

To see things whole and heal the world

Matthew 25: 31-46

[Augsburg University Chapel, 5 October 2018]

*Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.
All time is made up of healing of the world.
Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.
Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.*

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

Here we are in this sacred space, where we gather each weekday to worship and sing and pray for each other, for our community and for the world. Here is where we find grace - our foundation, our grounding, our purpose as we live out our mission.

And here we are at the beginning of our fall Board of Regents meeting, blessed to be governed by these remarkable individuals with us today who care deeply for this university and who are called to guide and advance its mission in times of great uncertainty and volatility for colleges and universities – times of great division and brokenness.

And here we are with the gift of the gospel for this morning that calls us to account with the great shepherd – to an account that, whether we are sheep or goats, reveals the fact that we have missed the point – to an account that shows us the way forward as God's people in the world.

The parable of the sheep and the goats illustrates the tension that the author of Matthew's gospel was addressing in the life of the early faithful. The Romans had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Second Coming had not yet happened. What were these good and faithful people to do? Matthew writes in the familiar language of his time to describe a heavenly scene when the Son of Man would come in judgment, separating the sheep from the goats, just as shepherds would do as dusk came to their fields. The important theological distinction here – the distinction that helps the early faithful to make sense of their lives in the world – is that Christ already has accomplished their redemption and now they are called to live not as those awaiting an imminent return but as those who are called to recognize God in the neighbor, in the world, in their continuing lives together.

So, what to do? Here, the clear messages of this day are particularly meaningful for understanding our work together – as students, teachers, administrators and board members. Here is a glimpse of our callings.

First, we confess that all has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ, and thereby we affirm that we live in the mean time, both saved and sinner (as Luther teaches us), our ways of seeing the world incomplete and fragmented. Only God sees things whole. Ours is an ongoing vocational journey to do God's work, accepting that we cannot, on our own, know enough about what God intends. We are called to humility. We are called to live as those who need each other, who need a multitude of voices and perspectives, who need to accept that we will never be finished with our explorations and questioning of what God wills for God's people. We will make mistakes. We will ask new questions. We will use the gifts God has given us to seek to do God's will. We see through a glass darkly, the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, but then we shall see face to face. What a day that will be!

[Here at Augsburg, we are blessed to have a set of principles and a planning tool appropriately called "Seeing Things Whole" that has shaped our work over the past decade. Originally developed as a way of holding an institution "in trust" and very much influenced by the work of Robert Greenleaf, who has defined what it means to be a "servant leader", "Seeing Things Whole" makes the same theological claim we find in our gospel – that is, only God sees things whole, but we are called to constantly seek an ever more faithful understanding of our lives together in organizations and communities. We are called to ask questions at the intersections of our identity and core values, our purpose and the mission we embrace, and our stewardship of the remarkable resources we have been given. There is much more to this important tool – lessons we are now including in our planning deliberations and in our classrooms – but the point is that we are called to the work of *semper reformanda*, always seeking to live more faithfully as stewards of God's good gifts.]

For now, we do well to listen to perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) these words that summarize how we might live in this paradoxical time – how hope can be found and pursued, how faith creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator, how we can seek to see things whole even when we know we will never be finished: "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."

The second lesson for the day is made abundantly clear in the words of the king in Matthew's gospel: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me." Those who have been redeemed, those who believe that all has been accomplished through Christ, those who live in the mean time, are called to be vigilant to where Christ is in our midst and to what Christ requires of us. We are called to heal the world. We are called to be what Luther called "little Christs" as we serve our neighbors no matter what...

Here, we have a helpful teacher in the German Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: "...it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ...that is how one becomes a human and a Christian."

We are called to see things whole and to heal the world. All has been accomplished and now we are here, in the world, the only body of Christ on earth now (as Teresa of Avila wrote). "Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken." What a remarkable gift, what an awesome obligation. May God grant us the wisdom and strength to be God's faithful people in the world. Amen.