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Who is the Greatest? Asking the Difficult Questions

(Scripture: Mark 9:30-50)

What an honor it is to address the congregation today.

Today Shepherd of the Hills begins a series of four Sundays where the scripture focuses on Jesus asking questions — sometimes difficult questions. Starting this Sunday, you'll be studying four passages from Mark where Jesus asks profound questions like these: This Sunday, "Who is the greatest?" This will be followed over the next weeks with "Will you sell everything and follow me?", "What kind of parade is this?" and "Who are you worshipping?"

In today's text, Jesus was not preaching to the masses. Rather, he was in dialogue with his disciples. Jesus was taking time to prepare them for his death and the carrying out of his ministry. His first efforts at a direct approach to talking about his impending death did not work. Jesus predicted his death and resurrection, but the disciples didn't comprehend what he was saying and were afraid to ask. Instead they argued about who was the greatest. So Jesus took the opportunity to engage in an insightful dialogue with his disciples about greatness — all to prepare them for their ministries after he was gone.

Jesus reminded them of the importance of servant leadership. "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." What does that look like? Jesus offered illustrations: Show your devotion to God by welcoming children. Do not judge others simply because they are not like us. Remove that which causes you to stumble in your Christian journey. Be the salt of the earth by restraining evil.

Through this conversation, which I imagine to play out as a Socratic-type dialogue, Jesus was demonstrating to his disciples the importance of serving others and giving them directions on how to do it.

The reason I am so grateful for the opportunity to be with you as you begin this series of reflections is that the themes we see in these scriptures are central to contemporary Lutheran Higher Education. The core of our efforts is to help our students grow in mind, body and spirit to become thoughtful servant-leaders.

The founders of our 26 Lutheran colleges were most likely inspired by Martin Luther's views about what we now call servant leadership. As Luther wrote almost 500 years ago: "If there is anything [good] in us, it is not our own, it is a gift of God. . . . Thus my learning is not my own, it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe to them. My wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. . . . We must empty ourselves in order that the forms of a servant may be in us, because it is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them."^[1]

Those who make up our ELCA-related colleges are servant-leaders. Faculty members in many of our disciplines agree to work at a fraction of what they could earn in the business world, because they are committed to helping young adults grow in spirit, mind and body. As Jesus recognized with little children, they recognize that welcoming young adults into the community of learners helps those young adults connect with the calling God would have them find in life.

And faculty and staff members are not the only servant leaders. Board members who donate their time and alumni and friends who donate their treasure to keep our Lutheran colleges accessible are truly servant leaders.

In the world of work, our graduates may meet people who leave their ethics at home, who operate as a-moral professionals. We call our students to a higher standard. You've heard of Plato's ideal of the philosopher king, who rules thoughtfully and ethically. If I may play on that concept, I might suggest our students should become "philosopher servant leaders." The study of the liberal arts helps them be thoughtful people, and doing so at a Lutheran college helps shape them into servant-leaders. Being a philosopher servant-leader will also increase their satisfaction with their profession.

Encouraging students to adopt the mindset of a philosopher-servant is consistent with, and perhaps the essence of, Lutheran higher education. Though he does not use the term "philosopher-servants," Capital University Professor Tom Christiansen elaborates on the essence of why servants should be philosophers in a book that's familiar to many of our faculty (or should be, considering how many copies I've given out!). Christiansen's book is called *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education*. In it he writes: "More than anything else we, as human beings, need to be critical of our own abstractions, particularly of all those abstractions that claim ultimacy ... In every aspect of our lives we are presented with partial truths that are promoted as the whole truth, abstractions presented to us as reality, images that are given to us as norms. We must in every case ask the hard, critical questions." (Christensen 80-81)

Philosopher-servants not only ask the hard, critical questions, they ask how to put their answers into action, with an eye toward serving others.

In our classrooms, in our residence halls and on our athletic fields, Lutheran higher education aims to create conversations with our students similar to the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Just as Jesus realized that his time with his disciples would draw to an end, we realize that our students are with us for a precious, few years. We attempt, as Jesus attempted through this dialogue, to prepare our students to pursue their callings in life.

The most effective way to encourage students to become thoughtful servant-leaders is to encourage them to engage in a meaningful process of vocational reflection before they are tempted by greed or status. When a student's career is an extension of vocational calling, it's far more likely that the student will become a thoughtful servant-leader.

