

WE BELIEVE WE ARE CALLED TO SERVE OUR NEIGHBOR

THREE HOMILIES ON AUGSBURG COLLEGE'S VISION

PAUL C. PRIBBENOW
PRESIDENT

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AUGSBURG COLLEGE

WE BELIEVE

ONE OF THREE HOMILIES ON AUGSBURG'S VISION

Augsburg College Chapel
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Job 19: 1-7, 14-27

*"From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss."
(Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian)*

Two years ago, I stood in this pulpit offering my first homily as Augsburg's president and I chose to preach on Jesus' question of Peter as recounted in the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel: "Who do you say that I am?" This invitation to Peter and to all of us to state our faith, to proclaim our credo, was, I contended, central to our life as a college that embraces the intersections of faith and learning. I still believe that is the case and I have found the opportunities to learn about the many faith stories in the Augsburg community to be one of the great joys of my work in your midst.

Today I come at the beginning of my third year as president to extend Jesus' invitation not simply to you as individual members of the Augsburg community, but to Augsburg as institution. Over the past year or so, we have begun to talk about the vision of Augsburg College, which we have stated this way: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. It is a vision statement that resonates deeply with the legacy and promise, the commitments and values, the aspirations and reality, of our college. And it begins with a statement of faith: We believe ... Later this fall I will offer some thoughts about 'we are called' and 'to serve our neighbor'—the other two components of the vision—but today we begin where we are firmly grounded: in our faith. And we are reminded by the words of our ancestor, Martin Luther, that it is "from faith" that there flows all else: love and joy in the Lord; and the joyful, free, and willing mind that serves the neighbor with no account of personal gain or loss. We believe.

So what are we offered as scripture for this morning—assigned for the day—but the well-known and distressing story of Job, the afflicted one? I nearly decided to look for a more fitting text, but I love the discipline of the lectionary, the assigned readings for every day, and I stuck with it. And as I reflected on these verses from the 19th chapter of Job, I began to realize just how powerfully they spoke to the ways in which faith and learning are inextricably bound up in our character and work as a college.

Now, I do remember the last time I thought about Job when it was an assigned reading for a humanities

course I was teaching at Wabash College. It was on the syllabus right in the middle of the semester, which, I assumed, was planned as a way of helping students to recognize that, despite what they thought to be a pretty tough life in college, it all paled in comparison to Job's terrible afflictions. And it worked—doing a few mid-term exams and papers, eating cafeteria food, and having squabbles with your roommate really didn't seem to matter much when presented with Job's physical pain, relationship woes, and sense of divine abandonment. It worked because Job's reality is, in a very real sense, the human reality (albeit in a most intensive fashion!) and it is a reality that we spend a lot of time exploring and analyzing and studying here at this college. We might say that Job's reality is the "stuff" of a liberal arts education.

In the opening verses of the 19th chapter, Job pretty much sums it all up in his response to his friends: "How long will you torment me? I call for help, but there is no justice. My relatives have failed me ... My bones stick to my skin and flesh ... Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, for the hand of God has touched me!"

If you recall the whole story, you have some sense of Job's plight. A faithful man, a good husband and father and friend, a lover of the Lord—and yet all of these horrors befall him. Why would God do this to him, his family and friends ask? Abandon your God—curse the one who tortures you in this way, they challenge him. The evidence does not support your loyalty and faith. And so it doesn't, and so it doesn't.

And here is the important connection to our work as a college. In the teaching and learning that happens in this college—in the classroom, the residence halls, the cafeteria, the playing fields and stages, and in the community—we learn so much about the human condition, about the differences between what is right and what is wrong in the world, about all that is unjust, all that seems undeserved, even about what is mysterious—this is an important part of what it means to be educated. You will learn to analyze social and personal and physical challenges. You will seek understanding and be amazed by the evidence of a

world that is shaped by mixed motivations, by evil and good, by apathy and passion, by a lack of compassion and genuine altruism. You may be just like Job's friends and family who, faced with the evidence, don't see a path to redemption and hope. The evidence is all there is. And there it all might end if not for the soaring proclamation of faith from Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."

Here is the statement of faith that allows Job—that allows all of us—to learn from and experience a world that often doesn't make sense, that fends off the arc of justice in the universe, that can seem arbitrary and capricious. Here is faith that grounds all that we are and do. Here is faith that seeks understanding but is not surprised when understanding is not enough.

