

Teach me to give

Augsburg College Chapel

November 20, 2006

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

I was a fan of the quirky TV show, Northern Exposure, which offered a weekly glimpse into the life of an Alaskan village. My favorite episode was about an annual feast and banquet, held in the home of the village's wealthy, former astronaut. (You probably need to see the episode to understand all this – I have a video if you're interested!) The point is, that though the actual banquet was the point of the episode, it was the getting to the banquet that filled most of the hour – who was to be invited (and not), what was the menu and wine selection, who would be seated next to whom (and not), and so forth. It was a wonderful glimpse into how the final product of human endeavors – in this case, the feast itself – could often overshadow the fascinating machinations of human relationships, egos, social dynamics and so forth that are the real stuff of our lives. If all we focus on is the banquet and feast, we miss the richness and messiness of our lives together.

Later this week, Americans will gather at feasts across the country - just like the Israelites of old - to offer our thanks for the bounty of our lives. Many of us find Thanksgiving the zenith of American holidays – a day on which we best honor a central virtue of the American character – what former Connecticut College president Claire Gaudiani has called our “impulse to generosity.”

But I wonder how well we understand what sets the stage for the feast. Do we acknowledge the act of giving thanks and its links to our history as a country of immigrants, free of the tyranny of monarchies, despots, state churches and the exigencies of social class and ethnic conflicts around the world. There is language in our history, in our founding documents, in the narratives of our lives together in this democracy – religious language, theological language even – that has been lost to our contemporary lives. It is the language of covenant, stewardship, vocation – the language of faith, hope and love – language that names our aspirations but that also indicts us for forgetting the richness and messiness that leads to the occasion for the feast, language that perhaps we need to recover if we are to know why we celebrate this national day of Thanksgiving.

I learned important lessons about thanksgiving – about why we give – from an unusual source.

Lin Tao, a graduate student, is a Brazilian citizen who was born in China. A couple of years ago I found him sitting in my office lobby and asked if I could help him. He said that his management professor had suggested that he make an appointment to talk about a class project.

I was intrigued as he described the project. One of the college's business faculty members is on the local Red Cross board of directors and wanted to find a way to

participate in a Red Cross fundraising campaign that had just been launched. The faculty member's creative solution was to offer a final project assignment for his management class that challenged students to commit to drafting and executing a plan to raise \$1,000 for the Red Cross campaign. What a great assignment!

Mr. Tao was in the class and wanted more information from me about the campaign. But this was no simple question about the campaign's goals or timetable. Lin Tao wanted to know what this crazy thing Americans call philanthropy was all about. "Teach me about philanthropy," he asked. "Why would anyone ask someone else to make a gift to support a cause like the Red Cross?" Why, indeed?

The next thirty minutes or so allowed me to share with Lin Tao the basic narrative about philanthropic practice in America. There were those ministers who traveled to London in the 1640s seeking support for Harvard. There were friendly visitors in 19th century metropolitan areas. There were orphanages and hospitals and museums that opened in the mid-19th century. The Rockefellers and Carnegies created foundations to give some of their wealth responsibly in the late 19th century. At the same time, Jane Addams opened a settlement house in Chicago. Fundraisers began to work professionally for YMCAs and universities in the early 20th century. Today there are professional fundraisers and venture philanthropists and direct mail campaigns and internet giving. And on and on the story unfolds.

But Lin still had questions to be answered – why would someone make a gift to the Red Cross? His cultural and national backgrounds gave him little context for understanding the motivations we might have as Americans to share of our personal resources with individuals and organizations that meet social needs. My response to that question was my personal story of stewardship – my philanthropic autobiography – the promises I make to fellow citizens in my giving – the hope I find imbedded in the work of individuals and organizations across our country – the ways in which I love strangers by meeting their needs and sharing their aspirations. The ways in which giving always begins with giving thanks!

In the end, Lin decided to pursue his class project with the most pure form of philanthropy I know. He asked classmates and friends and strangers on the street to contribute to his fundraising effort. He learned to tell the story of the Red Cross – about disaster and fire relief, about shelter for the homeless, about support for our armed forces. And the gifts began to add up.

What is the moral of this story for 21st century Americans who so take for granted the role of giving in our lives and are accustomed to all the forms of fundraising and philanthropy we experience in our daily lives? The point is, of course, that we should never take for granted what a remarkable set of institutions and social dynamics and personal stories the work of philanthropy in our democracy entails.

Three simple strategies should guide these intentional efforts to name our reasons for giving and they are particularly relevant to our work together here at Augsburg:

- Know your own vocation and help others to know theirs. “Why am I generous?” is a vocational question that can help others to reflect on their motivations – and that is where genuine giving begins.
- Encourage your fellow citizens to become “missionaries” for giving and giving thanks in America. Too often even our best efforts are characterized by a lack of reflection about why giving is at the core of our personal and social lives – we need to be reflective givers of thanks.
- Finally, take advantage of your time here at Augsburg to learn more about how giving is at the heart of a liberal arts education, central to our faith and values, and so critical to a vital and diverse civic life.

What do we learn when we give?

- A sense of history – remembering
- A sense of place – rooted
- A sense of values – grounded
- A sense of hope – faithful
- A sense of service – the connection between the liberal and domestic arts

When I saw Lin Tao after the class project was concluded, I asked what he had learned from his initial foray into the world of fundraising. And he replied that he had learned the most important and meaningful lesson of his entire stay in the United States: he had learned about the American spirit, about thanksgiving and generosity, about why we give.

And I, too, learned a good lesson about our giving. I learned how much we take for granted this remarkable individual and public dynamic of giving and receiving. I learned how meaningful it is to reflect on why we give and to tell that story again and again to those who don’t understand. I was reminded about stewardship, covenant and even vocation. I was challenged to understand my giving as an act of faith, an offering of hope, a life of love. I now know why I so enjoy coming to the feast of thanksgiving and why I relish the richness and messiness of all that it has taken to get there. The Israelites – on a faith journey just like ours – learned as an exiled people the importance of giving and giving thanks.

And today I am grateful for Lin Tao, a stranger in a new land, who taught me once again to give – to give thanks! Thanks be to God and Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.