

## To know because we are known

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

[Augsburg College Chapel, October 24, 2012]

This morning, I continue with my series of homilies on the five charisms (or gifts) of the Lutheran theological tradition that I believe shape the sort of college we are – a college that is relevant and sustainable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A couple of weeks ago, I explored the nuanced Lutheran theological understanding of vocation that is at the heart of our educational experience – a way of thinking about the significance and purpose of our lives in the world that is based in the messiness of our everyday lives, that connects us to wider communities of commitment and practice, and that may require real sacrifice in service to God’s intentions for the world.

This morning, I want to go to the heart of our academic mission – to our commitment to humble and critical inquiry, another of the gifts of the Lutheran tradition. Apart from reminding you that we are part of a faith tradition founded by a university professor (!), I want to argue that there is a theologically-grounded way of knowing in our tradition that supports our bias toward the liberal arts as the most appropriate and important education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So let me begin with a dinner table conversation at our home earlier this week. Thomas, our 6<sup>th</sup> grader, and Maya in third grade, were discussing their day at school. Maya excitedly told us that her class was studying the solar system and then she began to name the planets – in Mandarin Chinese, which is the language of instruction at her school! As we were prompting her to remember the planets, we came to Pluto, which of course is no longer considered a planet. Thomas tells me it is called a “dwarf planet.” Now when I was in school, learning the planets and solar system, Pluto was a planet. So what happened? I had an object lesson in scientific discovery right there in front of me. We developed a deeper understanding of how the solar system worked. We had better equipment and technology to test our hypotheses. We changed our minds about a previously held scientific fact. What we once had known, we now knew to be false. Human knowledge evolves. What a remarkable fact – what an essential gift in academic communities like ours. Pluto is no longer considered a planet in our solar system. Humbling for those of us who once learned otherwise. Critical for the progress humans make in seeking deeper and more accurate understandings of the truth.

The theological basis for this commitment to humble and critical inquiry is well described in our reading from the book of Job. I imagine most of you recall the longer story of Job. He is a good and faithful man, who is afflicted with all manner of suffering – physical, emotional and social suffering – apparently without explanation. His family and friends counsel him to curse this God he professes to revere; Job himself cries out in

agony and despair, seeking relief, asking for explanations. And now, finally, here comes the Lord out of the whirlwind, with these disquieting words:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched lines upon it?” And on and on.

This passage might be the source of deep despair concerning the relationship between the divine and humankind – it certainly has been interpreted that way through the centuries. Instead, I want to suggest that there is in this encounter a deep and abiding promise, and the theological grounding for what is at the heart of Augsburg’s academic aspirations.

Let’s begin with a simple – yet easily overlooked – aspect of this scene. God is answering Job. The God we worship is having a conversation with us. I think we take for granted how often the God of the Abrahamic religions is portrayed as in personal relationship with God’s creatures and creation. It starts in Eden, continues through exile and wandering in the desert, issues in commandments and promises, and for those of us in the Christian tradition is fulfilled in God made flesh in Jesus Christ. The idea of a relational God is at the heart of Lutheran theology and supports our belief that we are called into relationship with God, named and claimed and redeemed, so that we might be co-creators of knowledge and experience in the world. God calls us to ask our questions, to seek the truth, to work on behalf of the world. And God engages us in conversation through divine presence in the scriptures, in community, in our vocational journeys and in our using of our God-given gifts to seek the truth. God talks with us, God calls us, God is with us.

Then, of course, there is the seemingly stern message that God delivers to Job. So, is this an effort on God’s part to diminish human capacities, to play up the power inequalities or to intimidate? Perhaps it seems so from our perspective, but what does God say in this exchange with Job with which we might genuinely disagree? We weren’t there at the laying of the foundations of the earth. We can’t number the clouds or provide for all creaturely needs. What if, instead, we see in this conversation not a slap down of human capacities, but a promise that our God is in charge with a plan for all of creation and that God invites us to use our gifts and intellects to do and know what is within our God-given capacity and reach? In other words, to practice humility in what we don’t know and then get to work with all of our critical faculties and abilities to know more and more in service to God’s work in the world.

There is in this exchange between the Lord and Job the theological claims that underlie our commitment as an institution dedicated to humble and critical inquiry, to a liberal arts way of knowing and living. In my homily title, I’ve paraphrased a concept borrowed from educator Parker Palmer, who contends that “we know as we are known,” which is

his argument that knowledge is relational and not about seeking the “truth out there” in an objective world waiting to be discovered. My version of Palmer’s formula is that the Lutheran theological position on knowledge means that “we know because we are known.”

It begins with our relationship with the divine, whom we believe names and claims us at our baptisms, who has redeemed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and who calls us to faithful lives in the world. We are known.

It then follows that our ways of knowing and living in the world are the faithful response of a grateful people, called to do God’s work and be God’s people in the world. We know because we are known.

The implications of this theological gift and claim are obvious in so many ways in our academic mission and educational experience here at Augsburg.

We are humble because we – like Job – are in conversation with the divine, the One who knows us, and we understand that our knowledge and actions are never complete, that there are many truths yet to be uncovered, that the truths that others have found may help inform ours, that we may be wrong and need to amend our knowledge. What a significant challenge this is to the competing ideologies that too often claim truth once and for all and thus polarize and stymie conversation and genuine learning. Our colleague at Capital University in Ohio, Tom Christenson, has written powerfully of a Lutheran way of knowing that is grounded in wonder, openness, recognition to connectedness, freedom, critical faithfulness, engaged suspiciousness – these are the ways of humility.

And we use our critical skills because we are not afraid of the answers we may find and live into. As those already known, we believe that God calls us to lives of asking questions, of seeking an ever more full and accurate understanding of the world and our experience, of giving away our minds and hearts to serve our neighbor in whatever our vocational journey. Martin Luther taught all of us to ask “what does this mean?” The late Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, has argued provocatively that the purposes of a liberal arts education in a Lutheran institution is to “annihilate innocence” about the realities of the world and human experience, so that we might live authentically as God’s people, awake and vigilant to what we are called to be and do.

Here at Augsburg, I find example after example of how the gifts of our Lutheran way of knowing shape our common lives. Whether in our deep commitments to open and candid teaching and learning in the classroom, to interfaith dialogue and living, to civil discourse around pressing social and political issues, or to engaging with those of different viewpoints and experiences in our neighborhood – in all of these ways we are practicing what we believe. A quick example of how humble and critical inquiry is lived out: A couple of summers ago, I had the privilege to help mentor Juve Mesa Rodriguez

in an undergraduate research project which looked at the history of Augsburg's relationships with its neighbors here in Cedar-Riverside. Juve did his research work, exploring census data, reviewing histories of the college and neighborhood, and speaking personally with neighbors about their experiences with Augsburg – in other words, learning to think critically. But Juve also did more. He asked tough questions about Augsburg's values and the power and cultural dynamics between the college and our immigrant neighbors. He challenged how Augsburg had sometimes behaved in the neighborhood. I remember a couple of conversations where Juve clearly was nervous that I would find these tough facts unpalatable. But this was not meant to be a naïve claim that all was well – and always had been. Juve also learned about humility because he walked with his college, even when it did not live up to its highest aspirations and values. Humble and critical inquiry – the heart of our academic mission – a gift of our Lutheran tradition.

It seems fitting this week especially to lift up someone we regularly welcomed to this chapel, Professor Emeritus Vern Bloom (who would sit here on my right as a member of the chapel brass group!), who passed away last weekend, also embodied this commitment to humble and critical inquiry. A fine scholar of sociology and social work, Vern asked tough questions about the realities of human experience in society, and found in his critical research and practice evidence of injustice and a lack of attention to the most vulnerable in our midst. And then he went to work – humbly challenging Augsburg and all of us to live up to our values as a college that embraced access and hospitality and justice. We have Vern and those who joined him in the 1970s for Augsburg's longstanding and ground-breaking commitment to making our campus more accessible, especially for those who are physically disabled. Humble and critical inquiry – a gift that shapes our Augsburg community.

Tom Christenson says it even more eloquently when he challenges us as Lutherans to tell the “the Whole Human Story in depth and breadth honestly - to be radical truth-tellers” – and at the same time (here's that “both-and” Lutheran thing again!) to stand together in a community of hope. Radical truth telling and a community of hope. Humble and critical inquiry. So, that's what happened with Pluto! Thanks, indeed, be to God. Amen.