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PATRICIA J. LULL

More Value than Many Sparrows: A Sermon on Matthew 10:26-31

I left for college on my eighteenth birthday. It was a Sunday afternoon in mid-September. After church and a quick lunch with my family, I changed into the striped shirt and bell bottom jeans I had saved all summer to wear on my first day at college. While the table was being cleared and the dishes washed, I carried my college things out to the car: a stereo, a typewriter, a waste basket, a tennis racket, a trunk of clothing, a suitcase filled with linens and towels and the new Indian-print spread for my dorm bed, and a box of books including the Webster's dictionary I had received as an award at my high school graduation.

When I had loaded everything into the car, I sat in the backseat with the door swung open, waiting for my family to come out for the drive to the College of Wooster. I wasn't about to re-enter the house with my dream of going to college so near at hand. My widowed mother and my oldest sister, Jean, who had come home from her job in Cleveland to "get her baby sister off to college," may have remembered the day differently, but I marvel that so many of the details are still stunningly clear in my mind. Even at the time, that day—that beginning—meant so much to me that I knew I would measure my life by everything *before* and *after* that 82 mile drive.

In fairness, I should say that my sister Kathy was just a year ahead of me at that same college and I knew a week later she'd be a daily part of my life all over again. But still, leaving for college was a big deal. My family both cheered and wept that day. My church prayed for me and the many others

leaving "to go off to school." The hometown community rejoiced that another generation was launched on its way into higher education.

For all I could tell at the time, my college received me and 500 or so other entering students with joy and respect. They rolled out a royal welcome that day. Every faculty member and senior administrator showed up to greet us; older undergraduates returned early to serve as our RA's and team captains; even the housekeeping and custodial staff stood by lest we need anything on our move-in day. That evening the president welcomed us at a reception in his home, greeting us individually at the door.

But forty-some years later I can guess a whole lot more about what was going on behind-the-scenes at that college. It was the summer after the shootings just up the road at Kent State. The faculty and returning students would long remember the agitation that had marked the close of the last academic year. The admissions yield was higher than anticipated, which was great for the budget, but meant that lounges had to be turned into dorm rooms over the summer and additional classes added to the Fall offerings. Someone spent their August vacation making that happen.

I work occasionally as an enrollment consultant these days and know the thin margin by which most Lutheran colleges and universities—not to mention Lutheran seminaries—must navigate the treacherous waters of change and the demanding

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financial models for sustainability. In hindsight I can calculate the tuition discount that allowed me to be in college.

Back in the 1970s someone was surely watching the Return-on-Investments and noting the “butts in seats,” as enrollment is so inelegantly called these days, but little of that leaked out into public awareness. No one ever hinted to the two daughters of a widow living on less than \$5,000 a year that her children were anything less than smart kids, working their way through college with work-study earnings and well deserved scholarships. In those days students were anything *but* commodities; they were young participants in the college’s ambitious mission and life, welcomed to campus with joy and eager anticipation.

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No lectionary text is exactly scripted for this conference theme. But hearing the words “vocation” and “commodification” in the title, this preacher’s imagination turned to these half dozen verses from Matthew 10, a chapter which is all about vocation. Most have heard these verses before but we can hear them anew as God’s message about what matters in a world of collegiate worry and woe. Jesus teaches:

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt. 10: 26-31)

If you read the whole tenth chapter of Matthew, you’ll note the realism with which the tough challenges of discipleship are named. This is the unabridged version of what will happen to those who dare to follow the way of Christ. Though written to such followers near the end of the first century, it still holds true for those of us—and the institutions in which we serve—who truly aspire to the subversive and counter-cultural “way of the cross” in the twenty-first century. It’s a text that addresses both the *certainty of suffering* and the

possibility of endurance, which as far as I can see, are pretty good themes for Lutheran Higher Education these days.

Those sparrows in this gospel text were dinner for some poor family. They were, in fact, a commodity—an item to be bought and sold. But Matthew assures us that even those humble sparrows, offered at bargain price on the dollar menu, are regarded by the Creator God as creatures with value and worth.

“Don’t be afraid,” Jesus whispered to his followers. “No matter what happens, you are of more value than many sparrows.”

There’s a lot that could make us fearful today. There’s a lot of grim news about higher education in the air these days: Debates about student loan rates. Enrollment challenges. Competition between the institutions where we work and even greater competition with public universities and community colleges. It’s hard to say with certainty which of our Lutheran schools will even be around in 5 or 10 years. So it is right and wise that this conference be grounded in the unfailing promises of Holy Scripture.

And what exactly are those promises? I’ve looked from Genesis to Revelation and I can’t find the text that assures us that our Lutheran institutions will be exempt from the turmoil and financial challenges facing almost every other business and non-profit in this country.

The concept of “vocation” is not a guarantee that we will face fewer challenges. If anything, daring to speak of institutional mission as “vocation” likely guarantees that we will have to wrestle even harder to turn our values into real opportunities. Opportunities for slow-paced learning to thrive. Opportunities for ideas to be refined in the rough-and-tumble of genuine debate. Opportunities for students to earn a degree—especially students who cannot pay the full cost of attending our colleges and universities.

These may not sound like high-risk ventures, but such scholarship and learning take time and much careful, human interaction. In an age of huge anxiety about profit and loss, holding fast to these commitments may indeed involve a threat to body and soul.

And in that regard I love the candor of Matthew’s gospel. It promises not the easy path but the way that leads us *with Christ* into Christ-like service and sacrifice, not for our gain but for the benefit of others. It promises that God’s way of justice will indeed prevail in the end. It whispers in our ear that God’s mercy and investment in this whole creation is even more durable than our beloved alma maters. Most of all, it promises that this trust in Jesus Christ and the way of the cross is the easy yoke, the lightest burden of all.

Thanks be to God.