

To know as we are known

Acts 17: 22-31

John 3: 16

[Augsburg College Chapel, 14 February 2011]

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17: 22-31)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3: 16)

Happy Valentine's Day – and that's about all I'm going to say about that except perhaps to suggest that one of the themes of this festival of love has to do with how well we are known, how well those whom we love know and embrace us, name and accept us, engage and complete us. Here is a way of knowing – perhaps odd to your ears – that is social, grounded in relationship, possible because of our connection to the other; a way of knowing that is at the heart of the gospel message of a God who, as Paul proclaims in our reading from Acts, is known and who knows us.

I love this rare reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Often called the Mars Hill scene, we meet this account of the Apostle Paul, deep into his ministry to the Gentiles, here gathered with learned Greek citizens on the steps of the Areopagus, engaged in a spirited conversation about religion. Here is the founding narrative for our Lutheran vision of higher education, a narrative that helps explain what it is that we are about in places like Augsburg.

Paul is speaking to those who do not share his faith. And listen to how he engages the conversation. You clearly are religious people, he begins. It is the classic rhetorical move, flattering his audience and seeking common ground for the point he is about to make. I see, he tells them, your statues throughout Athens, inscribed to an Unknown God. But what if I were to tell you that there is a God who has become known; known in relationship to a privileged

people, known in the flesh of a martyred prophet; known in the spirit in which we live and move and have our being. This is the God who made the world and all that is in it, and who does not leave us alone and unknown. This is the God who continues to reach into our lives, not because this God needs our gold and silver idols, but because this God knows us and loves us without measure. You are known and loved by this known God, Paul teaches. You can't capture this God in your human forms. This God – our God – has done the unimaginable. Reached into our midst to name and claim us, to free us so that we might use our intellects and hearts and hands to serve the One who knows us. In other words, so that we might know as we are known – know as those known and loved and claimed and freed for the sake of the world God created and loves so much.

There is a vision of education in this scene that I find most compelling and that I think characterizes the best of what we do here at Augsburg. It is a vision that has been interpreted in recent years by Parker Palmer, educator *par excellence* (who just happens to be an honorary alumnus of Augsburg!) In his book entitled *To Know As We Are Known*, Palmer argues that knowledge is about so much more than sensation and rationality. He asks, "Why assume (such a limited view of knowledge) when the human self is rich with other capacities — intuition, empathy, emotion, and faith, to name but a few? If there is nothing to be known by these faculties, why do we have them?"

Palmer finds inspiration for his vision of knowledge and education in the New Testament and other Christian writings. He believes that as a teacher, Jesus is a model of personal truth — of abstract moral principles given "a human frame"; "his call to truth is a call to community — with him, with each other, with creation and its Creator." In other words, Jesus is God in the flesh, making known the divine to the world. Based on this claim, Palmer argues for the profound universal message that modern objectivist culture needs to become grounded in a moral, spiritual and communal dimension that it presently lacks and, indeed, actively discourages.

Knowledge and education, then, require a different way of teaching and learning. For Palmer, "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced," where we seek to know as we are known, and he writes in much detail about the attitudes, skills and approaches an educator might need to create such a space. He emphasizes openness (willingness to encounter what is new), boundaries (appropriate structure) and "hospitality" (a welcoming, compassionate environment).

I reflect on this vision of knowledge and education often as we explore how our community can create spaces in which the community of truth is practiced. It is a counter-cultural vision, but one I believe that is in our DNA as a college. Allow me to suggest three simple thoughts, inspired by other fellow travelers on this road, which I hope might guide our work together in ensuring that we live up to our aspirations as a college guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church.

My first point is about how this vision of education demands an expansive understanding and practice of hospitality. And I turn to the late Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and servant to the vulnerable in God's creation, who writes in his *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975) this moving challenge:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.

It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.

It is not an educated intimidation of good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find root and bear ample fruit.

It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity for others to find their God and their way.

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

To know as we are known is to genuinely welcome the stranger into our midst, to learn from difference and otherness, and to be enriched by the guest now become friend.

My second point is informed by Martin Luther King, Jr., whose remarkable life and work changed the world we inhabit. King's vision of the beloved community moves us beyond hospitality to the claims of justice, demanding that we use our gifts to ensure a better life for all God's creatures. In a sermon preached just days before his assassination in Memphis, King proclaimed:

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"....

"I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

"How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

To know as we are known means that our knowledge is a gift that is to be used to secure the justice that God envisions for all God's people. Our teaching and learning is not an end in itself – we are called to serve our neighbors. We are known and we are called to join our minds and hearts and hands to the work of the One who knows and loves us.

My final point is summarized in the familiar verse from the gospel of John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Our good former colleague, Dr. David Tiede, is always fond of reminding us that the gospel of John does not say, "For God so loved the church," or even "For God so loved the college," it's always been "For God so loved the world." But that can be a hard message for God's people to hear when the world so often places obstacles in our faithful way – obstacles of inequity and violence and anxiety and fear and injustice – obstacles that make it really tough to see how God can have a plan for this world. Welcome and learn from the stranger – come on! Do justice, take risks for the vulnerable in our midst, love those who hate us – you've got to be kidding. "For God so loved the world" – really, we ask?

For those of us who are called to know as we are known, those of us who inhabit this community of teaching and learning, the great gift we have from our good God is that we are not alone in our faithful work. We're in good and gracious company – called by our loving God who names and claims us at our baptisms to do God's work, to be God's people, to heal the world, to be instruments of God's loving and reconciling and justice-filled intentions for the world. For God so loved the world, he sent his only Son that we might be saved. And then he sent us and the great cloud of witnesses throughout the ages to know as we are known, to be God's faithful people in this world God loves so much. What a remarkable vision for our work here at Augsburg and what good news for the world! Thanks be to God. Amen.