

COMMON WORK

Acts 4: 32-37

[Augsburg College Chapel, 14 September 2009, Celebrating the Church World Service CROP Program]

{Reflections on daily chapel – a gift we should never take for granted.}

I want to begin with a personal story that helps me navigate the murky waters between the claims of the gospel for the lives of God's faithful people in the world – the claims that are illustrated in our reading from Acts this morning, claims to live as people who have been transformed by faith – and the daunting challenges of living in the world in the 21st century, challenges that often lead me to think that it just isn't possible to live as Jesus taught his disciples.

One of the efforts that I have long supported personally is the Church World Service's CROP program. The annual CROP walks, which I have chaired here in Minneapolis for the last couple of years, are a fine example of how local action is linked to global responses to deep need. Church World Service feeds the hungry of the world, even as it helps our global neighbors to build sustainable lives. We're going to learn more about CROP later this morning. Each year, I have the privilege to be reminded of how my life has been shaped by my participation in various CROP programs and the lessons I have learned about my calling from my efforts to support CROP...

I remember a Saturday morning some 40 years ago, when my father, a Lutheran minister, and I hopped into a borrowed pick-up truck to commence a day of work on behalf of the Church World Service's CROP program. Though most of you probably know CROP today through its annual "walks," in rural areas CROP has long sponsored the grain contribution effort we helped with that day.

For eight or nine hours that Saturday, my dad and I drove from farm to farm in our southern Wisconsin community gathering contributions of grain from generous farmers. When our pick-up truck was full, we would drive to the local grain elevator to unload. At the end of the day, our various contributions were totaled by the elevator operator and the contributed grain was transported to the Church World Service barge or flatbed, ultimately ending up in Africa or Asia as part of U.S. efforts to alleviate world hunger.

On that Saturday, my dad and I were grain-gatherers. Along with the grain donors (the farmers), the grain-storers and counters (the elevator operator), the grain brokers (Church World Service), and the grain recipients (the hungry of the world), we participated in the common work of a community where each member did his/her part, helping to relieve a need, building a healthier world.

It is a simple picture of a complex set of dynamics. It is, however, a picture that defines who I am and what it is I care about in my work. I was called to be a grain-gatherer. I live out that vocation every day in my professional life. From my early experience, however, I know well that my work makes no sense outside of the community of grain donors, counters, brokers, and recipients, who share my commitment to a more humane and responsible world.

In other words, on that day 40 years ago, I learned how to live as part of a community of people whose lives have been transformed by faith, a lesson that is even more relevant and urgent to me today. I have long felt that these verses from the Acts of the Apostles, describing the community of the early faithful, may be the most challenging in the entire Bible for those of us trying to live faithful lives in the 21st century. I imagine even now there are more than a few of us muttering about what a naïve and idealistic vision of community this is. What, for heaven's sake, does any of this have to do with our complex and complicated 21st century lives? We need to get real about what really drives our common lives, about the metrics and bottom-lines and markets that help us sort out the wheat from the chaff.

And I suppose you are right. On our terms, these early followers of Jesus don't seem to be facing the facts of private property and economic theory and mixed motivations for human agency. And yet we read that great grace was upon them as they lived together as witnesses to lives transformed through faith. I don't know about you but I want to know that grace in my life, in our lives.

Why is this so hard for us to imagine? Perhaps it's because we need to be reminded that lives transformed by faith compel us, inspire us, make possible common lives full of grace and truth. And while it really isn't all that complex or difficult to describe – in fact, its simplicity is really quite elegant; these good folks lived for each other and it worked – the problem is that it's just hard for us – even those of us who long to be faithful – to remember, to imagine and to make happen in a world that defines success and progress and gain in ways that have no place for faith, yet alone grace.

I think Kentucky farmer and writer, Wendell Berry, speaking to a group of seminary students a few years ago, got this paradox about lives of faith in the world just right when he put it this way: “There are embarrassing questions that the Gospel imposes on us...the first is this: If you had been living in Jesus's time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers?...The second question is this: Can you be sure that you would keep his commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so?”

I want to suggest that the burden or claim of the gospels and the stories of the early faithful upon us here at Augsburg College, in the year of our Lord 2009, here in this remarkable neighborhood, in our troubled world, is to ask ourselves these same questions and to share with each other how our answers might reshape our work together as a community. Can we imagine together a path of common work that is faithful to the gospel, to the values of our college and to the needs of our neighbors?

A week from today we will welcome Bill McKibben to campus to present the Christensen lecture. McKibben's *Local Economy* addresses in a provocative way just these sorts of questions. His suggestion that it is too easy to label local efforts to live more sustainable lives as naïve and unrealistic illustrates just how important it is for us to fight back against the dominant economic mythology that embraces a perspective of scarcity and cannot imagine a world of abundance. McKibben's book is full of examples of people around the world building and sustaining local economies that help respond to challenges of global climate change, sustainable communities and durable solutions to really big, daunting economic and social challenges. As McKibben says, though, "As much we need those working instances of new economies, we also need a new mental model of the possible." That is, we need to remember and imagine what it means to live as people whose lives have been transformed by faith and filled with grace. The world depends on us for this important work, and today, more than ever before as McKibben illustrates, our work quite literally is a matter of life and death.

So where does this leave us? We have, on the one hand, the Gospel claim that we should live as those whose lives have been transformed by faith, as a people who know that our lives mean nothing apart from our fellow faithful and our neighbors everywhere who so need our attention and care. We have, on the other hand, a world that warrants against this sort of vision of common purpose and work – in fact, we have a world whose challenges appear so daunting and overwhelming that we often cannot imagine how we can make a difference.

And here is where my 40-year old story most helps me to navigate a faithful life in the world. I live my life right here, right now, as someone called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ – just as the early faithful did in Jerusalem and Rome and Corinth. And then we begin to remember and understand how our efforts in this place are, perhaps more than ever before, a way of connecting our faithful work to the lives of neighbors around the world. I was called to be a grain-gatherer and my vocation is linked to the hungry of the world – hungry in body, in mind and in spirit. Decisions we make today, here in Cedar-Riverside – choices we make about how to live our lives, the vocations we will pursue – participation in efforts such as the CROP walk – actually do tie us to our fellow faithful, our fellow needy, no matter where we find them. The great promise of our global connectedness is that we now have the very real opportunity to understand in concrete terms how our local economies and efforts participate in the common work of meeting the needs of God's people around the world. All of the wonderful work of our students and faculty in educating and challenging us in this Sustainability Month are a powerful reminder of how our own local economy – the food we eat, the paper we use, the garbage we leave behind – is linked to the well-being of our neighborhood, our ecosystem, all part of God's good creation

A couple of years ago I was in Mexico with a group of our students on a Center for Global Education trip. While there we visited with a Mexican government official who was lauding the positive impact of the free trade agreements for the Mexican economy. One of our good students challenged the official by asking, "With all of this talk about free trade, I'd like to know how you are promoting fair trade?" to which the official replied, "Fair trade is up to you – the

decisions you make, the purchases you make, the policies you advocate for will help (or not) create the conditions for fair trade.”

It’s up to you and you and you and me. We are called to be God’s people in the world. Common work is ours to pursue, here at Augsburg, in our neighborhood and throughout the world. Lives transformed by faith call us to common purpose and to the grace of gathering grain for all of God’s people. Please join us for the CROP walk and for all of the ways we can live as those claimed by the gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.