

Follow me

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
June 27, 2010

*To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."
But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim
the kingdom of God."
(Luke 9: 59-60)*

Grace and peace to you from our God,
who is creator, redeemer and sustainer. 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 we join Jesus and his disciples early on the path of their ministry. In our liturgical calendar, we are in the season after Pentecost, these long days between the celebration of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the beginning of the new church year in Advent – what also has been called ordinary time – a time when we follow the unfolding teaching and healing journeys of Jesus and his disciples. It also is our time – time when we are called to consider how we might live faithful lives in the world and on many days, just as it was for the original disciples, we're just not sure what that looks like. And in our gospel reading from Luke, we sit here alongside the disciples receiving our orientation, if you will, directly from our leader as he encounters those along their journey and calls them to follow. Now you may think it a bit odd to talk about orientation when you are about to graduate – that's something we do when you are about to begin your educational journeys – but allow me to suggest that we don't call it commencement for nothing. Today you begin, you commence, to live as someone educated – in a particular degree program, a particular discipline of study, a particular professional field – but also as someone formed by the faith, values and vision of this particular college. And it seems perfectly fitting that we begin your commencement day at Augsburg with this orientation to faithful lives in the world!

My sense is that what we hear in this morning's orientation lesson is one of the central – and most radical – of all of Jesus' teachings. And it focuses on this simple yet remarkably powerful call to "follow me." And we have, in the various responses offered to the potential disciples, a pretty clear picture of why these are sometimes called "the

difficult sayings.” “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Or “Let the dead bury their own dead.” Or again, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Wow. Tough stuff.

“Follow me,” Jesus says to us. And I don’t know about you, but I have plenty of things to do before I can come along. I need to take care of my business. I need to be sure I have the gear I need for the trip. I need to say good-bye to family and friends. I need some contact information. “Follow me,” Jesus says again. And here lies the gospel claim that Jesus makes on all of his disciples – whether 2000 years ago or today. Follow me. No matter what. This is the claim of radical discipleship. There are no excused absences, no incompletes, no justification for delays, no way out for those who would follow the call to be disciples, to be God’s faithful people in the world.

One of my favorite stories is about our youngest, Maya, surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.”

I want to suggest that here is an object lesson for this morning, for as much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to avoid the disruptions, the surprises, the call to service, even the promise of abundance – it is, of course, impossible to do! Thanks be to God! And with the gift of faith, we are launched on our vocational journeys, to follow our calls to be God’s people and to do God’s work in the world. And we can’t shake it off!

I often wonder about this claim of radical discipleship upon our college, which aspires in its mission to be a faithful and welcoming community. A quick story reminds us of how difficult it can be – even when we want to follow Jesus and welcome the stranger – to overcome the institutional and personal obstacles that keep us from being genuinely hospitable. My friend and predecessor, Bill Frame, the 9th president of Augsburg, had a deal with the local Somali community that I inherited when I took office four years ago. If they needed space for a meeting or some other sort of gathering, they should come to the President’s office and we would work it out for them. Simple, right? Well, I still recall the day early in my tenure when Omar came into the office and asked my assistant for help in scheduling a room for a meeting. She said sure – how many people do you expect, when do you need it, how long, and so forth? All the right questions. To which Omar replied, 15 people, for an hour or so, right now – and my assistant looked out the window to see the 15 Somalis standing on the sidewalk waiting to get a room to meet. Follow me. No matter what. Counter to all our rules, our schedules, our expectations – now that is radical.

So here we are, ready for the orientation to the rest of our lives, claimed by the gospel call to radical discipleship, shaped by our education in this college with its distinctive vision focused on the belief that we are called to serve our neighbor...now what? Here are my humble reflections on what this means for you and me as we seek to live faithful lives in the world.