There are, in this remarkable story of Job, at least three ways to think about what faith means to our lives and work here at Augsburg:

Surely there is no way to grasp Job's proclamation of faith in light of his situation without seeing faith, first and foremost, as a gift. How is it possible to have suffered as Job has suffered and still be able to say, "I know that my Redeemer lives"? To believe this much, this deeply, this confidently in spite of the evidence is a gift not to be coveted or expected, but to be received—we are chosen by God to be God's child, to become a part of God's family. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, appears despite the evidence, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever—and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people. Faith is God's gift to Augsburg as well—the gift that makes possible all that we do here—that frees us to explore and study and investigate and experiment and live confidently in a world where our gifts are so needed.

Job's story also reveals what it means to see faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a person of faith. It seems to me that Job's story offers all of us a way to understand how our calls arise from the tension between the evidence—all that we come to know and understand about the world's needs—and the gift of faith that frees us to serve our neighbor, to do God's work, to be joyful in the Lord. At Augsburg, this idea of faith as call forms us to see that there is not necessarily one destination point—one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith—faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy, working to make the world more just and compassionate, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to challenge the systems that perpetuate violence and hatred. Faith is the call to

an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected, that puts all that we learn and understand and experience in service to God's will for God's world.

Finally, Job illustrates what it means to see faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait and work patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. And Job does wait—his story and afflictions go on many more chapters, and things end well—just so you know. It is faith as promise, setting a new horizon to our lives. This is faith as promise, reaching to a deeper place in our individual and common lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to care for each other and to be faithful partners in the work we are called to do; to learn how healing is as much about broken systems and hearts and spirits as it is about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come. For Augsburg, faith as promise is the deeper well, the longer horizon, the belief in redemption that allows us to continue to do what we are called to do—to ask our questions, to seek our evidence, to live into God's will for our lives.

Faith as gift, call and promise—faith as a life unfolding. Each day at this college, we join together to proclaim "Lord, I believe"—I believe in your gift, your call, your promise—even as we admit, "help my unbelief"—my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. We face the evidence of all our learning and experience, with all of the lessons of paradox and affliction, firm and confident in our faith, not that the evidence is wrong—nobody doubts Job's suffering—but that the evidence is not all there is. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace!

This is the faith that seeks understanding and that makes genuine learning possible, that grounds all that we are and do as a college. "We believe", we proclaim, and in that bold statement of faith, we engage the world in all its tensions and messiness, so that we might be God's own in God's world. I know that my Redeemer lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

WE ARE CALLED

ONE OF THREE HOMILIES ON AUGSBURG'S VISION

Augsburg College Chapel
November 19, 2008

Luke 19: 11-28

This homily concludes the series of three comments I have offered this fall on the component phrases in the Augsburg vision statement: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. Early in the fall, I suggested that the story of Job offers us a way of understanding how the firm and confident statement, “We believe” grounds all that we are and do as a college—our pursuit of knowledge, our teaching and learning, our lives together in community, our acts of mercy, are all possible because we believe that our lives already have been redeemed and thereby we are freed to explore all of God’s good creation, in its remarkable diversity of experience and awe and sadness and joy and beauty and messiness and wonder.

A few weeks ago, I turned to the outcome of our vision, “to serve our neighbor” by suggesting that our response as a community to Nur Ali’s tragic and senseless murder was an important declaration of how our faith and our calling lead us—in the face of commandments broken—to accompany our neighbors in building up community, in being of service to each other.

And today, we turn to the core of our vision, “We are called.” And we do so in the context of today’s assigned gospel from Luke. Parallel to the gospel most of us heard this past Sunday—Matthew’s account of the trusted servants who were given talents to invest on behalf of their master; some delivering, others not—we have this more difficult passage. Luke’s particular concern to position Jesus’ parable in the context of his journey toward Jerusalem means that the passage is pregnant with meaning around how the prospective king was rejected by his potential subjects. And yet we are left with the core message: Jesus entrusts his servants with gifts to be invested wisely, and when the master returns he expects that those gifts have been stewarded well. The lesson is clear: our God is active in the world, our God trusts us to be partners in God’s work by giving us gifts unearned and undeserved to use wisely, and our God expects us to use those gifts to further God’s will in the world.

One thing I find particularly intriguing about this parable is something that is unstated, except by implication in the behavior of the third trusted servant. The question that is raised by this servant’s (we might say) prudent contention that, given the possibility he

might lose the pound he had been given he chose to bury it, what about the possibility that we return with nothing to show for the risk we take in investing our gifts (this possibility rings more than true in the current economic climate)? How would the master have responded if servants one and two had taken reasonable efforts to invest their pounds wisely and instead of the manifold return they earned, ended up with nothing? I think we are left to assume a meaningful part of the character of the master—of Jesus, if you will; of our God—which is given that he trusts us enough to give us these undeserved gifts, his expectation is that we will have the faith and courage and imagination to use them, even to risk them for the sake of serving God’s intentions.

