live together in the world, to respond to the great and daunting challenges of our times, and to chart a path forward that sees faith not as a source of division, but as a constructive force for good. When we gather as a community around the challenges of interfaith dialogue and living, we come willing to listen to each other so that we might learn from other; we come in humility so that we might be open to wisdom that comes from the experiences and traditions and cultures of others; we come with a critical eye for how our own privilege often blinds us to the opportunity to expand our knowledge; we come longing to know the grace of great things.

We come as Tom Christenson challenged us to tell “the Whole Human Story in depth and breadth honestly – to be radical truth-tellers” – and at the same time to stand together in a community of hope. Radical truth telling in a community of hope. Called to know as we are known. There is indeed a wideness in God’s mercy that is the deeply radical truth at the heart of our community of hope – as it has been for 150 years and ever shall be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.