

Wrestling with Angels

Central Lutheran Church
October 19 and 20, 2019

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. Amen.

It is a wonderful privilege to be with you this weekend as we celebrate Augsburg's 150th anniversary and our abiding partnership in ministry with Central Lutheran. My thanks to Pastor Peter - and, of course, to all of the Augsburg grads on staff and in the congregation - including Pastor Melissa, Deacon Mark, Sara Masters and who else? - for your help with this special weekend of celebration!

So what do you think of when you hear about our ELCA colleges and universities? I'm sure there are many alumni of our colleges in the congregation. I'm a proud Luther College grad and now have the honor to serve as Augsburg's 10th president.

I read the texts assigned for this weekend and immediately thought of Augsburg's world class wrestling program - Jacob might have been an NCAA champ. And as you might know, our chief rival for NCAA championships is the team from our sister school, Wartburg College. Who would have imagined two Lutheran colleges vying for wrestling titles!

Or maybe you've had an experience like me when our kids, Thomas and Maya, were maybe seven and four years old. We were at Target after church one Sunday and the kids were a couple of aisles away, and all of a sudden I hear them singing at the top of their lungs, "Jesus Loves Me," but instead of rushing over to quiet them down I thought how wonderful that I was raising future members of the Luther or Augsburg or St. Olaf choirs!

Or maybe your memories of our Lutheran colleges are friends for a lifetime, or that faculty member who changed your life with a class or a word of wise advice, or the daily chapel services that drew the community together.

Whatever your memories - and they all are still important to our lives on campus today - I want to suggest that at the heart of our mission as a university grounded in Lutheran faith and values is our deep and abiding commitment to walking alongside our students as they wrestle with angels - wrestling just like Jacob did millennia ago to secure a blessing, to find a way in the world, to discern a calling, to live faithfully as a child of God.

I invite you to join me in exploring what it means that we are called as Jesus tells his disciples in our gospel reading to be persistent and courageous as we seek justice and right living in the world - even when we are not sure anyone is listening or calling or paying attention. We are called to wrestle with angels.

I've long been a student of vocational journeys – even before I came to what our students call the “V-word” school. And I'm always looking for stories of how various people come to hear and follow a call. Perhaps the most compelling stories of vocational journeys are found in the lives of Jesus' disciples as depicted in the Christian scriptures. Think about Simon Peter and John and Thomas and Paul and Mary and Miriam and Tabitha– and all of those invited by Jesus to follow – in many ways, the disciples offer us a mirror to our own experiences of trying to live faithful lives in the world. I've been struck by how relevant their experiences of some 2000 years ago still are for us in the 21st century.

I wonder if we might find a few lessons from the disciples during Jesus' ministry and in the early days after his death and resurrection? In fact, what if we looked at the disciples as 1st century college students to see how their experiences might inform our own vocational reflections?

A few thoughts come to mind. First of all, what about that admissions pitch Jesus used? He's on the road, recruiting a few good souls for his entering class. Not much financial aid to offer. No fancy new campus buildings. And he wants them to drop everything – their families, their livelihoods, their homes – to follow him and become fishers of people! Are you kidding me? But Jesus wasn't kidding – and neither are those of us who continue to believe that the call to be educated is above all a moral, and even a spiritual, call.

And then there are all those life lessons along the way. There are the classroom lessons, the good news often offered by Jesus in parables that cause the disciples to think differently, to see the world with fresh eyes. Sound familiar? And there also are experiences that can't help but challenge and shape their understanding of the world. The sick who want to be healed. The hungry who want to be fed. The dispossessed who want a voice. The religious who are scandalized. The women who wash Jesus' feet with their tears. I've seen many of you involved in similar experiences in our neighborhood, in the city, around the world.

And the disciples, like all of us, don't always know how to react to Jesus' curriculum and to the life-changing experience they are having. So what do they do but clamor for access and position (who is the greatest among the disciples)? They ask lots of questions (how many times must I forgive?) They gawk at miracles at wedding banquets. They run around trying to figure out how to feed 5000 hungry pilgrims. They chastise their teacher for wasting his time with sinners. They are frightened by storms (of all sorts) and they try to emulate their teacher walking on water – don't try this at home! – only to learn that their faith is not strong enough.

And then there are the final days in Jerusalem – days leading up to what they clearly believed would be a great commencement of Jesus' reign. Triumphant marches into the city – sort of like an honors convocation. Remarkable moments in upper rooms, where Jesus breaks bread and offers the cup, and washes their feet. Perhaps you've had meaningful lunches or dinners with your teacher or even the president! The frightening moments of prayer outside the city – why is our teacher crying out to God? Do teachers cry – are they human?

