

Lessons from a widow

Luke 21: 1-4

[Augsburg College Chapel, 26 November 2007]

- For those of you who pay attention to such things, this is the final week of the Christian liturgical year – yesterday was what is called “Christ the King” Sunday, ending the long months after Pentecost, what we sometimes call Ordinary Time, and setting the stage for the beginning of Advent next Sunday. I must admit to some concern about this liturgical moment when it becomes more about the church triumphant than about the reign of God in Christ...perhaps this intriguing story from Luke’s gospel, assigned in the daily lectionary for this Monday after Christ the King, is a relevant gift as we seek to keep all of this in proper perspective.
- Last fall, the Christensen lectures were given by Douglas John Hall, a wise and sometimes provocative theologian, who spoke about the future of Christianity. The moment I remember best from his lectures happened in the Q&A session, when someone asked him what the church would look like fifty years from now, and Hall responded that it would look very much like a synagogue, combining study and worship as God’s faithful people could no longer count on the community gathering because of birthright or cultural expectation. Instead, God’s faithful people would come together intentionally, responding to the call to explore and study what God intended for them to do and offering their worship and praise for what they came to understand and believe.
- This, of course, is a radical understanding of church, especially in a culture where we still count church membership and giving and programming as signs of religiosity. A culture in which the fruits of faith are too often judged by institutional arrangements – whether it be mega-churches, purpose-driven churches, mainstream churches, base community churches, house churches, and so on.
- Kathleen Norris tells a wonderful little tale in her *Amazing Grace* about the district superintendent pastor who is organizing a district-wide gathering to consider strategies to evangelize those called the “unchurched.” In preparation for the gathering he visits the local grocer and asks him to prepare some deli meats to feed the gathering. The grocer, who apparently does not attend church regularly, has been targeted by the pastor for some special attention and gets an earful while he takes the food order. Imagine the pastor’s surprise when he unwraps the deli tray on the day of the gathering and finds a centerpiece: a cross made of bologna! Point taken, I think.
- Here at Augsburg, we face some similar challenges I think as we seek to be intentional about how faith is a part of our common lives (in line with Professor Lowe’s call in chapel last Monday for us to be more intentional about our diversity work!). I love this chapel and the fact that some of us gather here everyday to mark this Sabbath moment in our lives. But often when I talk with alumni and friends about our daily chapel, the first response many of them have is to ask “How many attend?”, perhaps thinking that my answer to the question, if sufficiently large or not, is the true sign of whether chapel services are an indicator of our religious well-being as a college community. Institutional arrangements are the rule. But what about

witnesses to the gospel, people of living faith, prophets that call our world to the truth...some of you are here, others are not. Perhaps the story of the widow reminds us to focus on what God expects, not what humans deem adequate and sufficient to mark out our faith.

- This wonderfully simple story may deceive us – as it has preachers throughout the centuries, who, too often, reading the story out of context, believe that it is meant to reflect Jesus’ vision of giving: give more, give sacrificially, give out of your scarce resources, not out of your vast wealth. We might agree that this is a radical vision, and yet...
- Many scholars suggest that, instead of a story of praise for the widow, this is a story of lament by Jesus for the religious establishment that puts this widow in the position to have to give up all she has so that the religious order might be satisfied. Jesus, the scholars say, would never praise the fact that the widow is asked to give up all she has to honor the religious rules. Instead, he calls us to recognize how our religious institutions too often impose claims that are meant to serve the institution, not our faith. Read this way, the widow becomes not an exemplar of giving but an evangelist for the gospel – the good news of social justice and freedom from the bondage of human authority, the good news of reform, the good news that calls to question the ways in which humans create expectations and structures that stymie the work of God in our midst. Jesus points to the widow’s experience as a sign that the religious order must be reformed. The story of the widow turns our understanding of faith upside down and calls us to be intentional about how we will be faithful – not because of what others expect of us, but because of what God calls us to be and do in the world. The story of the widow calls us to reflection and worship!
- So what does that mean for us, especially here at Augsburg College? What can we learn from the story of the widow that can guide our understanding and practice of faith in this community? A couple of thoughts...
- I think there is an interesting twist to the widow’s situation that is quite instructive. Surely there is a case to be made that Jesus’ vision of discipleship and giving does require us to give up our own lives and follow him. Remember the rich young man who goes away in tears because he cannot give up his wealth – something about a camel through the eye of a needle. And remember the disciples themselves who left behind family and livelihoods and comfortable surroundings to follow Jesus when he called.
- Jesus’ lament over the widow’s plight in today’s scripture is not to say you don’t need to give it all up; the point is that you need to give it up for the right thing, in response to God’s call, not to satisfy human expectations and rules. Here at Augsburg, all of our talking about and seeking ways to explore our calls needs to be infused with and informed by Jesus’ call to reformation of institutional and social arrangements, and by his own struggles to challenge the authorities of his day – challenges that, of course, led him to Jerusalem and the cross.
- My friend, Sam Portaro, former Episcopal chaplain at the University of Chicago, reminds us in his *Crossing the Jordan: Meditations on Vocation* that Jesus was in many ways like us in his own vocational journey: “To leave home and take up residence either literally or ideologically on the opposite bank from where we originated is difficult. To cast off the protective shelter of the familiar and predictable and take up with strangers is difficult.” Jesus, Portaro reminds us, not only tells us to follow

the call but he also shows us how – what following the call looks like and how tough it can be. We need to give up our own sense of what we think the world wants us to do and what it expects of us – instead we must listen for and follow God’s call. For example, if this chapel is where you are called each day, then let us be intentional about how the faith proclaimed and lived here is a source of comfort and strength for our journeys. If not (as is the case for many in our community), then let us seek with our brothers and sisters to find ways to support and understand how their faith journeys will unfold. The call of faith will take all of us to quite unexpected and surprising places – as individuals, as a college, as God’s people in the world – that is the firm and confident proclamation we make in this place. Are we listening and watching and paying attention? Are we ready?

- I also think there is in our gospel for this morning another important reminder for our lives of faith here at Augsburg – it is the fact that Jesus uses the widow as the focus of his call for reform. Throughout the gospels, Jesus engages the vulnerable – children and widows and foreigners and the ill – to be evangelists, the sources of stories and parables about faith and courage and love. In our lives here, we too must find ways to listen for the voices of the vulnerable – in our midst, in our neighborhood, in the world – who will teach us what is important, who will call us to reform, who will ask us to be faithful and courageous on their behalf. The world isn’t fair (or just or compassionate or healthy) – we see evidence of that each day in our lives at this college and in the world – we are called to change that, whether it be by changing our personal behavior or by challenging social structures and systems that keep people from living their lives as God intended. The widow calls us to affirm the bias of the gospel for those who are too easily forgotten, too easily ignored, too often lost in our social arrangements.
- As Wendell Berry puts it – most clearly: "If change is to come... it will have to come from the outside. It will have to come from the margins... this sort of change is a dominant theme of our tradition, whose "central figures" have often worked their way inward from the margins. It was the desert, not the temple, that gave us the prophets."
- God’s lessons from a widow, offered for God’s faithful people...and now we have the gift of Advent in which to consider how we will make the gospel of Jesus Christ – the gift of God’s love breaking into our lives – our inspiration and guide to a reflective faith, a courageous spirit, a bias to the poor, and a call to do God’s work in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.