

Full of grace and truth

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

John 1: 1-5, 14

[Augsburg University Chapel, 27 October 2023]

A wise pastor I greatly admire often begins his preaching by proclaiming (and praying): “We don’t need another sermon, Lord – dear God, not another one – but we are deeply in need of a word, the Word. Send the Word into our midst.” And so we might pray today and everyday in our fraught, noisy, full-of-distractions, too much talking lives. Dear God, please send your Word!

We live in perhaps the quintessential world of words – a university campus – where people like to talk and talk and talk. This is my 48th straight year on a college campus, so you have to wonder how many words I’ve spoken and listened to – and you might also ask how many I remember. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, to ask what we are doing in our university to listen to the Word, to be the Word, in the midst of so many other words. I think this is a most pressing question when our words – my words – seem so inadequate for this moment when violence and hatred and oppression dominate our lives and our world.

I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad’s sermon so that we could have a discussion at Sunday dinner. “Punitive” comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual – “of course I listen to what you’re saying, Dad!” But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to “pay attention,” to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to pay attention to love breaking into our lives as God’s faithful people. It is the lesson first taught by Martin Luther, whose Protestant Reformation we mark next week on its 506th anniversary revolved around faithfulness to the Word.

The late cultural critic, Neil Postman, has been one of my most influential guides to learning how to pay attention. In 1995, he wrote, “Like the sorcerer’s apprentice, we are awash in information without even a broom to help us get rid of it. Information comes indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume, at high speeds, severed from import and meaning. And there is no loom to weave it all into fabric...No stories to tell us what we need to know, and what we do not need to know....” What to do, then? “[W]e will need to consult our poets, playwrights, artists, humorists, theologians, and philosophers, who alone are capable of creating or restoring those metaphors and stories that give point to our labors, give meaning to our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future.”

This morning's scripture readings offer God's faithful people such a story – a Word that can give point to our labors, meaning to our history and direction to our future – let's listen once again.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides a still (and perhaps never more urgently) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word must be proclaimed by the community of believers. I think we can assume that the Corinthians were having their own issues in hearing and living the Word in the midst of the noisy and frightening early days after Jesus had left them. So Paul offers this remarkable hymn of love as a pattern for their lives – Paul offers the Word of Love to help the Corinthians (and us) make sense of our lives. If all I have are the words of mortals (or even angels), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If all I have are human power and knowledge, I am nothing. Even if I give away all I have and give up my body, I gain nothing. Unless I have the Word, unless I have Love, I will not find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Wow – this concrete word to a very real community of the faithful – just like this one – is the call to live as the beloved, to live in the midst of the world as the Living Word, the body of Christ. It is the call to pay attention.

And so the story continues – as it has now more almost 2000 years – here at Augsburg, as we seek to live as the beloved community, to be the living Word in a world that more than ever needs to know the Word.

And it continues especially in our reading from John's gospel, which contains the original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary, written in Norwegian, of course, but (in translation!) continues to offer us a way to consider how to hear Jesus' call and to follow Paul's map to faithful lives. From the 1st chapter of John's gospel, the 14th verse, "And the Word became flesh." And so it does – each and every day – on our campuses (in Minneapolis, Rochester, Mexico, Latin America and Namibia) as we seek to educate students for lives of faithful service in the world. Here is both a theological and practical claim on our lives together.

So how do we honor the call to be the Word made flesh in the city? Here are three simple, yet profound, ways that John's gospel guides us as we seek to educate our students for vocations of service in the world and thereby live as the Word made flesh in the city.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. I have the privilege everyday to witness how faculty, staff, students and community members linked to Augsburg are embodying the Word in their work on and off campus. In a neighborhood full of immigrant diversity, we are working to be the Word by being neighbor.

The Word came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. Nobody said this would be easy and that is a central message in our vocational work. Certainly

John's gospel is a stark reminder that the Word is not easy for the world to hear. We kill our prophets because we are people who cannot imagine the year of the Lord's favor or love that is kind and patient. As we seek to be the Word made flesh and to listen for our calls, we also must know that faithful work, God's work, will not necessarily make us popular or comfortable. There is room in our world for the courageous company of witnesses to the Word and the way of love, and we are called to be among them.

And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. I love the juxtaposition of grace and truth in this passage. The Word surely is grace. It is nimble and forgiving and imaginative and surprising. It is practical and resourceful. It creates miracles of abundance where the world sees only scarcity. We see glimpses of grace everyday at Augsburg as we engage with community partners in programs like Faith in the City, a consortium of Lutheran organizations in the Twin Cities that are working together to seek the welfare of the city. We see glimpses of grace in our international work through the Center for Global Education and Experience, transforming the lives of students by teaching them about privilege and introducing them to global neighbors whose lives do intersect with ours. We see glimpses of grace as we work around our usual institutional rules to meet the needs of our East African neighbors. We see glimpses of grace in our classrooms where we explore together the great questions that animate our lives in the world.

And the Word also is truth, a word that speaks to a way and a life that we are called to follow. It is a call to discipleship, to love beyond human understanding, to God's intention for us and all of creation. It is the word of a God who has known us forever. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," the prophet Jeremiah reminds us. To be known and named is the promise of the Word, the truth of life abundant and eternal. This is the Love that hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. The glimpses of truth are also visible at Augsburg – in the classroom, in this daily chapel, in all of the ways we faithfully serve in the world, to equipping each other for lives of meaning and value. This search for the Word of truth is always incomplete, of course, for "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." But what a wondrous gift it is to pay attention as God shows us the way!

Here is the Word. Pay attention, for in a world so full of words, we have the Word to live, to share, and to shout from the mountaintops. Thanks be to God. Amen.