

Remembering Donald Juel

READING SCRIPTURE, ENCOUNTERING GOD

BY SHANE BERG

It happened in Mackay one morning in April 1999. Suddenly New Testament Professor Don Juel charged in through the doors of the dining hall and began looking around intently. When his eyes came to rest on me, the corners of his mouth curled up in a smile and he made a beeline for my table. “Berg,” he barked, “you’re a North Dakota Lutheran—just what I need!” “Former Lutheran,” I reminded him, though he knew full well I had become a Presbyterian in college.

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied impatiently, “you grew up singing the old Lutheran hymns.” I conceded the point. “I cannot remember the words to the second verse of ‘Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended,’ and I want to use it in my sermon this afternoon,” he continued. “Do you remember how it goes?”

I tried several times to come up with the words, but I could not quite sort them out in my head. I finally shrugged my shoulders and said, “I’m sorry—I can only remember the verses when I sing them.” “Well sing then!” he insisted. “Right now?” I asked hesitantly. “Yes, right now!” he replied, now almost in exasperation. Though I am no musician, there was little that I would not do for my beloved professor, and so right there in the dining hall I launched into a halting rendition of one of my favorite hymns. I did manage to come up with the words to the all-important second verse that he was seeking:

“Who was the guilty, who brought this upon thee?
Alas my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.”



Donald Harrisville Juel was the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Theology at Princeton Seminary from 1995 to 2003.

“Yes, you’ve got it!” he exclaimed with delight. After a parting shot about my questionable vocal skills, he thanked me and darted out as quickly as he had come. This was a classic Juel moment—he was mischievous and funny while at the same time vigorously pursuing a serious theological train of thought. In my classes with him, and especially in the countless lunches that I had the joy of sharing with him, I came to know well how his playful nature

added warmth and levity to his intense theological imagination. Work and play were not separate categories for him.

Juel had invited me earlier in the week to sit in on the class in which he was delivering his sermon—Jews and Judaism in Christian Preaching, which he cotaught with his colleague Professor Ellen Charry. Juel was preaching to the students a Good Friday sermon that modeled how to avoid an anti-Semitic reading of the Gospels without emptying the passion narrative of its drama and shock.

Like the other students in the classroom that stuffy late spring afternoon, I was spellbound as Juel worked his way through several passages in Luke’s passion narrative. He elegantly and persuasively showed us how Jesus’ words on the cross—“Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34)—refer not merely to the “Jews” who had put Jesus on trial but rather to every character in the Gospel and by extension to all of humanity. Juel drove home his point by citing the words to the second verse of “Ah, Holy Jesus” that he had sought from me earlier in the day, which speak of the guilt for Jesus’ death not in the third-person but in the first-person. “I” crucified Jesus, not “them.”

Jesus died not because he fell in among a few malicious people, but rather because all of humanity is “under sin,” as the apostle Paul might say. Despite our best intentions and valiant efforts, Juel asserted, we humans are caught in webs of ignorance, suspicion, and resentment that forever undermine our well-laid plans and reasonable assumptions. We do not know what we are doing, and our only hope is that God will break the power of sin and give life to us. In Juel’s masterful reading of Luke, this basic Reformation conviction came through with grace and power.

Over the course of his teaching career, Juel offered such rich and stimulating insights to thousands of people—students in his classes



Shane Berg lectures on the Gospel of Mark to a group of students at the Presbyterian seminary in Cairo. He and President Iain Torrance taught intensive January term courses at the school in January 2010 just prior to the revolution in Tahrir Square.

at both Luther Seminary and Princeton Seminary, pastors attending conferences at which he spoke, and lay people in whose churches he preached and taught all over the United States. Whether it was helping people see the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke from an entirely new angle of vision (he preferred to call it “The Lament of an Oldest Child”), calling into question the traditional way of understanding the Parable of the Seeds and the Sower in Mark (“Be good soil? Soil can’t ‘be’ anything!”), or exploring the theological possibilities of the “shorter ending” of Mark’s Gospel, Juel always offered what amounted to a master class in interpreting the Bible within the community of faith.

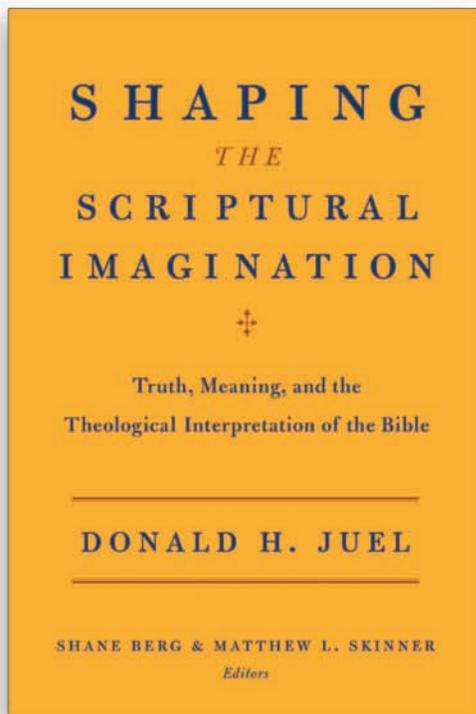
My friend Matt Skinner, a PTS M.Div. (1997) and Ph.D. (2002) grad who now teaches New

Testament at Luther Seminary, and I are convinced that Don Juel still has a great deal to teach the church about interpreting scripture. As a result of this belief, we have edited a volume of his essays that represent his accessible and lively interpretations of scripture. We also included transcripts of eight of his sermons because they are such vivid examples of his approach to reading the Bible. The sermon on Luke 23:34 that had made such a deep impression on me in the spring of 1999 is among the sermons we chose for the volume.

