

OUR FOUNDER'S DAY: A LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

[Augsburg College Chapel, Founder's Day, 11 November 2009]

In recent years we've marked our Founder's Day in late fall (the actual date is rather vague) with a wonderful series of lectures by distinguished Reformation scholars, recalling our Lutheran roots and celebrating the distinctive gifts of the Lutheran tradition for our work as a college. For a variety of reasons, we decided this year to schedule the Reformation lecture later in the academic year, and so you're left with me, certainly not a distinguished Reformation scholar by any stretch of the imagination, but more surely a humble college president who has thought a good bit about the gifts we have been given by our founders and all those who have gone before us that make a significant difference for who we are and what we do as a college today.

I'm mostly interested in relevance and not nostalgia. And in that vein, I have been thinking a good bit lately about the distinctive gifts of the Lutheran tradition and their relevance for Augsburg. This past summer, Professor Martha Stortz from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary was on campus for a gathering of staff and faculty from the ELCA colleges and universities. In her talk to the group she outlined a group of what she called "charisms" or gifts that we have received from our tradition that allow us to be the sorts of colleges we are. She listed four such charisms: (1) our commitment to ongoing reformation, *semper reformanda*; (2) the priesthood of all believers and what that means for our service to the world; (3) the freedom of the Christian and what that means for our critical inquiry; and (4) meeting the other as neighbor and what that means for our relationships and communities. We could spend lots of time on each of those gifts from our tradition and the ways they have shaped us as a college. In fact, the Augsburg community has spent a good bit of time during the past decade and more considering how these gifts have shaped us – it is good to go back and read the Augsburg vision documents, the 2004 version is called "Access and Excellence: The Vocation of Augsburg," and see how *vocation*, *caritas* and *community* are lifted up as guiding ideas for our work as college. This morning, though, I want to suggest a fifth gift from the Lutheran tradition that I find especially compelling in our work together: the gift of linking our worship with our study. Luther was both a scholar and a pastor, and throughout his life he taught his fellow faithful of the importance of education for our called lives in the world. He practiced what he preached, and because of that gift from the namesake of our church, we have the great blessings to be the sort of college we are. Our founders also understood this remarkable gift. We were brought here to Minneapolis by a Lutheran congregation – Trinity, which still worships in this sacred space. We honor our abiding belief in the power of the gift of linking worship and study in our daily chapel services (even on Saturdays!) And we believe deeply in our continuing obligation to practice what we preach – to see the gospel and education as bound up together in our lives of faith in the world, in everything we do as a college.

As I thought about this gift of linking worship with study, I remembered the many times I have sat in a church service, going through the liturgical motions and not necessarily grasping the links between worship and study and service in the world. I'm sure I'm not alone in being distracted by the many claims of the world – we know those claims all over this college – claims of academic and disciplinary privilege, of careerism, of structures and bureaucracies that overwhelm our commitments to personal relationships, of the mundane things that get in the way of doing what we know we should do, and on and on – distractions abide.

So this morning – on the occasion of this celebration of our Founder's Day in this our 141st year as a college – allow me to explore with you how the structure of our worship together – what we call the liturgy – is tied to our work as a college. I have five quick points:

Our worship begins with *Confession and forgiveness* – Perhaps you recognize these familiar

words, known as the Collect of Purity, “Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid...” Our God from whom no secrets are hid – the 20th century Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, once remarked that these simple words are the summary of the Christian faith. We are known, we can’t hide, and that makes all the difference for our lives of faith in the world. The truth is that God knows all of our failings as individuals, as a people, as a church and as a college, and because of that truth, we are freed to be God’s people for the world. Especially on our Founder’s Day, we are wise to recall all of the ways in which we have strayed – to be timely, all of this fossil fuel we use up every day might be a good place to begin – and then to rejoice in the words of forgiveness that free us to get back to work, to live as God intends for God’s people to live. How about this? Turning out the lights, not using trays in the cafeteria, advocating for biodiesel – this is the work of a people forgiven and called!

We listen for *the Word* proclaimed and preached– “And the Word became flesh, and dwelled among us” (John 1: 14) – our founding scriptural text. The core claim of the Lutheran tradition is the centrality of the Word proclaimed and preached. And our founders understood that, in this college, the Word needed to be much more than written texts, it needed to be among us, in the flesh. And once we accept that theological claim we are free to ask our wonderful, distinctive Lutheran question – “What does this mean?” This, it seems to me, is why we get to be a college – past, present and future – because our church has never been afraid to ask what it all means. So how is the Word flesh here on campus in our scholarship, in our common life, in our worship and study, in our work in the neighborhood? What would it look like to put our Lutheran question above every classroom door on campus? It’s what we do. Relevant in 1869 and relevant today – asking, as those hungry for knowledge and wisdom, what does this mean? And then we share our gratitude in our *Prayers and Thanksgiving* – [“For All The Universe, We Thank You God” by Eric Whitacre]. Most certainly on Founder’s Day we offer our prayers and thanksgiving – for the faith and courage of our founders and all those who have held this college in trust over its 140 years, for our rich and vibrant present, for the remarkable promise that we have in serving our mission as a college into the future, and for the Universe – as the choir so powerfully proclaims. In our liturgy the thanksgiving is about admitting that we can’t do it alone in our prayers, praising God with our anthems and giving of ourselves in our offerings. In our Thanksgiving, we once again proclaim that our awesome God is in charge and all that we can do in response is to give of ourselves in acts of prayer and praise.

And so we join together to receive *the Sacraments* – the ever powerful reminders of how God takes the ordinary – water, bread and wine – and makes it holy in Baptism and in the Holy Communion. “Do this in remembrance of me,” we hear in the liturgical formula known as the Words of Institution. Take us, Lord, we pray on our Founder’s Day and make us holy, make our work holy, so that we might *do this* – live as ordinary people made holy and called to God’s good work in the world – in remembrance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. And then it’s time for *the sending* – at least in my church, this is a rather messy time, lots and lots of announcements, a benediction, and charges to go forth, equipped by this worship for called lives of service in the world. For Augsburg, the sending is especially relevant because our educational work is not bounded by the limits of this campus. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor – faith, learning and service can never be separated. And as we are sent forth from our worship, it is to return to our teaching and learning, to our faithful lives in community and to our love for neighbor.

And so we do today as our Founders of 140 years ago would have us do – we get back to God’s work. Go in peace and love and joy to ask your questions, to serve your neighbor and to do God’s work in the world. To which God’s people respond: Thanks be to God. Amen