In order to encourage this process, we ask our students challenging questions. And we challenge them to be just as rigorous in asking questions of themselves. By doing so, we challenge students to reflect, assess, and commit. After accurately assessing their values, passions and skills, they connect with a profession that fits who they truly are.

The key is **reflection**. Just as Jesus challenged his disciples to reflect on servant leadership and inclusivity as they built the early Christian church, students need to be encouraged to reflect on their calling in life and advancing the values they hold dear. Much of this reflection is helping students question the assumptions they bring with them about where they are headed. It is a rare high school senior who doesn't come to Augustana

with a career picked out. As educators, we help students take a fresh look at these early career choices, all through the lens of vocational reflection. Part of reflection is to encourage students to reject a misguided sense of duty they might owe to someone else (often a parent) to join a particular profession.

We've done something at Augustana that has gained national attention to help our students best reflect on their calling in life. We've stationed one of our co-chaplains in our career services office. Increasingly, this generation of students is less likely to find its way to our chaplain's office or to Sunday morning services. It happens that the service which most consistently fills our Ascension Chapel is the weekly Evening Prayer and Holy Communion held each Wednesday night at 9:30. In the same vein, much of the reflection on life-directions that once occurred in a pastor's office now takes place in a career services office. At Augustana, students going to the career services office these days engage in a vocational reflection exercise with a campus pastor, thinking about **who** they want to be before choosing **what** career they want.

After reflection comes **assessment**. Jesus urged his disciples to assess what causes them to stumble, viewing those things as millstones hung around their necks. Likewise, today's students headed into the professions must thoughtfully assess the gifts they possess that might be useful in their chosen profession, and what millstones might interfere with work. An accurate assessment of one's gifts includes an accurate assessment of one's limitations and millstones. Students also need help learning to **assess** the values they hold dear, to **question** those values, and - if the values hold up under questioning - to **strengthen** them. And we must encourage students to use the college years to explore what they are passionate about. Finding and pursuing passions often requires students to step outside of their comfort zones.

Assessment of a young person's skills and talents often takes place outside of the classroom. Just as Jesus sought to push his disciples out of their comfort zone, we try to do the same thing with our students. Exploring outside one's comfort zone, for college students, often entails studying abroad in a new culture, working in the inner city, doing a research project that pushes them academically harder than they have ever been pushed or completing an internship to help them assess their preliminary views of their calling. At Augustana, about 70% of our students travel abroad, with the same percentage completing internships.

Then comes **commitment**. Jesus challenges his disciples to "have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." This I take to mean that his servants should go out into the world, restrain evil and purify as salt purifies. Jesus was calling his discipline to commit to action. For our students, the process of committing to action entails developing a vocational vision, which means ascertaining how students' gifts, strengths and passions might best be used in their calling as a professional. Are the values of the chosen profession compatible with their values? Usually, this is a mixed bag. If some of the values of the profession are compatible and some aren't, how will this impact the student's career choice? How will the student be able to hold fast to her or his values within the profession? For many, creating a vocational vision will be more than an intellectual exercise; it will also be a spiritual one.

In today's world, it is not enough to merely talk with students about being the salt of the world after they graduate. They need to engage deeply with the world during their college years. Starting this year, to emphasize this need, students will be given two transcripts upon graduation - the traditional academic transcript and a co- and extra-curricular transcript. A student receiving a 4.0 grade average will be counseled that it is not enough to be a philosopher. They are counseled to exercise leadership and commitment outside of the

classroom - in co- and extra-curricular activities and organizations to prepare themselves for the type of engagement that will make them the salt of the earth.

So who is the greatest? I can't presume to answer that question better than Jesus did. But I do know that my mother and father's generation, the World War II generation, is often called the Greatest Generation. Many of them were true servant leaders. But I believe that this generation of students is well on their way to being the next Great Generation. They are self-reliant, believing that they will need to make their own way in life. Many want to own their own businesses someday. They are absolutely committed to work-life balance, using technology for a better world and taking advantage of this nation's and this world's rich diversity. But young adults need guidance and focus to become the next Greatest Generation. We in Lutheran higher education have the honor of providing that guidance. We have the honor of helping students find their calling in life. And we have the honor of setting them on the path to fulfilling their calling.

Thanks be to God for all who teach young people and support our schools, colleges and universities. And may you, the people of Shepherd of the Hills, continue to be salt among yourselves, and for all the earth. Amen.



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