This assumption about a gifting God then sets in place this faithful logic for us as individuals and as community. For Augsburg, in particular, the claim upon our college with a calling is to know that we are trusted and gifted through God’s good grace and that we are called thereby to use all of our courage, ingenuity, intellect, passion, and faith to use our gifts to be God’s people and do God’s work in the world. Simple, right? There is no place in this story for hiding our gifts away for fear of losing them. There is no place in this story for apologetics about our God who loves us and the world so much. There is no place in this story for the passive, the middle way, for mediocrity or modesty—this is about the joy and wonder and adventure of gifts abundantly and creatively put to work to serve our God.

This notion that we are called then is a genuinely bold statement about the God who loves us so much as to trust us with remarkable gifts and about the world God has created that so needs these gifts deployed to serve our neighbors well. So what are the gifts entrusted to Augsburg College by our gracious God and how are we doing?

The first gift we have is an active faith, a gift we recognize in the first clause of the vision statement. We believe—and thereby we are free to live out our call in service to the world and neighbor; we are free for education and service. I want to be clear that the gift of this active faith is not bounded by existing ideas or images of church and religious doctrine, though we

would be foolish not to explore and even embrace those ideas and doctrines to learn what God's faithful people through the ages have found meaningful as they live in the world. The gift of active faith means that this college is free to explore here and now (and in an ongoing way) how God needs God's people to be present, to organize their work, to meet the needs for education and community and service. The gift of active faith means a curiosity about life in God's world with all of God's diverse creatures, a curiosity that knows no bounds.

Our second gift is an immigrant sensibility, a perspective and a sensitivity shaped by our neighbors who have always been immigrants. We have the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of those who have made great journeys, at great peril, to build better lives. We have the gift of not taking for granted the freedoms won for us in great battles at great cost. We have the gift of learning new languages and customs and traditions so that our worldview might be expanded. We have the gift of friends and neighbors whose love for us is authentic and unconditional; whose hard work and enthusiasm for life challenges our complacency and cynicism; whose pursuit of justice and fairness and engagement in a new world is inspiring.

Our third gift is an accessible education, this remarkable legacy from our founders who believed that education should be for all, no matter their circumstances, and that the quality of that education should be of the highest order because that is what God expects of those faithful servants who have been given the gift to teach. This is our distinctive gift for the world, an educational experience like no other available to those who might otherwise not have the opportunity. This is our distinctive gift for students from many different backgrounds and experiences. This is our distinctive gift to have a community in which access to education is celebrated and encouraged and yes, even demanded. We dare not keep back any of the educational opportunity with which we have been entrusted because it is our distinctive gift from our gracious and loving God.

And finally, our fourth gift is an engaging urban place, the gift of our location in the midst of a thriving city. The city where God is in our midst, calling us to seek the welfare of this place, to settle here with our neighbors, to be generous, to struggle against injustice and poverty and violence. The city where God calls us to learn from our ancestors and elders and indigenous neighbors. The city where God calls us to be hospitable and gracious, to share our abundance with those in need. The city where God calls us to stand shoulder to shoulder with our fellow citizens to build community. The city which God calls us to love.

An active faith, an immigrant sensibility, an accessible education and an engaging urban place—the gifts of God for God's faithful people here at Augsburg; gifts to be invested and used with joyful and faithful abandon so that we might stand before our God and proclaim that our love affair with God and God's world is at the heart of all we do as a college.

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. So how are we doing? I actually think we're doing pretty well—the return on God's investment here at Augsburg seems pretty substantial given our almost 140 years of work in the educational vineyards. But, of course, it is not the point of this vocational business to assess our progress to date—there is nothing to be earned by a good report card! Following our call, using our gifts wisely and faithfully, is work that continues without ceasing, for our God has entrusted us with these gifts and sometime soon, we believe, the master will return and we must be prepared. But that is for another day! Thanks be to God. Amen.

TO SERVE OUR NEIGHBOR

ONE OF THREE HOMILIES ON AUGSBURG'S VISION

Augsburg College Chapel
October 13, 2008

"You shall not murder" (Exodus 20: 13)

Exodus 20: 13

*"We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way."
(Martin Luther, Small Catechism)*

Earlier this semester, I promised to offer homiletic comments on the three component parts of the Augsburg vision statement: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. In September, I reflected on how what we do here as a college, our core academic work, is grounded in the belief that faith is the gift, call, and promise from God that offers us (like Job and countless other witnesses to the faith before us) the freedom to ask our questions, to learn from our experience, to explore the riches of creation, to engage the messiness of the world with confidence in God's redeeming presence. Though logic would argue that I next comment on the second clause of the vision, "we are called," life is often illogical and the events of the past couple of weeks suggest that it is timely that I consider instead the object of our vision, "to serve our neighbor."

