

Remembering Donald Harrisville Juel

Dr. Donald Harrisville Juel, Princeton Seminary's Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Theology, died on February 23, 2003, following a long illness. Born in Alton, Illinois, on March 4, 1942, he was educated at St. Olaf College (B.A.), Luther Theological Seminary (B.D.), and Yale University (M.Phil. and Ph.D.). He served as pastor of several Lutheran congregations and taught at Indiana University, Princeton Theological Seminary, and, for seventeen years, at Luther Theological Seminary, before returning to the Princeton Seminary faculty in 1995. He wrote *Messiah and Temple*, *Messianic Exegesis*, *Mark* (a commentary), and *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted*. He is remembered by his Princeton Seminary colleagues and students as a man committed to awakening in them and in the church a deep appreciation for and love of the Bible.



Photo: Keith Kerber

by Beverly Gaventa

During the second semester of the 1995–96 academic year, Donald Juel and I taught NT101 together. I watched as this new colleague opened his first lecture by showing slides of the ending of the Gospel of Mark in several ancient Greek manuscripts. Although I nodded politely, I was more than a little confused by this strategy. At most, perhaps a quarter of these entering students would have studied Greek, which meant that most of the assembled class would have experienced the exploration of a text-critical problem as a visit to another planet.

Slowly the tactic became clear to me. Don wanted to begin the semester by destabilizing students' assumptions about the New Testament. He might have done that by sketching for them some important current debates in New Testament scholarship, debates that sometimes involve understandings of the earliest Christian communities that are diametrically opposed to one another. Or he might have compared a few crucial texts in varying contemporary translations, underscoring the ambiguity of the original text. Instead, he presented the class with the more basic question of the "original" text itself. Before we interpret, before we translate, we confront a myriad of textual problems that complicate the phrase "the New Testament," and Don wanted students to face the question of what *is* the New Testament.

These days classifying scholars by their areas of expertise is standard fare. Biblical scholars may engage in rhetorical analysis of Paul's letters, for example, or literary analysis of 1 Kings. I suspect that an equally revealing, maybe even more revealing analysis, however, would inquire into the varying pedagogical goals of professors. Some professors, deeply enamored of the scholarly traditions in their own fields, want students to understand the history of research that has produced whatever consensus and conflict characterizes present discussions. Others have strongly held convictions about major questions in the field, and they will want to shape students to favor their own views. Still others want students to know and appropriate the interpretive traditions of their own denominations—or perhaps to challenge those same views.

These are not mutually exclusive goals, to be sure, and I can recall occasions when each of them emerged in Don Juel's teaching. Yet surely his primary commitment was to the preparation of leaders for the church, women and men who would be capable of leading, and willing to lead, congregations in the reading and interpreting of the Bible. He wanted our graduates to be equipped to make decisions about texts, not to be so overwhelmed by the Mount Everest of biblical scholarship that they avoided it altogether. After all, shouldn't a pastor be able to articulate a position about the ending of Mark 16?

To say that Don Juel wanted to prepare leaders for the church sounds utterly innocuous, but Don's understanding of leadership had little to do with packaged lessons on church management, especially when it came to interpreting the church's biblical and theological tradition in the present.

Leaders, for Don, were not list-makers. Simply to identify the various options available for addressing a given problem is a poor substitute for interpretation. Commentators who specialize in rehearsing the many proposed solutions to any exegetical argument perform an important service, but Don would find the mere listing of opinions insufficient. More than once, he urged a student, "Make an argument, for crying out loud!"

