

## To excel also in this generous undertaking

Augsburg College  
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*Now as you excel in everything—in fact, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.*  
(2 Corinthians 8: 7)

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,  
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. Amen.

It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this morning – our graduates, your families and friends; our faculty, staff and Regents; and other members of the Augsburg community. This is a splendid day for all of us as we mark your great achievements and celebrate the mission-based work of Augsburg College. You, our graduates, are our epistles to the world, and we look forward with great anticipation to all of the ways in which your work, commitments, relationships and faith will make God’s world an even more fair, just and compassionate place for all God’s creatures.

This morning, in this Time after Pentecost, we listen in on the Apostle Paul’s conversations with the early faithful in Corinth. It is a conversation about generosity. I’m not sure we can imagine the lives of these 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians, but I do think we can recognize the dynamic of a community learning to work together. Paul is writing to them 30 or 40 years after Jesus has been crucified. And his concerns are very practical. As they have formed a community of those who believe in the risen Christ, they have encountered some of the sorts of problems that any community might face. There clearly is inequity between the members in terms of their material well-being. Paul writes, as he says, not to command them to make things right, but to encourage them, to offer advice, to commend them to follow through on what he calls their earlier “eagerness” to do something that has not yet been accomplished. He is careful not to ask the members of the community to give something they do not have, but instead asks them to recognize the need for a fair balance within the community. He asks them to do the work of building a healthy community, to do the work of a generous undertaking.

Now, if we were to read only Paul’s exhortation to this fair balance of meeting material needs within the Corinthian community, this text could stand as a fairly straightforward how-to guide for community-building. But, of course, it is the broad arc of Paul’s theological argument that makes this practical advice so compelling. For Paul, it is the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ – the one who gave up everything so that those who believe might become rich – that inspires and challenges us to excel also in this generous undertaking. Because we have the gift

of faith, Paul argues, then we have no choice but to do what it takes, to do God's work in the world. It is to this generous work that we are called as God's faithful people in the world.

What a rare gift it is for those of us who are part of the Augsburg community to have this same inspiration and challenge in our lives. In this community of faith, this college of the church, we too acknowledge the gifts we have been given – the gifts of education and ideas and relationships and opportunities – as we embrace our call to excel in our own generous undertakings. And it is this charge and call that I commend to you on this, your day of celebration and commencement.

The Apostle Paul has many spiritual ancestors who affirm this link between the gifts we have received and the generosity to which we are called. The founder of our church, Martin Luther, writes in *The Freedom of the Christian* these wise words: "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." Our official college motto, "From truth to freedom," summarizes Luther's point: only the truth we are given through faith – truth we seek and find in part through the education we receive in this college – frees us to serve our neighbor, to excel in this generous undertaking

A contemporary voice, that of my teacher Martin Marty, asks us to pay attention to the ways in which God is depicted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as generous, a generosity that runs counter to careful, rational, human calculations. From acts of creation to covenants with chosen people to presence in the midst of anguish and suffering, Marty argues, the character of God is marked with generous self-giving. And the appropriate response to this generous God is to give thanks and get to work – with glad and generous hearts.

With glad and generous hearts then we send you forth to get to work. So what do your generous undertakings look like? I can't begin to imagine how each of you will discern and follow your call to be generous – the stories of your generous undertakings will be your gifts to this college and to the world – but allow me to point to a few aspects of the world's need that might surely demand your generous work.

I begin with the needs of creation itself. As our reading from the Wisdom of Solomon proclaims, "God did not make death, and God does not delight in the death of the living. For God created all things so that they might exist..." And yet, God's living creation is in some jeopardy and needs our attention with glad and generous hearts.

One of my most formative experiences here at Augsburg was a neighborhood tour a couple of years ago with Professor Joe Underhill from the Political Science department who guided a group of us through Cedar-Riverside down to the Mississippi River. Along the way we picked up garbage and observed, with Joe's help, all of the ways in which the waste products of those of us who live above the river, ultimately flow into the river. The lesson of the day was that the ecosphere around the river, of which we are simply a small part, was threatened by

our lack of understanding of how our behavior and actions affected the well-being of the living river, God's living waters.

One of my guides to generous care for creation is the Kentucky farmer, novelist and poet, Wendell Berry, writes these powerful words in his poem, "The Gift of Gravity."

All that passes descends,  
and ascends again unseen  
into the light: the river  
coming down from sky  
to hills, from hills to sea,  
and carving as it moves,  
to rise invisible,  
gathered to light, to return  
again. "The river's injury  
is its shape." I've learned no more.  
We are what we are given  
and what is taken away;  
blessed be the name  
of the giver and taker.  
For everything that comes  
is a gift, the meaning always  
carried out of sight  
to renew our whereabouts,  
always a starting place.  
And every gift is perfect  
in its beginning, for it  
is "from above, and cometh down  
from the Father of lights."  
Gravity is grace.