It begins with our openness to the stranger in our midst. The world is filled with such fear and most of that fear is grounded in our anxiety about what we don't know or understand. Jesus knew that. Those who taught you in this place know that. You know that. And I believe that it is because we know how fear paralyzes and distracts and fragments that we come together in this community to seek education, to learn about new and strange things, to broaden our perspectives on the issues and people and systems that define our world, to seek even to figure out what it all means. Genuine education, as Parker Palmer reminds us, is about overcoming the fear that so pervades our personal and social lives. Radical discipleship begins with the openness that authentic education provides to take pleasure, to find joy, to be intrigued by what we don't know, what we might be able to learn, who we might come to respect and love. Certainly our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, one of the most diverse communities between Chicago and Los Angeles, offers all of us daily opportunities to welcome the stranger, to learn from those who do not share our life experience, our culture, our faith tradition. But that can be scary, too. I think about the student who was with me as part of a service project in the neighborhood, who noticed a Somali woman in traditional garb, with a suitcase, attempting to hail a cab on Cedar Avenue. After several cabs passed her by, the student crossed the street, asked the woman where she was headed, hailed a cab for her and made sure the driver knew where to take his passenger. That morning, our student learned a life lesson about otherness and privilege – about not having to worry whether or not a cab would stop – but that student could just as easily not chosen to cross the street to be of assistance. Follow me. No matter what. Are we open to the strangers in our midst, who might teach us important lessons?

Discipleship is more than random acts of kindness, it is a way of life. I think that one of the great temptations of the way in which we read scripture – passage by passage, often out of context – is that we lose sight of the radical claim it puts on us to live as people of the book, of the gospel. This really isn't just about an occasional foray into a life of faith, random acts that might push our comfort zone for a while but that will not fundamentally alter our way of seeing and being in the world. This is about a life of discipleship and hospitality, a life reshaped by the claim of the gospel to live as the people of God, a life in community that is often messy, even sacrificial, but that ultimately is about faithful and grace-filled lives that proclaim God's reign. You don't meet many people who have fully grasped the radical claim of hospitality that Jesus calls us to live out – and there's probably a good reason why. This hospitable way of living is tough – just ask the disciples, who floundered and denied and betrayed their teacher! In their book, *Radical Hospitality*, Father Daniel Homans (a Benedictine monk) and Lonni Collins Pratt, describe what it was like for the monks of St. Benedict Monastery to open

their worship lives to the public, when they had long saw themselves only as “professional pray-ers,” watching the world from afar.. “It is easy to pray for ‘the world’ and ‘God’s people’ when you don’t have to look into their tear-reddened eyes, or fetch more toilet paper after mass on Sunday. Something sacred and unexpected has happened since we opened our doors and our hearts...we have become a part of each other’s lives.” And there you have it. It is easy for hospitality to position us as the “professional do-gooders,” patting ourselves on the back for our good works. But the call of radical discipleship and hospitality is to the messiness of daily, mundane life together, sharing the good, the bad and the ugly, the pain and the joy, the boredom and the richness, because that is what it is like to be human, and that is what Jesus calls us to understand. Follow me. No matter what. Not just once, but every day, all the time. Are we ready for lives of radical discipleship, really radical...? I hope so, because...

The world so needs our lives of radical faith. This is serious business, my friends. The founders of this college understood that when they chose the motto for Augsburg. It’s on the original seal of Augsburg Seminary, written in Norwegian, from the gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh.” Our college was founded upon the greatest act of love we could ever imagine, the act of a gracious and awesome God who entered into our world so that we might know God’s radical welcome. And what did we do – what did the world do – but reject God’s hospitality? There you have it. Out of fear, ignorance, injustice and hate, we turn our backs on God’s hospitality, God’s abundant and eternal welcome. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him,” the gospel proclaims. But God knows how much the world needs radical hospitality, and so God abides (perhaps the most lovely word in all the scriptures), God persists, God fulfills God’s plan for God’s people. For God loved the world so much, God sent his only Son...And here in this college community, the community that has educated and shaped you to commence this next part of your lives, we stand firmly on the shoulders of our founders who believed – as we believe – that we are called to serve our neighbors, that we too are called to abide in the face of a world that needs our lives of radical faith and hospitality. We are called to be prophets of peace, to work for justice and fairness, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to be the word made flesh in the world. Follow me, Jesus calls us – no excuses – lives of radical faith and hospitality, no matter the cost, no account for the joy. And we can’t shake it off. The Word made flesh, full of truth and grace. Here ends our orientation. Here begins the work we are called to do and the people we are called to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.