For God so loves…

Numbers 29: 1-6

[Augsburg College Chapel, 9 September 2010, Opening of the Academic Year and Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year]

Happy new year! A greeting I can offer this morning for at least two reasons.

First, because this is, of course, the beginning of a new academic year for those of us who follow this agrarian and State Fair schedule. For some of you, this is your first new academic year in the college. For others of us, we just can't get enough. It is a time of excitement and some anxiety and new beginnings for our teaching and learning work and maybe some resolutions to attempt to follow.

In addition, it also is fitting to acknowledge the new year for our Jewish brothers and sisters who celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the festival of the trumpets that commences the Days of Atonement culminating late next week with Yom Kippur, the most sacred day for the Jewish community.

So, happy new year – and also happy breaking of the fast – the Eid al-Fitr – to our Muslim brothers and sisters who conclude the month of Ramadan and the discipline of daily fasting with a celebration of renewal and resolve.

Wow – what a convergence of calendars we enjoy today as we gather in this most sacred space as a community of faith to mark this Sabbath time together, this daily reminder of God's blessings to this college and to God's world, this daily time away from the busyness of our lives to worship and pray and sing, this daily practice of remembering how much our God loves us and loves the world

I have had the privilege in each of the past several years to offer some thoughts early in our chapel time on the significance of this time together and specifically on the role of faith in the life of this college. I have found it most meaningful to share my sense of the importance of sharing our faith stories with each other as a part of our daily lives. "This is what I believe; what do you believe?" I also have spoken of Augsburg's strong grounding in a particular faith tradition, the Lutheran Christian community, and the difference being Lutheran makes to the sort of college we are and aspire to be.

Today, I want to use this remarkable convergence of holy days to say something about how our personal faiths and our common faith traditions are linked to a wider sense of God's intentions and purposes for God's people and world. And I want to suggest that the logic of faith challenges all of us to recognize that God has something very much in mind for God's people – something in mind that is beyond human understanding and that ties people of faith together across their personal stories and religious communities to serve the world that God so loves.

And our responsibility as God's people is to seek to know a bit of God's mind so that we might do God's good work in the world. How do we do that?

In a recent essay, wise teacher and writer Parker Palmer speaks of the deep connections between his faith and his writing. He says, "As we work our way into that empty page – or into the unknowable future as we live our lives on faith – do we discover what is there or do we invent it?" His answer is that lives of writing and faith are about both discovery and invention – that, as he says, "the words I put on paper are encountering realities that are already "out there" but will remain invisible until someone's words give them visible form."

Faith is like this, as well – a journey to know God's intentions for us, marked by both discovery and invention. Quoting 2 Corinthians, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us," Palmer reminds us that every container – every word, every worship space, every liturgy, every holy day – we create to hold the sacred treasure is earthen, limited, finite and flawed, and the best we can do to avoid iconoclasm – where the vessels become more important than the transcendent reality they attempt to convey – is to admit our fallenness, to overcome our fear of what it means to admit that our earthen vessels are not the only or the best means to know the divine, and to (as Palmer suggests) "set the sacred loose" so that we might know the truth that sets us free to be God's people and do God's work.

"(W)hy believe in God," Palmer asks, "if the God we believe in is so small as to be contained and controlled within our finite words and forms?" A great question for this new year and for this college community.

Let God be God, said our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther. And then we shall be freed to be the people God intended for us to be.

Now, I don't mean to argue that earthen vessels – our great faith traditions – are not important. There is a dynamic paradox and tension between the earthen vessels and the treasure they were constructed to honor that we must respect and live into. And we must be vigilant because it is easy to be complacent or arrogant – witness the call of the Christian pastor in Florida to burn the Qu'ran on September 11, surely an action that claims a higher place for one earthen vessel over another, surely not what our awesome God intends for the well-being of the world God so loves.

Which leads us to the crux of the matter. Given that our personal faith stories and the various earthen vessels in which we store the treasures of our faith are finite and limited, then what are we to do as people freed for lives of faith in the world, people who are seeking to do what God intends, not what we think is best or expedient or most likely to please others (or even, to please God)?

Here is where the convergence of these holy days – Rosh Hashanah and the Eid al-Fitr – with the opening of our new academic year, grounded as it is in our Lutheran faith tradition, offers

us a compelling path forward. For there is in these great faith traditions – and in the education they promote – a common promise and claim for people of faith. And that promise is that God loves God's people and the world they inhabit. And so must we if we are to live as faithful people in the world.

There are ways indigenous to each tradition to talk about what it means that God so loves the world. In our Christian tradition, of course, we believe that God so loved the world that he sent God's only Son into our midst to live and die and be raised from the dead to redeem us and set us free for lives of service to the neighbor and for lives eternal and abundant in the time to come.

In the academic tradition we embrace at Augsburg, guided by our faith and grounded in the liberal arts, we also have ways to explore and practice what it means to love the world. What you study here has a purpose: to seek to understand the world in all its myriad aspects – historical, cultural, economic, scientific, political and so forth – so that we might bring our education to bear as we work to make the world a more just and humane and healthy place.

We learn from all the great faith traditions and today, in honor of the Jewish new year, I turn to the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, who suggests that the Jewish faith compels those who believe to see their lives as dedicated to "tikkun olam," the mending of the world. In his *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks suggests that this mending of the world God so loves is found at the intersection of "what I can do" with "what needs to be done." Sounds a good bit like what we, in the Lutheran Christian tradition, call "vocation," that place where our deep gladness meets the world's great needs.

Rabbi Sacks sends us forth with these compelling words: "To live the life of faith is to hear the silent cry of the afflicted, the lonely and marginal, the poor, the sick and the disempowered, and to respond. For the world is not yet mended, there is work still to do, and God has empowered us to do it – with him, for him and for his faith in us."

And to that, all of us can say together in faith: May Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Thanks be to God. May it be so. Amen.