I was a fairly precocious Sunday School and Confirmation student, and when your Dad is the minister and thus your teacher, there was a good chance that I would regularly push the envelope on Dad's good lessons. I was thinking about that when I turned to our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures: the sixth commandment as found in the story from Exodus about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

One of Dad's confirmation assignments was to write an essay on the Ten Commandments in the context of the interpretation of the commandments in Martin Luther's Small Catechism. I remember writing page after page about each of the commandments, extending their reach to create a complete moral code. My Dad smiled and patted me on the head.

But that was just the beginning. I went on to college and then to graduate school in theology and social ethics. I studied with Martin Marty and let me humbly tell you that I know a lot about ethics and moral codes. Professor Marty smiled and patted me on the head.

And then my Dad and Professor Marty sent me into the world to live and work with God's faithful people, to follow my calling as an educator and a college leader, and now I know what I didn't know before. These commandments are pretty simple and if you break them, bad and messy stuff happens.

I know this because I now live here with you, God's faithful people who have experienced the bad and messy. Just three weeks ago, our friend and colleague Ahmednur Ali was murdered outside a community center in our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children. Someone broke the commandment, "You shall not murder," and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments.

Let's be clear. The Ten Commandments fit into a very specific context for the ancient Israelites. It was a cultural context that we may not be able to understand very well from our 21st century perch. But they also fit into a theological context that may be more relevant than ever to our lives as faithful people in 2008. The commandments are a gift from God that create and sustain a community. For the Israelites, the commandments were a radical new way of being in relationship with God. God spoke these commandments directly to God's people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God's will, God's reign, God's intentions for God's people. What a remarkable gift.

And it is God's gift that I am firmly focused on right now as I lead our mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and now we must live in the aftermath. It has become so clear to me during the past couple of weeks that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner—we all get that, we're broken, we don't live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together. God gives us the commandments for our neighbors and our neighborhood.

Martin Luther is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," when he says: This means that "we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way." Simple

and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder—the law covers the murderer—it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice—it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don't believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us.

At the neighborhood meeting a couple of weeks ago to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, we all experienced first hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were “God is good,” and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors—yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety, and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood—I think that is what Martin Luther meant as he explained the commandment!

In a more contemporary comment on commandments, journalist and former war correspondent Chris Hedges writes in his *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* that “The commandments hold community together. It is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity ... The commandments call us to reject and defy powerful forces that can rule our lives and to live instead for others ... [The commandments] lead us to love, the essence of life.” Hedges makes the critical point that the commandments call us out of ourselves, toward our neighbors, and into the community of God's good and faithful people, into the world, and into God's reign in creation.

Here at Augsburg, where we spend a good bit of time exploring this theological idea of “calling” or vocation, we all seek to find ways to listen for, wait upon, discern what God is calling us out to be and do. We know that vocations arise from a wide range of sources—from scripture, from personal experience, from life in community, usually from some combination thereof—and the main challenge we face is how open we are to trusting that God does indeed speak to us of God's will and intent for our lives.

This concept of vocation, which has become central to our entire educational program at Augsburg, is important both for our individual lives and for our lives

together in community. In this sense, then, what happened with the shooting death of our student could be seen as a challenge to our institutional vocation. Dozens of us are sent out into our city neighborhood every day to learn and serve. If the streets are dangerous, how can we responsibly continue to put our students in harm's way? Let's pull back into the safety of our campus and go on about our business. I think we all can recognize the allure of that sort of response to a vocational challenge—that is what the world would have us do.

But we have the gift and challenge of God's word in our midst, the commandments that offer us a vision of life with our neighbors, a call to defy and reject the forces that rule our lives, the command to love each other. And that is the foundation upon which our vocation is understood and practiced. God has called us to be here in Cedar-Riverside, the urban neighborhood where we have been with our immigrant neighbors for 137 years. God has called us to educate students here who are skilled and reflective and committed to service. God has called us to be faithful here, to learn from those who are different from us even as we are firm and confident in our belief that God is good. God has called us to be neighbor here, to do acts of mercy and to make this a place of hospitality and mutual respect.

What a tough message for the world to hear. The world chooses death and darkness and despair. And we live in the world.

Professor Lori Brandt-Hale recently reminded me of some very wise words from a most wise guide to life in the world, the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: “... it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith ... By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ... that is how one becomes a human and a Christian.”

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. God is good. And our good God calls us to live faithfully in the world even when bad and messy stuff happens. God calls us to serve our neighbor. Listen to the commandments for God is here, in our midst, offering all of us the grace, the faith, the love, and the hope we need to be God's people in the world. We choose life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

AUGSBURG COLLEGE

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA