

STAY WITH US

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
May 7, 2011

But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

(Luke 24: 29)

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains our lives together. 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.

Let me digress for a moment with some behind-the-scenes insight from the world of those who have the privilege to preach on occasions such as these. The print deadlines for fine programs like you have before you this morning are often 4-6 weeks before the actual event, meaning that the choice of sermon titles can be speculative at times. My own pattern when given a far-away deadline for a title is to take a quick look at the assigned scripture for the day to see if I can find some catchy phrase that will help me organize my thoughts when I actually get around to preparing my sermon. Today's readings, the assigned lectionary for tomorrow, the third Sunday in Easter, gave me pause. Let me point out that you could have heard a sermon this morning on such provocative lines as this from the Acts of the Apostles, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!" – which may be how you're really feeling today – or even this from Peter's first letter, "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth" – which may be how you perceive the academic demands of your final semester. But instead I invite you to join me in exploring what it means to ask someone to "stay with us," this act of hospitality that has much to do with the sort of education you have received in this college, as it has for generations of those who have gone before us as God's faithful people in this place we call Augsburg.

In these hours and days after Easter, we join Jesus in Luke's story as he appears alongside the two disciples – one of whom we learn is named Cleopas, the other remains anonymous – on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It is a familiar and well-loved gospel

story. The disciples do not recognize Jesus, we're told, and there ensues this remarkable conversation in which the two disciples share with this stranger their account of what has happened in Jerusalem in the previous few days. "The things about Jesus of Nazareth," they exclaim, this mighty prophet handed over to authorities, condemned, crucified like a common criminal, and then reported by the faithful women to have disappeared from the tomb, alive even according to the report of angels.

And then there is the rebuke from Jesus, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" Was it not prophesied that the Messiah would suffer so that he might enter into glory? "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures," Luke recounts. And then, as with any good and engaging conversation, the time passes quickly and the three near the village. Jesus walks ahead, only to be invited – urged strongly we learn – to "stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." Stay with us, stay with us – and Jesus does, later blessing and breaking the bread at table, the moment when the eyes of the disciples are opened to his true identity. The Lord has risen indeed.

This is a delightful Word for a baccalaureate service – especially as we gather here together as God's faithful people before you are sent into the world as graduates of this college.

Three simple messages emerge for us from this story.

Vocare

The first is about Augsburg and your call – OK, OK, you knew I would get this in one last time before you depart!

Joining a college is a wondrous thing. The great American poet, Robert Frost, captured my sentiment in his 1936 poem, "Build Soil," where he wrote:

Steal away and stay away.
Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any.
Join the United States and join the family.
But not much in between unless a college.

No matter how you may be feeling today – sad to leave friends, excited about what's ahead, anxious for that job or grad school application, glad it's over, or probably some combination of these and other emotions – I can assure you that joining this college and the community it represents will have a lifelong impact on you in so many ways. And there is something tremendously meaningful about how you will invite the values and character and people of this college to stay with you as you move forward in your lives.

Not a day passes for me that I don't remember the ways in which my college experience has shaped my life. It was the reason for my first ever airplane ride and my first ever international experience. It was the place where I grew up and realized that I could not live my dad's life and become a pastor (though here I am!) It was the community in which challenging and loving teachers made me think, made me stronger, taught me how much more I had to learn. It was the sanctuary where I learned to sing from my heart and soul, and not simply from my diaphragm. It was the college that helped me discern a life's journey, a calling to faithful leadership and service in education.

How about you? What will you remember about how your Augsburg experience shaped your journey, your call to the life you will lead, your sense of what is important and what is not?

Stay with us, we plead, for we feel and know how much this college and its community have meant to who we are and aspire to be. Stay with us, so that our eyes might be opened and our hearts set to burning. Stay with us.

Educare

There is in this story on the road to Emmaus also a compelling metaphor for the ways in which education is at the heart of a good and significant life together. I love the image of these strangers deep in conversation along this road. And there is Jesus walking alongside, responding to their confusion over what had happened just now in Jerusalem with his wise interpretation of the scriptures. Here is Jesus, our teacher, helping us to make sense of our lives in the world. Isn't that what good teachers always do for us? Isn't that what we are called to do for each other as we commence our lives as college graduates?

Some of you likely studied Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* in your confirmation classes or perhaps in a religion course here. I am convinced that if we are to be truly faithful to our Lutheran roots, we would put the simple question "What does this mean?" above the door to every classroom on this campus. Here at Augsburg, we embrace the faith and values of the Lutheran church that allow us to affirm that we are indeed called to ask questions of the world and our experiences in it – scientific questions, artistic questions, political questions, historical questions, questions of all sorts. "What does this mean?" becomes the abiding question of a liberal arts education and a liberal arts life.

The Roman Catholic priest and political philosopher, John Courtney Murray, has taught me a great deal about how genuine education is at the heart of a healthy and good society. Murray writes that "*Barbarism...is the lack of reasonable conversation according to reasonable laws. Here the word 'conversation' has its twofold Latin sense. It means living together and talking together. Barbarism threatens when men cease to live together according to reason, embodied in law and custom, and incorporated in a web of institutions that sufficiently reveal rational influences.... Barbarism likewise strikes when men cease to talk together... when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another...*" Murray's challenge is clear:

How shall we recover our capacity for conversation – both genuine living and talking together?

Murray's words, written more than fifty years ago, strike me as most relevant for our own 21st century lives. Scan the newspapers and find example after example of where barbarism is at our doorstep – in nationalistic fervor, political diatribe, social rancor – and this is the world into which we send you now, our educated friends. I'm sorry, but this is why we have taught you to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders – this is why Augsburg College exists. The world needs you, we need you and your many gifts of intellect and creativity and passion.

Stay with us, we urge all of those who have been our teachers and mentors and colleagues here, those who have taught us that education is our most compelling asset in creating genuine conversation, in learning to talk and live together, in doing God's faithful work in the world. Stay with us so that we might never cease in asking "What does this mean?" Stay with us, for the darkness around us is near and deep, and you are our light. Stay with us.

Servare

And finally, there is in this gospel story a moving reminder that when we invite the stranger to stay with us, that when we sit together at table and break bread, that when we overcome our fear and confusion, then our eyes will be opened and we will know that we have been redeemed. We will know that our loving God will not leave us without comfort and hope.

I wonder if you might think about Riverside or Cedar or Franklin avenues as your roads to Emmaus here in the Seward and Cedar-Riverside neighborhoods. What strangers did you meet there or nearby, what did you learn from them, and in what ways has your mutual hospitality become a source of love and grace and comfort and hope in your lives here at Augsburg?

Teacher and spiritual guide for many of us, Parker Palmer (who has an honorary degree from Augsburg), commenting on the road to Emmaus story, says that "the stranger is a bearer of truth which might not otherwise have been received. (The story tells) us that our everyday perceptions and assumptions must be shaken by the intrusion of strangeness if we are to hear God's word."

I remember an Augsburg graduate of a few years ago sharing with me her experience of working with the Campus Kitchen program, first preparing and delivering meals, and then developing relationships with the families who received the meals. She spoke of how her world was changed by a stranger – a Somali mother whose children played at the Brian Coyle Center – who invited her to visit her apartment in the Riverside Plaza, to help tutor her children in English, to enjoy time with the family over meals, and

then to learn in return about the Somali language and culture. Her life was changed, she learned more than she could have imagined, her call was made clear in the truth of the stranger breaking into her world.

Where have you met the stranger here and invited her to stay? Where has your world been turned upside down by a stranger, by an alternative truth, by an experience of otherness? Where have your eyes been opened by the truth of new life, breaking in all around? When has your heart burned with the wisdom of the stranger, whose love for us is boundless?

Stay with us, dear stranger, so that we might learn from you. Stay with us so that our eyes might be opened, our hearts set to burning – so that we might break bread together and know in you the Risen Christ. Stay with us.

And so today, this very special day – surrounded by these colleagues and teachers and friends and family who have meant so much to you, as you commence from Augsburg into the world – you are called by this community, by your education, by the stranger – to care for God's creation, to give away your minds and hearts, to live your faith in service to your neighbor. Stay with us, we pray, for wherever you go, whatever you do, we know this remarkable truth that God so loves the world, that God so loves you, that we have been equipped with the gifts of faith and education so that we might do God's good and faithful work in all the world. Thanks be to God – and God's people say together, Amen.