And then the violence begins. One of the disciples betrays Jesus – have you ever betrayed a teacher? One denies knowing Jesus. Now Jesus has been condemned. He is crucified. A few of us stand at the cross, grieving. And now he has died, taken away to be buried. And we are hiding away, hoping that we won't be next to die. This is not the education we expected. This is scary stuff. This is not what we were promised when Jesus called us to follow him.

And on the 3rd day the women come and report that the tomb is empty. There are witnesses to the resurrection. He is risen; risen indeed. Do you believe? And we realize that our education is just beginning; our vocational journey is ahead of us; God has a plan for us.

And so God does have a plan for us. Just as God had a plan for Peter and James and John; for Paul and Miriam and Tabitha – disciples all. A plan that our teacher(s) have prepared us to live out. A vocational plan, if you will – a call to love and serve. A call to follow even when – like for disciples throughout the ages – the stakes are high, the rewards perhaps uncertain, the terrain uncharted, the future murky at best. A call to abide in our awesome and loving God, You're not alone with these vocational feelings!

“Where I am going,” Jesus tells his disciples in the 14th chapter of the gospel of John, “you cannot come.” But you will not be alone. I leave you this new commandment, by which the world will know that you are my disciples. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” By this, they will know that you are mine, if you have love for one another. You are known by how you love – how you love God, each other, and God's good world. You're as ready as you're going to be. You've been called...abide in me and all will be well.

And now what? What does it mean to wrestle with angels?

This thing called faith is so central to our lives, our tradition, and our role in the world, and yet too often we find it extremely difficult to engage each other in conversations about what we believe and why. I believe deeply that our need to talk about faith and its role in our private and public lives is perhaps more relevant than ever before because the world needs people of faith. The evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other, at war within and without – surely we all know the reality of what the Apostle Paul called “creation's groaning.” And we could leave it just there – as many do – with no evidence for optimism, no sense of what it all means, no horizon that inspires us to go on. Yet we are called to faith and hope. Acknowledging creation's groaning while also believing that the Divine is active in our midst, we find hope in the *glimpses* of God's reign in our history, in our daily lives. Faith is what helps us live in the paradox that Martin Luther called *simul justus et peccator* – people living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of creation's groaning and the mysterious and redemptive work of God in our lives.

Perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) these words that summarize how we might live in these tensions – how hope can be found and pursued, how faith creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator: “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.”

In the context of this elegant tension, I’ve been thinking about faith a good bit over the past few months as we try to imagine the role that faith plays in the Augsburg University community on the occasion of our 150th anniversary – I’d like to offer a brief glimpse of some of my thinking and see if it makes sense to you as we all seek to grasp what it means to be faithful people in the world. How are we called to wrestle with angels in our lives of faith in the world?

Story of Thomas’ adoption: Imagine this situation – five families gathered in an orphanage conference room in Soc Trang, Vietnam, brief speeches, food is served, and all of a sudden five children are carried out from the back room. There ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking – and then we are off, loaded into vans and on our way back to our lives, changed forever by what happened in that orphanage.

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us when faith breaks into our lives: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever – it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive.

It is this story that helps me to understand that faith truly is a gift – not to be coveted or expected, but to be received – we are chosen by God to be God’s child, to become a part of God’s family. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever – and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people.

Story of Betsy, an Augsburg student: Betsy is like many of our students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes – and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant in our Campus Kitchens program. Betsy begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns in relationship with neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals – she wants fellowship and community.

Surely Betsy shows us what it means to think about faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a gifted person of faith.

My teacher, Martin Marty, says that the distinctive mark of faithful people is “acts of mercy” – Luther uses the word “neighbor” more often than any other word in his voluminous works.

Faith as call teaches us that there is not necessarily one destination point – one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith – faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy – faith is an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected.

Story of my mother, Elsie My mom died 15 years ago this past summer and during her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for several years, and, now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment alternatives, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family—I am the oldest of six children, all married with children of their own—made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together and with her.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we “keep vigil” with and for mom. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here, then, is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God’s will to be done. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God’s embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called “just one last surprise,” God’s promise of abundant and eternal life.

Faith as gift, call and promise – faith as a life unfolding. We join together to proclaim “Lord, I believe” – I believe in your gift, your call, your promise – even as we admit, “help my unbelief” – my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace!

One last story, once again a baptism story. Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.” As much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives, it is, of course, impossible to do – thanks be to God!