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Say Something Theological: A Meditation on the Vocation of Lutheran Colleges and Universities to Serve the Common Good

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He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Luke 14: 12-14, NRSV

A distinguished member of the divinity school faculty where I pursued my graduate education was once asked at a cocktail party to "say something theological," to which he is purported to have responded, "God," before walking away.

As much as we might like to get away with such a retort, those of us who lead Lutheran colleges and universities are often asked to say something theological as pertains to the mission and work of our institutions. And truth be told, we don't always feel equipped to do so. That said, I want to argue that our leadership demands of us a willingness to engage the theological issues that are at the heart of the vocation of Lutheran higher education—not because we need to prove ourselves as theological scholars but because the world needs the distinctive theological voice of the Lutheran tradition that points to love for the neighbor and hope for the world God loves so much. And we are uniquely situated in our leadership roles to help that voice be heard.

Furthermore, I believe that the questions around our personal and institutional callings to serve the common good are particularly fitting for theological reflection, creating an opportunity to engage our communities in the exploration of how our distinctive identities and missions as colleges and universities of the Lutheran church offer an important voice in the public discourse about pressing social issues.

The early twentieth century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once said that he did theology with the Bible in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other. How about you? How do you "do theology?" Maybe you think that task belongs only to the professional or expert class, such as members of our religion departments, those who have devoted their lives to scholarly research and reflection. Or maybe you believe it is the work of those called to ordained ministry, the clergy who teach and preach.

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I want to explore in this essay the Lutheran idea of "the priesthood of all believers," Martin Luther's contention that the work of "priests" or "clergy" and even theologians belongs to all the faithful. This offers a way of understanding how the work of "doing theology" is actually another way of describing vocational reflection, discerning what God is calling us to be and do in the world.

Theological Education Unbound

In 2013, I was appointed by then ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson to the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). TEAC was charged with exploring the ecology of theological education within the ELCA and recommending ways in which theological literacy might be strengthened for all the baptized.

In particular, we focused on the vast and abundant resources for theological education that exist across our church—in seminaries certainly, and also in colleges and universities, in lay training schools, in congregations and synods, in outdoor ministries, and so on. In fact, I came to see my role on the Council as someone who reminds my colleagues that theology is being done day in and out in settings far and wide. Our job should be to tell the story of this expansive network of theological education.

Most days we get this work right, but to get it right clearly requires a different understanding of what it means to do theology and who is charged with the work of theological education. And here we have our Lutheran Christian tradition to thank for a more expansive understanding of theological education. For those of you who went through the confirmation program in a Lutheran church, remember that key question: "What does this mean?" It is a question that invites us into the work of "doing theology."

One of the joys for me in serving on TEAC has been the opportunity to share the remarkable theological education happening on the Augsburg campus every day. Theological education is happening in the classroom and residence halls, in locker rooms and cafeteria, in the sacred space of Augsburg's Campus Chapel and out in the community, in Urban Plunges for middle and high school students and Spring break service trips and interfaith projects—and it belongs to all of us!

So what does "doing theology" look like? What are we invited to do when we talk about theological reflection and education? As Martin Luther taught us, we need to work out our own relationships with God—there is no mediator in the person of a theologian or a priest or a church. That is the work of doing theology.

The Bible, the Times, and Community

More specifically, to do theology truthfully and commendably requires us to explore the theological issues pregnant in our world's most pressing challenges. Let's start with theologian Karl Barth's instructions to have the Holy Scriptures in one hand and the *New York Times* (or some similar arbiter of world news and social realities) in the other. But we need also to add another critical component of doing theology. Beside scriptural literacy and knowledge of contemporary events, we need to situate our theological reflections in the context of communities of memory, tradition, and ongoing practice. Churches and other faith communities provide one kind of context, but so do academic communities.

The remarkable passage from Luke's gospel quoted above serves as our scriptural foundation. Surely there are copies of the *New York Times* and plenty of other newsfeeds close by. And each of us lives and works in a particular community of faith and learning.

An Inviting God

First, here are three themes from Luke's gospel that offer us insight into the nature of the God we know in Jesus Christ—themes that go to the heart of the character of God and God's aspirations for our common life:

- Ours is an *inviting* God, not a commanding and controlling God. We are invited in. And then the choice is ours whether to come to the banquet or not.
- Ours is an *inclusive* God, urging us to invite not simply those who will feel obligated to come (and return the favor) or those entitled to come, but those vulnerable and forgotten whose place at the table is not secure.
- Our is a God of *fellowship and hospitality*—a God who understands that feeding our bodies also feeds our souls, that the banquet table is a compelling metaphor

for our lives together in the community. Ours is a God who wants the banquet hall filled with those who hunger for nourishment of all sorts.

News about Walls

Second, there is the *New York Times* or some online news source, pointing to the realities of our lives in the world:

- *We build walls to keep people both in and out.* Even as we read about the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, we are surrounded here in our Minneapolis neighborhood by the "walls" that have been built to separate us from each other—walls in the guise of freeways and concrete jungles and other less tangible means of walling ourselves in and out.
- *We argue over whether and how to welcome the stranger to our country and community and banquet table.* Our struggles over immigration reform boil down to our fears of losing control and jobs and power and safety. The experiences of our immigrant neighbors here in the neighborhoods of Cedar-Riverside and Phillips are daily reminders of a fearful world.
- *People are going hungry and homeless when there is plenty to go around.* When food and homes become weapons, we surely have reached a low point in our humanity, refusing to feed bodies and souls. We don't need to go far to witness this barbarism in our own community.

The Character of Community

And finally, we at Augsburg have particular values and commitments, as does every college of the church. While other churches and college communities will certainly be different, each is called to live out the biblical vision in society that often pulls us in opposing ways. Some of the particular gifts we try to nourish at Augsburg include the following:

- We are a community with an "immigrant sensibility." Surrounded by immigrants in our Minneapolis neighborhood for most of our history, we have the gift of living alongside neighbors who don't take for granted the freedoms and opportunities most of us enjoy. What difference does that make for our educational work in this college and for our commitments in the world?
- One of the central tenets of our campus ministry program (and I would argue for our entire college community) is our core commitment to radical hospitality. What does that look like in daily practice? Why do we have too many students on this campus and fellow travelers in the neighborhood who bear the burden of bias and prejudice in their daily lives? And what are we doing about it?
- Which points to my final thought about the character of this community: We have to believe that, as important as it is, hospitality is not enough. We must believe that gifts of education and community and faith demand of us more than inviting people in; they demand that we fight for the justice that evades too many of our fellow citizens in their journeys in the world—journeys in pursuit of safety, nourishment, meaningful work, a better life.

Here is what *doing* theology looks like: We discern the character of our God and the nature of God's work in the world through the scriptures that have been passed to God's faithful over two millennia. We also seek to understand the realities of the world that challenge God's good intentions for God's people by our vigilance in study and experience. Finally, we discern our vocations as co-creators of God's will and plan for the world in the midst of this particular community and beyond.

Conclusion

I conclude by asking some simple theological questions that flow from these reflections:

- God invites us in—will we accept the invitation and invite others to join us?
- God loves all creation—will we be good stewards of that inclusive impulse?
- God believes in hospitality *and* justice—will we join in the work to be done?

The invitation is into the work of doing theology, into the practices of loving God's good world, and into the wonder of community where we know God's grace and love in the work of compassion and reconciliation. What a remarkable gift. We are all deputized and commissioned as theologians. Let us get to work.