"For everything that comes is a gift, the meaning always carried out of sight to renew our whereabouts, always a starting place." Our whereabouts; our relationship to the river and the earth, to God's good creation; our history and values, our place in the community and in the culture – this is our starting place which we are called to renew again and again. Our God created all things so that they might exist – that is our gift. How will you seek to excel also in the generous undertaking to renew God's good earth? There's important work to be done.

Let us now turn to settings that many of you may already occupy – and if not, may soon enough – and those are the organizations in which you will live and work and bring your education to bear. Perhaps it is a corporation or a family business or a social service agency or a school or church – whatever their size or scope, organizations are the means by which we get things done in the world. And perhaps it is in an organization that you will pursue your generous undertaking – and allow me to confess, as a lifelong organizational person, we need

your glad and generous hearts to help organizations live up to their better natures! Our reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians illustrates the fact that even the early church needed some help with its organizational practices...

But what can you do? I've recently been reading lots of literature on helping organizations to embrace and sustain a culture of innovation – i.e., to create organizational cultures that are constantly looking for new and different ways to do things, to make products, to deliver services; to save souls, educate students, heal the sick. You get the picture. I'm not surprised by most of what I read about this work. Make a plan, think outside of whatever box you're in, provide incentives for innovative work, hold people accountable for being innovative – pretty standard leadership work. But then I happened upon the writing of Mark Federman, a Canadian scholar, whose writings on innovation include this provocative suggestion: "Multiply your mind by giving it away." And Federman means exactly what he says – be generous, be charitable, give instead of always taking. Because when you are generous with your mind, with your knowledge and education, you help to create organizations and neighborhoods and agencies and churches and schools that are marked not by the scarcity of the world, but by the abundance of what's possible when generosity of mind and heart and spirit is our guiding principle.

How will you give away your mind in the organizations you serve? I find examples of such generosity right here in this college community – I'm sure you have your own examples of how someone at this college has multiplied his or her mind by giving it away in a classroom or in the community. These days I'm especially struck by the ways in which staff member Brian Noy and his many colleagues who run our Campus Kitchen program are illustrating this generosity of mind and spirit. Campus Kitchen's core work is led by students who collect leftover foodstuffs from our cafeteria and area restaurants, prepare and then deliver more than 2,000 meals a month to our neighbors in Phillips and Cedar-Riverside. It is good and important work. What I have seen in the past year, though, is that Brian and his colleagues have not been content simply to stay the course. They have focused our attention on the important role that food plays in our lives – as sustenance for our bodies, as fellowship for our community, as politics and economics in our neighborhood and world. They have multiplied their minds by giving them away to all of us. And the results are staggering – community gardens on the edge of campus that bring together neighbors and students and children; a Farmer's Market on campus beginning next week and relationships with organic farmers from across the region; composting of leftover everything in the cafeteria; and so much more – abundance through generosity.

The gift of an education, an Augsburg education, calls you to this generous undertaking of multiplying your mind and knowledge and experience by giving it away so that it serves God's abundant intentions for God's people and world.

Finally, I challenge you to consider what it means to be generous with your faith itself. Not all of us in this college or in this chapel share the same faith, but we do believe – and our various faiths all demand of us a generosity of spirit and means that we have captured in

Augsburg's statement of vocation: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. In Martin Luther's voluminous writings, the word we find more than any other is "neighbor." And it is for the neighbor that our faith calls us to be generous.

This morning's gospel recounts the size and intensity of the crowds that surrounded Jesus's earthly ministry; crowds pushing in on him, seeking a word, imploring his attention, asking to be healed. And these are people of all backgrounds – from the Jewish leader, Jairus, who asks Jesus to make his daughter well, to the unnamed and long-suffering woman who touches Jesus's cloak in search of healing. "Who touched me?," Jesus asks, seeking out the woman in the crowd. "Do not fear, only believe," he says to Jairus, when word comes that his daughter has already died.

I see you, Jesus tells us. Your faith has made you well, he teaches us. Now get to work. The gift that is yours through faith is meant to be shared with glad and generous hearts. The crowds are all around us as well – neighbors who need a word, who implore our attention, who seek to be healed, to find justice, to know love in their lives. And we are called to excel also in this generous undertaking – to share our faith in acts of mercy and service to the neighbors who need us so.

And so today, this very special day – surrounded by these colleagues and teachers and friends and family who have meant so much to you, as you commence from Augsburg into the world – you are called to generosity – to care for God's creation, to give away your minds, to live your faith in service to your neighbor. Wherever you go, whatever you do, know this remarkable truth that God so loves the world, that God so loves you, that you have been equipped with the gifts of faith and education so that you might excel also in this generous undertaking. Thanks be to God – and God's people say together, Amen.