

SEEING THE LIGHT

Acts 21:37 – 22:16

[Augsburg College Chapel, 1 October 2010, Fall Meeting of the Board of Regents]

The story of Saul's conversion to the faith – and his new name, Paul – is a meaningful tale for our college dedicated as it is to transforming lives as we educate at the intersections of faith, learning and service. The zeal of Saul's crusade against the fledgling early church and his radical turn to his role as a missionary for Jesus Christ is a powerful parable for those of us who live some 2000 years later and who too often get caught up in the minutiae that define orthodoxy in the academy, in the church and in society. What would it be like to believe in the awesome power of a God who is bound by no human limits, who can reach into the heart of even the most ardent detractor, the most ignorant and stubborn, and offer the graceful embrace of love and hope and abundance? What would it be like to be blind and then to see the light?

The founders of Augsburg College had a vision of that sort of radical faith as they launched this remarkable venture in a ramshackle house in Marshall, Wisconsin. They believed in the power of an awesome God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, present in our common lives in the work of the Holy Spirit, to transform their lives and the lives of the students they faithfully served. They believed in conversion through faith and education and service. And they set us on a path as an institution that believes that it is possible for those who wander in the darkness, who are lost and alone and afraid and anxious and full of hate, to see the light and to live as people who see the light.

And when our ancestors at Trinity Lutheran Church brought our founders to this neighborhood in Minneapolis in 1872, they chose a motto and seal for this college that proclaimed their radical faith: "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) became their creed as a seminary, affirming the faith that God has come among us to save us and free us to follow our calls and serve our neighbors. Elsewhere in the first chapter of John's gospel, the evangelist proclaims that this Word is "the life that is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." "See the light," our ancestors boldly claimed for this college.

Now, as an aside, I love the original seal and motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary and I have in my office the official seal imprint for that original seal. I have it here today and offer anyone who might like the opportunity to press a gold seal for themselves this morning after our service. The good folks in my office know how much I love this imprint and reminder of our heritage as a seminary and college that believes that its work is about bringing light into the world.

But now, as you likely know, we have a newer seal, first designed on the occasion of Augsburg's centennial in 1969. You have that seal reprinted on your service program for this morning and I want to take just a few minutes to suggest that the Augsburg seal is a wonderfully appropriate

and relevant statement of how this community continues to share our founders' radical faith in the promise of our God that we might see the light.

First, let's look at the component parts of the seal. There are three primary images: the lamp that symbolizes wisdom and knowledge; the skyline that marks our place and location in the city; and the cross that stands above all as our abiding faith commitment. On the edges of the seal, you see the lion on the left, emblematic of Augsburg's Norwegian roots; and the eagle on the right, standing for Augsburg's commitment to the United States (and, by the way, likely at least once source of Auggie the eagle!). Finally, around the edge of the seal is our official name and founding date, and the deeply theological statement "Through Truth to Freedom," by which we summarize our belief that the truth sets us free to be educated and to serve.

This is a really fine seal and a compelling motto – and you might notice that we have decided to use it even more extensively in recent years as the backdrop to campus signs and stationery and such things. And we do that because it is important to be reminded of what we stand for, what is our college's character and identity, what we believe in. Those are bold and radical claims in our divided and fragmented world. We stand for education; we are shaped by the city and our neighbors therein; and we believe in a God who loves us so much!

As I have reflected on the story of Saul's conversion, I also have come to understand that our seal suggests that all we do here is in some fashion aimed at helping all of us – and those we serve – see the light. Consider these familiar scriptural allusions to our core commitments as a college:

Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalms 119:105)

At the center of our lives is our firm conviction that education itself is a source of light – enlightenment for those who study here and for those in the world who will benefit from their educated service. The lamp of learning points to our work in the classroom and labs, in the library, on the playing fields, in the neighborhood and around the world, where all of us are engaged in teaching and learning that seeks to prepare students who are informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders.

There is no question that there is imbedded in our Lutheran faith tradition this deep confidence that being educated is a part of God's intentions for God's people. Martin Luther in his catechisms – his guides to the faith – replied to the various historic statements of faith with this simple question, "What does this mean?" Each and every day on this campus and wherever Augsburg is present in the world, we ask the same question as we seek to be enlightened and to share the light of education with all of creation. See the light of learning.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. (Matthew 5:14)

Our location in the city and in this neighborhood is at the heart of the education we offer at Augsburg. This chapel itself was constructed so that we might see the links between our worship and our gathering here as a community for academic occasions and the city we serve.

Now, there are some who would argue that the city can be a dark place. In fact, Professor Diane Jacobson from Luther Seminary has suggested in an essay on cities in the Bible that most of the references in scripture to urban locations are not very positive – think Sodom and Gomorrah and desolation and destruction and crucifixion. At the same time, she sees in the scriptures an aspiration that the city might be redeemed. As we read in Jeremiah, we are called to seek the welfare of the city. And in Isaiah, we are called to be repairers of the breach. And then in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus – on his fated journey to the holy city, Jerusalem – calls us to be a city that lights the world.

We are not naïve about the darkness and messiness of the city, but we believe that there is light here, light that must and will shine as God intended. We are called to help the light shine. See the light of the city.

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. (Ephesians 5:8-9)

And then there is the light of faith. It is meaningful, I think, that the cross in the seal hangs like a star over the lamp and the skyline, a beacon that serves as a guide, a compass point (as Professor Stortz suggested as important to our lives here in her homily a couple of weeks ago), a light over all we are and do.

In our Lutheran tradition, we are bold to claim this faith as gift – we cannot earn it on our own merit – and we also claim it as call – as God calls us into the light of faith, we live as children of that light. This faith then beckons us follow this path, this path of education in and for the city, even as it provides that sure and steady light along the path.

Even when we doubt our ability to learn enough or find the answers we seek – even when the city is a dark and lonely place – our faith lights our way to all that is good and right and true. Thanks be to God.

There are those who are skeptical about whether or not colleges like ours truly can be places of light, given the pressures of the market and cultural expectations. Historian James T. Burtchaell went so far as to call his 1998 tome on the state of church-related colleges and universities in America, *The Dying of the Light*. So here we stand, firmly on the path of the apostle Paul whose own conversion to the faith, his seeing of the light, challenges us to live as those who believe deeply that in faith, learning and service, we are called to be light in the darkness, to live as children of light and to help others see the light in and through us. Through God's good grace, may it be so. Amen.