

IT GETS BETTER

Matthew 10: 24-33

[Augsburg College Chapel, 12 October 2011, Reconciled in Christ Celebration]

The hymn we sang to open our chapel service this morning - "All Are Welcome" - was written by Marty Haugen, a fellow Luther College graduate. A couple of years ago, I was in a session with Marty when he told the story of having written this hymn for a particular Christian community and as he delivered it to them, reminding them (and us) that you can't sing this song if you don't live it. All are welcome is not some sentimental bromide, it is a call to faithful action in community and in the world. Words matter. They are our expressions of reality. We should think twice about the words we write and say and sing to make sure we really mean them.

There are compelling words on the wall of this chapel as well. Words that proclaim that this college believes deeply that all are welcome here - in this community, in this chapel. Our status as a college "reconciled in Christ" means specifically that we have committed ourselves to being a community where people of diverse sexual and gender orientations are welcome and embraced as full and vibrant members of our common life. We can't say those words if we don't mean them, if we don't live them.

The scripture assigned for this morning is a Word of grace that provides a rich backdrop to our faithful lives in this place. Jesus's words to his disciples about how God knows and loves each of us, how the darkness cannot overcome the light, how we must live as those known and reconciled, how even the hairs of our heads are counted - stand as a powerful reminder that we are called to the ministry of reconciliation and hospitality precisely because we have been reconciled already through Christ. These are joyful words of significance and inspiration and challenge to the world's ways of darkness and hatred and anonymity.

Augsburg is a college founded on a theological concept, a Word if you will, that has powerful implications for how we are called to live here and now. Our founding scripture from the gospel of John, chapter one, verse 14, proclaims that the Word became flesh. These words mean that God came into human history, became incarnate (the words we hear in Christian creeds), lived among us, showed us the way, the truth and the life, died, was buried and rose again so that we might be freed from our sin to live with and for each other.

It is a deep theological idea, worthy of more than a couple of paragraphs in a brief homily - the main point, though, is clear. Our founders believed that God's ultimate act of hospitality - entering into our world and inviting us into God's love - was an

appropriate way to imagine the work of a seminary and college, educating students for lives of meaning and purpose in the world. We are called to lives of hospitality.

There is, however, a related theological idea that also calls us in John's gospel, and it is the fact that this ultimate act of hospitality was rejected by the world. "He came to his own, and his own did not accept him," we read in verse 11. And because God's love and generosity is rejected, the world needs to be healed, justice needs to be pursued, love needs to be practiced. In other words, hospitality is not enough - we must also fight for justice.

As we affirm and celebrate our work as a reconciled in Christ college community today, we most assuredly are reminded day in and out of the abiding call we have to lives of hospitality and justice. Just a year ago, a hate crime on campus galvanized all of us to stand together and declare that this is not what God intends for God's faithful people, that we will not be a community marked by fear and violence. But even in that powerful moment, we were challenged to recognize that our call to hospitality, to be a welcoming community, can invite fear and violence against those who do not share our experience or background. We learned that to be hospitable also means that we must work for love and justice and healing. We must work to undo the systems and policies and practices of a world that would demonize and polarize and keep watch in the darkness, afraid of the light.

The recent "It Gets Better" campaign, fighting against bullying and violence perpetrated on young people of diverse sexual and gender orientations, is an example of how we can stand together for both hospitality and justice. Begun a couple of years ago by journalist, Dan Savage, this movement has attracted the attention of a wide community of leaders and citizens who believe that we are called to fight back against the fear and violence, and particularly to help young people know that they are not alone, that they are welcome, and that we will fight for their healthy and safe and just lives in the world.

For those of us in the faith community, we come to the "It Gets Better" campaign with a message that only enhances and extends this important work of hospitality and justice. And it is the message in our gospel for this morning. It is the Word made flesh. It is the powerful word that we must live out day in and day out.

The late Letty Russell, who taught theology at Yale, offers this crisp summary of the word we hear today. She writes, "Just hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching out across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing in our world of fear and crisis of the ones we call "other." To live out God's welcome as just hospitality is both calling and challenge."

This is the word that assures us that our God knows us, names us, claims us and loves us. This is the word that we are part of a community of those called by this generous and all-knowing God to do God's work in the world, to be agents of hospitality and

justice. This is the word that says it does get better - thanks be to God - and that then inspires and challenges us to get to work to make it so. All are welcome – and we mean it. So be it. Amen.