

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

“Hearing our Callings Through the Neighbor”
Mark 5: 21-43

Pastor Paul Rohde

20 February 2008

One of our alums gave a very clear and succinct articulation of the focus of this sermon. Rachel Wiener is now a neonatal intensive care nurse in Philadelphia, PA. When she heard I was gathering alums in the DC area in January, she decided to come down and join us. If you know Rachel, it will not surprise you that she announced her somewhere-close-to-midnight-arrival time at Union Station widely—we should be there with bells on, offering a bold, dramatic, colorful welcome and reunion.

A few hours before she was to arrive, one of the other alums got a call. The baby who had been Rachel’s patient that day had died; she wouldn’t make the evening train and would be coming the next morning instead. Our meeting at Union Station was somewhat more subdued, of course. After the “hellos” and “glad you’re here” I said, “How was it for you?”

She said, “Well, the parents asked me to stay.”

For this sermon on hearing our callings, our vocations, the focus will be, hearing those callings in the voices of our neighbors. “well, the parents asked me to stay.”

For many of us Frederick Buechner’s quotation defines vocation. Buechner says “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I hear and affirm both foci: your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger. My concern is when we get stuck attempting to hear our own deep gladness in a vacuum, in isolation, without recognizing the power and clarity that making a difference for others can offer.

“Well, the parents asked me to stay.” I can promise you as sure as I’m standing here, that Rachel Wiener has no deep gladness for dead babies. She has enormous gladness for living babies, for holding and healing them—including the preemies that sometimes weigh little more than a pound. That’s her deep gladness. But like Jairus in this morning’s Gospel, in the voice of a neighbor she also found clarity and calling in being present to heal grieving parents.

It may be helpful to clarify from the beginning that the verb of this sermon is hear, not obey. To attempt to obey all the voices of the world’s hungers is madness. But to fail to hear them is to miss much of what gives life purpose and pleasure.

The Gospel this morning invites us to think of how even Jesus got his calling from neighbors. Even Jesus faced interruptions and competing voices. And even Jesus felt zapped by it. [I think I've waited 20 years to say that in a sermon.] When we're just thinking deep gladness we can fantasize a work so delightful, so invigorating, we'll never get tired. But even Jesus felt the power coming right out of him. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue and more importantly a grieving father, and the woman with a hemorrhage both call Jesus to healing.

When disciples said it would be impossible to know who'd touched him. When Jairus' neighbors come around to say, "There's no use." When the mourners even laughed at him, Jesus lived into the din most of us face when we're trying to figure out what we're supposed to do. I wonder if even the competing voices stirred clarity for Jesus. Jesus was not stopped by his disciples' preoccupation with a busy street. Jesus was not stopped by those who would make death final. . . or those who would laugh at the foolishness of his presence or promises. I wonder if hearing it didn't make his purpose even more emphatic. . . . Jesus looked until he saw more going on than people bumping in the crowd. Vocational discernment calls us to attentiveness beyond coincidence or random association. To a listening through conflicting voices until clarity comes.

I learned last month that Martin Luther King, Jr. had an intense conflict with his father about leading the Montgomery bus boycott. His father was saying, "Martin, you can do great things. . . .you could be president of Morehouse College." Do you suppose the conflict intensified his call to serve our country's liberation from racism?

Remember the verb is not obey, it is listen. I believe this is true for all our work and all our roles. The voices of neighbors are as essential as any sense of ourselves in hearing the calling of God.

Because representatives are here from our church's seminaries and because church vocations are a significant focus in Augustana's own mission, I do want to reflect on how the call of neighbors is gift for those called to work in the church.

Too many times the call to church work is caricatured as only between God and a person. Very few if any of us who work in the church have heard God directly. But we have had neighbors say, "Please, come, speak, listen, pray, teach."

I know people are put off by the presumption or arrogance of speaking for God. I've had students say, "Well, I don't want to tell the church what to be." In my own call to ministry I've never yet had a church that wanted *me* to tell them what to do or be. I know that because I have tried to tell them. Mostly they ignored me; sometimes they got upset. Rostered or ordained ministry is not being God to people. Increasingly I hear this call through neighbors as neighbors say, "Come help us remember who God is and therefore who we are and what we are called to be." It is being a neighbor who reminds them who God is and of the gifts that help them know. These include the Bible, the sacraments, neighbors, prayer. . . .

I decided to use this sermon as a reminder to myself: the Gospel is NOT at Augustana because I am here. I am here, because Augustana by its defining mission says it wants the Gospel, so they scrounge around until they find someone willing to serve it up and to help others serve it up. To remember that others hunger for the Gospel helps me know why I am called. Apart from that hunger my passion for words would better be served playing Scrabble.

In today's Gospel—in each Gospel—we meet a Jesus who is attentive to the world's hungers. In this morning's Gospel it took the power right out of him. Before Lent is done, we'll hear again that this defining love of God takes everything out of him. . .the better for us to know that Easter is a deeper, wider, greater gladness than we'd have ever imagined.

I pray that even as Jesus gave hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, love to neighbors of every ilk, that Jesus will give you an ear and eye and heart for neighbors who will hunger for your gift, your work, for God's gift in you and God's gift of you. I can promise you, it will not be painless or without conflict. I can also promise in the name of Jesus, the service and sacrifice evoked by a neighbor's call will give life substance and significance and joy.

I keep telling you, I try to be useful by giving you responses to the dreaded question, What are you going to do when you grow up? I'm going to listen to my neighbor's hunger, Jesus both hears your hunger and will help you listen. With him we'll be raised to new life together. Amen.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

TRAVEL TO NORWAY OR ITALY WITH AUGUSTANA

COLLEGE - Augustana College is offering two exciting travel opportunities this summer for alumni and friends. Join Dr. Gary and Rosaaen Olson, June 10 - 21, 2008 for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience Norway in its fullest. The Olsons are veteran tour guides, having led four successful alumni tours to Norway for the College. You will experience the breath-taking natural beauty of this country and learn about the people and culture so central to the heritage of Augustana College. If you have never had the opportunity to visit Italy, you may wish to join veteran traveler and tour manager Brad Heegel and alumni director Mary Toso May 31 - June 11, 2008 as they introduce you to the magnificent cities of Venice, Florence, Tuscany, Sorrento and the Eternal City of Rome. To bring this tour to a most memorable conclusion, you will experience The Augustana Choirs final concert performance in St. Peters Basilica. For more information on either of these tours, please contact the Alumni Office at Augustana soon at alumni@augie.edu .

BREAD FOR THE WORLD - We are searching for the best and brightest young advocates to become Bread for the World's Hunger Justice Leaders. We'll start by giving these 18-35 year olds an all-expense paid trip to Washington, DC on June 14-17 for training. They'll then commit to leading advocacy efforts to overcome hunger and poverty in their local communities - on their campuses or in their churches. So please, help us in our search and invite all the great candidates you know to apply today at www.bread.org/bealeader. Watch this one-minute peace <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4YzpZJrcEg>> about the Hunger Justice Leaders. Rate it, then forward the video to all your friends and ask them to help spread the word about this effort. Students on Facebook can post the link on their profile.

CHAPEL CALENDAR

- Fri. (22nd) Worship, 10 am - Brandon Elsasser, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (24th) Dist. Scholars Worship, 9 am
 Family Wknd. Worship, 11 am - Kari & Pr. Roger Lenander
Mon. (25th) Worship, 10 am - Debbie Hanson: Ethics and Folklore
Wed. (27th) Holy Communion, 10 am - Ann Pederson
Fri. (29th) Worship, 10 am - Kristen Wilcox, Sr. Spkr.