The book has recently been published by Baylor University Press. The director of the press, Carey Newman, is an admirer of Juel’s work and eagerly agreed to take on the project as soon as Matt and I proposed it to him. Newman and his editorial team did a terrific job bringing the book through the various stages of the publication process. They are proud partners in making sure that Don Juel’s legacy lives on for future generations of pastors and scholars.

Matt Skinner regularly encounters those who have been influenced by Juel’s teaching and writing. In Skinner’s nine years on the faculty of Luther Seminary, speaking to congregations, groups of pastors, and other Luther Seminary graduates, over and over again when people learn his educational history, they venture the question, “Did you by any chance know Don Juel?” “I’ve seen people joyfully imitate his distinctive mannerisms, quote his best lines, and speak fondly about his deep influence on their lives and ministry,” Skinner reports. “Don wasn’t one of those scholars who writes a big book that reorients the field of New Testament studies; he was the kind who knows how to guide others into the riches of the field, who knows how to take ‘subject matter’ and bring it to life—in both generative and disturbing ways. That’s the kind of teaching that leaves a legacy, and I’ve been repeatedly struck by discovering just how wide Don’s legacy is at the two seminaries that I know best.”

One of Don Juel’s dearest friends was Beverly Gaventa, his colleague on the Princeton Seminary New Testament faculty. When I asked her to reflect on what made him such an effective and inspiring



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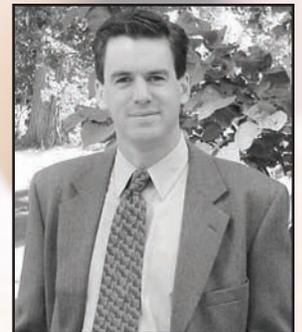
teacher, she struggled to give a short answer. “He was incredibly learned, but he wore that learning lightly,” she offered. “He was deeply committed to shaping students as interpreters of scripture. He knew how to provoke them in order to bring out their best thinking, but his touch was so gentle they always felt supported.”

As a colleague, Gaventa claims Juel was unequalled. “He was warm, witty, generous, and supportive, and he wanted all of us to flourish,” she said. “He and Lynda embodied hospitality in this community, both with colleagues and students.”

Don’s widow, Lynda, played a key role in the book by providing access to her husband’s files, which yielded notes and manuscripts that were incorporated into the volume. In the attempt to capture the defining quality of Juel’s life and teaching, she offers that “Don was about ‘venture.’ He loved the metaphor of sailing into deep unknown waters. He was an explorer, a questioner, and yet a man of great faith. He always knew he would be a teacher and preacher. He loved his students, his colleagues, his family, and learned from them all. He

thrived on theological discussion. It drove him deep into the Word, and what it can do. He hoped that his students would catch that same excitement as they searched and explored the scriptures, and that they might set forth on their own venture of faith and revitalize the church.”

Matt Skinner was one of those many fortunate students who experienced Don Juel’s compelling teaching, so I asked him to name the single most important thing he learned from Juel’s classes, writings, and sermons. “Perhaps the most important thing I learned from Don was that the Bible can make a difference in the lives of people and congregations,” he replied. “That sounds simplistic, I know, but it’s not, especially when you try to see it happening in real life. Too many Christians have found themselves in positions where they don’t know what to do with the Bible. They don’t know what to expect from it. The Bible itself was not a magical book for Don, but he regarded Bible reading as a kind of sacramental activity—not necessarily because grace is sure to flow from the Bible’s pages, but because the possibility of an encounter with God is always there. It’s there when we don’t get too distracted by the historical, rhetorical, and methodological questions that always come, but instead let those lead us to consider who God is and to ask, ‘What if God really is like that, right here and right now? What difference might that make?’”



Matthew Skinner is associate professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary.

For Don Juel, God’s surprising and often unsettling intrusion into human lives meant all the difference in world. ✦

Shane Berg is assistant professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary.

Donald Harrisville Juel

Donald Harrisville Juel (1942–2003) was the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Theology at Princeton Seminary from 1995 until his untimely death in 2003 from a lung disorder. He had previously taught at Luther Seminary (1978–1995), Princeton Seminary (1974–1978), and Indiana University (1972–1974). His education included a B.A. from St. Olaf College (1964), a B.D. from Luther Seminary (1968), and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Yale University (1973).

Juel was a beloved professor whose masterful teaching made a deep impact on his students at both Luther and Princeton. He was also much in demand for church conferences, continuing education events, and alumni/ae gatherings.

Juel was also an accomplished scholar. His most significant works explore the literary and theological dimensions of the Gospel of Mark. Juel wrote important books on the literary qualities of the trial narrative in Mark (*Messiah and Temple*, Scholars Press, 1977) and the rhetorical artistry of Mark (*Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted*, Fortress, 1994). He also published a popular book on Mark that sets out his assessment of Mark’s theological achievement in an accessible and winsome fashion (*Gospel of Mark*, Interpreting Biblical Texts series, Abingdon, 1999). In addition to these studies of Mark, Juel also penned a well-received volume on the interpretation of the scriptures of Israel (what became in time the Christian “Old Testament”) in the early church (*Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity*, Fortress, 1988).