

Called to Work

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

[Augsburg University Chapel, 8 February 2019]

This morning I offer the first of three homiletical meditations during the spring semester that focus on the theological and scriptural threads of Augsburg's history that define who we are today. I invite you into these meditations as we prepare to celebrate Augsburg's Sesquicentennial – its 150th anniversary – beginning next fall. Later this spring I will reflect on our call to learn and our call to be neighbor. This morning I want to share thoughts on our call to work – a distinctive aspect of our Norwegian Lutheran heritage.

Do you know this PBS series, "This Old House"? It is one of my longtime favorites, perhaps because I barely own a hammer and did not inherit my dad's handyperson genes... More meaningfully, I watch the show with great interest for what it teaches me about the complementarity of skills and crafts that combine to renovate the homes featured on the show. One week, it is the plumber whose work is featured with great respect and attention by others; the following week, a carpenter, then an electrician, then a structural engineer, then an interior designer, a landscaper, and so forth. The various skills – explained, held up and admired, put to work so that the project might proceed to its final form.

The Epistle lesson assigned for last Sunday, the Third Sunday after Epiphany, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, offers a scriptural frame for my "This Old House" example. Here, Paul uses the body metaphor to charge the young Christian community at Corinth to respect each other's gifts, arranged as individual members of the one body, with the same care for each other, with honor paid each member so that the body might rejoice. The church itself is lifted up as the body of Christ with its individual apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, leaders, even miracle workers – each individual called to the work for which he or she is best equipped, combining to live as a community, dedicated to being God's people in the world.

This is such a compelling image of humans working individually and together that it may be difficult to imagine how Paul's call to be the body of Christ was lost in the centuries that followed, but lost it was as the church became more and more institutionalized and stratified. Where the gifts of individual members often were diminished in the name of a hierarchy of roles and skills. Where the clergy and other religious orders took on more of the responsibility and privilege, relegating laypeople to lesser work.

And then along came Martin Luther, himself steeped in the religious orders of the early 16th century, an Augustinian monk, but one troubled by what he witnessed in the practices of his fellow clergy and the Roman Catholic Church – especially their greed and corruption. When his calls for reform were ignored, he set about to recover Paul's vision of the body of Christ with its complementary individual members. From his perch as a university professor, he set about to honor the work of the laypeople in his part of Germany. He translated the scriptures into the German language so that all people could read and benefit. He created and supported businesses in the town of Wittenberg, so that the economy would support the needs of all citizens. He created a community chest so that when there was a crisis for an individual or family, there were resources to help. He wrote with great passion about the dignity of work across all professions and crafts – cobblers and printers, students and shop owners, even shepherds as

he wrote in this Christmas sermon from 1521: “Behold how very richly God honors those who are despised of men...Nor could the angels find princes or valiant men to whom to communicate the good news; but only unlearned laymen, the most humble people on the earth...God chose poor shepherds, who, though they were of low estate in the sight of men, were in heaven regarded as worthy of such great grace and honor.” For Luther, we are all called to the work God intends for us.

Now let us jump some 275 years ahead to the Lutheran church in Norway in the late 18th and early 19th century. Though much good had occurred in the years following Luther’s reform movement, it also was the case that the Lutheran church is now more institutionalized and stratified. In fact, the Lutheran church has become the State Church in Norway (and other Northern European countries). And there were reformers at work, calling God’s people back to the Gospel and to the vision of the body first described by Paul.

One such reformer was Hans Nielsen Hauge. Born in 1771, Hauge had a spiritual experience at age 25 that led him to believe that he was called to preach the gospel and to fight against the ways in which the established church in Norway did not create healthy and just communities. Inspired by the idea of the spirit of community practiced by early Christians, Hauge sought to put the idea of common and shared economies into practice in Norway. Hauge was a skilled businessperson and entrepreneur, who would preach the gospel on Sundays and then live out the gospel by creating new businesses in which work was valued. He saw that demands for efficiency and increased production often took precedence over caring for workers and valuing their vocations. He emphasized stewardship of material goods. “The good and the wise live and use their talents, strength and fortune for themselves, so that they can shape it for the good of others; they are stewards and look for possibilities.” He focused on full employment, encouraging business owners to create jobs so that fellow citizens could experience the dignity of working to support themselves.

As is often the case with reformers, the powers that be charged Hauge with crimes against the state and church, jailing him for most of the last twenty years of his life. He died in 1823. But his influence was secure through the businesses he had created, the workers he had encouraged with his preaching and leadership, and the challenge he had brought against a church that separated the faith it preached from the works it supported.

The founders of Augsburg Theological Seminary (then College, now University) were Haugeans, Norwegian Lutheran immigrants who fled from Norway to seek better lives in a new country. These were individuals who believed in the dignity of work as a gift from God and who sought to create healthy economies and communities in their new homes. Here in Minneapolis, the neighborhood around us was first settled by these Haugeans who created businesses to serve their neighbors and institutions like Augsburg and Fairview Hospital to meet the various needs of a growing population.

Now, some 150 years later, we are inheritors of the Haugean vision for reform: building healthy economies and institutions, valuing work as meaningful and worthy of respect, and embracing our roles as stewards of God’s many gifts to us. And there are partners in this work that inspire and challenge us to secure that vision.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose 90th birthday we marked earlier this month, took up the cause of all workers late in his life. His speeches on the dignity of labor – especially focused on garbage and sanitation workers – resonated with the ideas of his namesake, Martin Luther, who lifted up work as a gift from God in our vocations. Former President Barack Obama, speaking in South Africa last summer,

said “The pace of change is going to require us to do more fundamental reimagining of our social and political arrangements, to protect the economic security and the dignity that comes with a job. It’s not just money that a job provides; it provides dignity and structure and a sense of place and a sense of purpose.” Spoken like a true Haugean and Auggie!

I recall when I first suggested that our friend Gladys Strommen honor her family’s legacy at Augsburg by funding the creation of the Strommen Center for Meaningful Work, she was a bit confused by the idea of meaningful work – it is a counter-cultural notion in 21st century society with our individualistic, celebrity culture where formal educational credentials often take the place of Medieval hierarchies. . But as she explored the idea with us over the next few months, she came to understand that this is exactly what Augsburg stands for. We believe in what we call a three-dimensional education – helping students to make a living, make a life and build a community – three aspects of work that the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, Hans Nielsen Hauge, the founders of Augsburg, and a cloud of witnesses since know can never be separated from each other – an education that equips the next generation as reformers of our social and political and religious arrangements.

We are called to work. I can’t wait to see what’s next! Thanks be to God. Amen.