Don also had a particular disdain for what he called "explainers," a term I have come to cherish. "Explainers" are those interpreters who think that all difficulties in the text can be unraveled in one way or another, so that the Bible becomes a little lapdog, incapable of causing problems or giving offense. A couple of generations ago, an "explainer" might have analyzed Jesus' exorcisms as psychological solutions of hysterical illnesses or attributed the feedings of the multitudes to the brown bags each family brought along from home. In Don's view, however, "explainers" are everywhere. A conversation about the story of Ananias and Sapphira brought this home to me. Don dismissed the various attempts to reduce the story to a warning about the authority of Peter and the apostles. He was more interested in taking seriously the terrifying power of God at work in these deaths, something Luke himself does when he notes at the end of the story that "great fear seized the whole church." (Acts 5:11)

Don also understood that leadership in biblical interpretation is not about moralizing. The desire to be sure that other people behave, that they do it on our terms, and that the Bible supports our understanding of those terms, runs deep in many of us who study and teach in seminaries. Profoundly shaped by his own Lutheran tradition, and perhaps more profoundly by his reading of the letters of Paul, Don recognized both the deep urge to moralize and its lack of foundation in the gospel of God's grace. (In fact, we had a standing joke about our developing a program in anti-Pelagian studies, except that neither of us was kidding.)

Stating what Don wanted to avoid is easier than articulating positively what he meant by leadership. The best encapsulation comes in his own words. Often he employed language about pastors offering interpretations that would "prepare readers for an encounter with the text." (When I find that expression in a student's paper, I know to whom the student has been listening.) That encounter would not necessarily be a warm and fuzzy experience. After all, rubbing the noses of often-anxious entering students into the very basic question of what constitutes the text of the New Testament may well produce an encounter that is far from comforting. What Don wanted, if I understood him correctly, was that our graduates and their congregations would be genuine listeners of the text, able to imagine that Jesus Christ himself is "on the loose," a phrase Don used to characterize the end of Mark's Gospel. (Much of this approach was worked out in his long-standing collaboration with Patrick Keifert of Luther Seminary. In "The Bible and Theological Education: A Report and Reflections on a Journey," which will appear in *Unsettling Scriptures, Surprising Faith: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel* [Westminster John Knox, 2004], Keifert traces the development of this understanding of leadership and its impact on theological education.)

Although I never heard Don articulate his understanding of collegial relationships in so many words, I think it is fair to say that his understanding of pedagogy had parallels in his understanding and, more important, his practice of collegiality. Preparing women and men who are ready and able to make interpretive decisions and lead communities of faith to hear and respond to challenging biblical texts requires something more than a gaggle of talented scholars. It requires a team of people who are bound together as much as they are bound to their work.

Put succinctly, Don wanted his colleagues to flourish. Although he would feign envy when one colleague's book appeared on the shelves at Barnes & Noble or another lectured in some exotic location, he genuinely rejoiced in his colleagues' accomplishments. At the drop of a hat, he would engage a conversation about pedagogy or think out loud with a colleague about a problem with a student or a class.

Recently I ran across a C.S. Lewis comment that, when we lose someone dear, we lose not only that person's relationship to us, but we lose some portion of that individual's relationship to other people (*The Four Loves*, chapter 4). Although he doesn't say as much, Lewis seems here to develop Paul's understanding of the Body of Christ as it applies to grief. The comment struck me sharply because of Don's death. Reflecting personally, I have lost this dear friend and colleague, as well as his influence on the students we would have taught together, his enlivening rapport with members of the Seminary staff, his engaging conversations with friends near and far, and much more that I cannot bear to articulate. That sentence could be multiplied many times over across the PTS community.

Perhaps that is only a long way around saying that we grieve the loss of this colleague with his youthful black hair, his loping gait, his perpetual tardiness, and his welcoming smile. And our personal sense of loss is exceeded only by our grief at what the church has lost in the death of this fine teacher. We give thanks to God for his many gifts to Donald Juel and for Don's gifts to the Body of Christ. ■

Beverly Gaventa is the Helen H.P. Manson Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at PTS; she taught New Testament courses with Don Juel and was his friend and colleague.

"Don also had a particular disdain for what he called 'explainers,' . . . interpreters who think that all difficulties in the text can be unraveled in one way or another, so that the Bible becomes a little lapdog, incapable of causing problems or giving offense."