

Marking a Life: A Tribute to Don Juel

by Matthew L. Skinner

When I spotted the book last September, I took it as coincidental, a random yet felicitous occurrence. It was during my first semester on the faculty at Luther Seminary, while teaching a course on Mark's Gospel. Among the books piled in front of a student I spied a copy of Donald Juel's commentary on Mark, a text assigned to me in 1995 when I was a PTS student enrolled in a course on Mark taught by Juel. He had just rejoined the PTS faculty after teaching at Luther for seventeen years.

Before the semester ended, I noticed another student carrying the commentary into my classroom. The same thing happened in the spring, when I taught Mark again. While I was pleased to discover evidence of students reading more than the texts assigned by the syllabus, I was even more gratified to see that these commentaries showed signs of wear. They had been read before.

I soon understood that these students toted hand-me-down books, remembrances from Juel's former students and perhaps survival guides bestowed upon a new generation of seminarians. I quickly learned of Don's impressive reputation, anchored deeply and broadly within the Luther community. In a year, I have met numerous graduates who, upon learning that I came from Princeton, inquired hopefully into my connections to their beloved teacher. I have even heard students who never met him share glowing accounts about him. The testimonies were no surprise, for they accurately described my teacher, too.

So, as Don lay short of breath in Princeton, he spoke in a Minnesota classroom, present through the words in students' books. Sensing his voice slightly unnerved me, until I realized that his words already permeated the room; they were woven through my lecture notes. It felt appropriate to encounter Don anew in a classroom. In that arena he made his deepest impact.

In his scholarship, Don employed familiar criteria from classical rhetoric, inquiring after the ways Scripture teaches, delights, and moves its audiences. In classrooms, he enacted this rhetorical triad as his job description. If he enjoyed lecturing, it was because his pedagogy was so enthusiastically performative, demonstrating his conviction that Scripture exists not to be admired but to be read (preferably aloud, as a public event) and, consequently, to provide a means by which God shapes people and communities. His instruction blended dimensions of entertainment and provocation, a combination that appropriately dislodged naiveté and facile solutions lurking in the class.

Like a critic who delights in investigating and revealing the secrets behind magicians' illusions, Don dissected people's biblical exegesis, often wondering aloud why so much knowledge about texts and their histories prevented us from actually reading the texts. Likewise, he eagerly exposed students' hermeneutical assumptions, not necessarily to invalidate them but always to impel us to acknowledge and examine them.

His sarcastic reading of the centurion's "confession" in Mark 15:39 best illustrates this practice. While reading the passion narrative aloud, he would voice "Sure this was God's son!" with acerbic scorn. He clearly enjoyed the effects of the reading as much as he believed it a faithful rendering of Mark's account. His bold interpretation sounded alarms among students, driving us to the text to examine its contours for evidence to support various readings. This also led us within ourselves to explore if and why the narrative had brought us to a point where we desperately yearned for *any* character in Mark, even the centurion, to make sense of the cross and to understand Jesus rightly.

No one could deny Don's zeal for his subject matter, or his conviction. He believed what he taught.

Although the words of his eleven books and numerous articles will speak afresh to future generations, I believe that the words Don spoke in classrooms have created his most durable legacy among the company of his students. We will forever recall the impassioned Lutheran dressed in a green blazer whose trademark quotations we still recite, just like lines from films or from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*: from the ruptured heavens at Jesus' baptism, "God is among us, on the loose!"; from Juel's unequivocal contempt for moralistic, feel-good interpretations of the Parable of the Sower that implore audiences to try harder, disdain for the suggestion that a passive medium might endeavor to "be good soil"; from his diagnosis of the pious older brother (whose father "gave the 4-H cow" to the prodigal), a man in "bondage to his own idea of fairness"; from his fascination with Frank Kermode's writings on hermeneutics, delighted warnings about interpretation through "cunning and violence."

Recently at a local church I led a Bible study series on Mark's passion narrative. When it ended, someone approached and introduced herself as a Luther Seminary alumna. With equal parts gratitude and sorrow, she said that Mark's Gospel always reminds her of a New Testament professor who brought the Bible to life for her. I said to myself, "I know. Me too." ■



Photo: Todd C. Hawkins

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