

FAITHFUL AND RELEVANT LUTHERAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

FIVE HOMILIES ON AUGSBURG COLLEGE'S VISION

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AUGSBURG COLLEGE

FAITHFUL AND RELEVANT

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I had the rare privilege in the summer of 2012 to be away from campus for a sabbatical—literally, to enjoy Sabbath time away from the roles and routines of daily life for renewal and refreshment. During the six weeks we spent in Chicago, we had two objectives.

The first was to spend good time as a family exploring Chicago, a city we love. Mission accomplished, I can report, as our bucket list was filled with lots of time in museums and neighborhoods, on beaches, and with family and friends.

My second goal was to engage in research on the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education. I explored

the literature written during the past 50 years about Lutheran higher education in America and set out to test a hypothesis that the charisms (or gifts) of our Lutheran theological tradition have helped to make us institutions with particular identities and character that are more needed than ever in our world.

The five homilies in this monograph were given in the Augsburg College chapel during the 2012-13 academic year and reflect on five of the gifts of the Lutheran tradition that ground the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education in the 21st century.

WE ARE CALLED

Luke 5: 1-11

Beginning this morning and continuing into the spring semester, I want to use the privilege of this pulpit to reflect on the five gifts of the Lutheran tradition that I named as essential to our identity as a college and say something about why I believe they make us relevant and sustainable. The five gifts are vocation, critical and humble inquiry, engagement with the other, commitment to service and justice, and *semper reformanda*, our place in the reformation tradition.

This morning, the “V” word—vocation, of course.

You already know, even if you have just joined the Augsburg community, how central the theological concept of vocation is to Augsburg’s academic mission. There are required religion courses entitled “The Search for Meaning”—1 and 2, just in case you miss it the first time! There are capstone courses before you leave us. There are special programs in this chapel, around campus and around the world, seeking to help you discern and live your callings in the world. There are signs that proclaim, “We are called. Auggies.”—everywhere, it seems. Well, you get it. We won’t let you forget it.

And there is a simple reason for that. As Lutherans, we believe deeply that one of, if not the greatest, contribution our tradition has made to the world is this theological concept that says simply that God calls you and me and all of us to lives of meaning and purpose and significance in the world. And our vocations matter,

because they implicate us in God’s work in the world. In other words, through our vocations we become co-creators of the world, working to ensure that God’s will is done, that God’s love is known to all of creation.

Luther himself put it this way, commenting on the Christmas gospel in Luke 2: “...For we are unable to give to God anything, in return for his goodness and grace, except praise and thanksgiving...Faith teaches such praise and thanksgiving; as it is written according to the shepherds that they returned to their flocks with praise and thanksgiving and were well-satisfied, even though they did not become wealthier, were not awarded higher honors, did not eat and drink better, were not obliged to carry on a better trade.” In other words, being a good shepherd was its own vocational reward!

This is all well and good, but why is the concept of vocation, developed some 500 years ago, relevant to my life today? To answer that question, we need to go back another 1,500 years to our gospel lesson for this morning.

In this familiar tale from Luke’s gospel, we find Jesus in the early days of his ministry, already pressed upon by the crowds—and perhaps in need of some help, we might surmise. So he engages with Simon and the other fishers—and we all know the end of this story, so why don’t we move on? But wait a minute. Let’s look again at the story itself.

Here is Jesus engaging with men already working hard to earn a living, to make a difference. You see, Jesus doesn't wait until they are resting on the shore or back in their homes, to call to them. He comes to them in the midst of their work, in the midst of their busy and hectic lives, in the midst of the mundane practices of throwing nets to catch fish, in the midst of messy and difficult times where the fish are not biting—and he calls them not to come out of the water to talk about the days ahead, but to return to their work, to cast their nets again, and to reap the harvest of nets overflowing.

Too often, when we talk about vocation, we seem to think that our call will come to us in some mysterious, perhaps even supernatural way. But in our tradition, what we believe is that God is already here in our midst, in our history, and that God's call to us may very well be to continue on the journey we already have undertaken, to follow our passion and talents, to return to work, aware that God has a plan for us—and that our nets may well soon be overflowing.

There's more to the gospel story. Recall how Simon followed Jesus's instructions to pull up the nets, but he couldn't do it by himself—he needed help. And so he called for his colleagues and friends to come and help. And then there were four or five of them working together to follow the call. Only then were they able to do what Jesus asked.

So often we seem to think that this vocation stuff is all about me. I get a call and set off on my own to live it out. But both Jesus and Luther knew well that by its very definition, vocation is social. It calls us into community, into the complementarity of gifts that together help to do God's work in the world. Every once in a while, I will hear someone say that they were called to a particular role, but that they could not live out their calling because the community or institution would not allow them to do so. The problem with that conclusion is that callings are always a dialogue between my gifts and roles and the needs of the community and the world that I am called to serve. Our callings only make sense as they serve others. God calls us into community, into the company of those who together are able to haul those heavy nets into the boat.

And then, of course, there is the conclusion to this story—the call we all remember—the call to give it all up and follow Jesus. The key here is not to forget what comes

before in the story. First, Jesus comes into the midst of the disciples' lives. Then, Jesus called them into community. And now, now, Jesus calls them to sacrifice what they know to do the work that needs to be done. First, there is trust and fellowship. And then there is taking up the cross.

And that, too, is part of the story of vocation. The call we receive may very well ask us to give up our own notions of what counts as success. We may very well have to sacrifice in order to do what needs to be done. We may have to leave it all behind. We cannot sugarcoat this thing called discipleship. It demands all of us, but it does so having given us all we have. That is what we call love.

Here, then, is our Lutheran understanding of vocation. In a world where vocation has become part of common parlance, and where Christian theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner's lovely formula—"your vocation is that place where your deepest gladness intersects with the world's deepest need"—has been misappropriated to suggest that vocations are upwardly mobile journeys to always more meaning and success in the world. We now come with this perhaps never more relevant and urgent message from our faith tradition.

Your vocation—your calling—may very well be found in the messy, mundane details of daily life, where we believe God is present and active, even when we don't believe we'll catch another fish.

Your calling has a history, which unfolds like a story with twists and turns, where there is no one single destination but many stops on a life-long journey. A fisher one day, a healer the next. A carpenter and then a teacher. A student and then a nurse.

Your vocation is not a solitary undertaking but is inextricably bound up with those whose own callings complement and inspire yours. God does not leave us comfortless or without the help we need to do God's work in the world.

And yes, there may come a time when the call you receive demands of you sacrifices the like of which you cannot imagine. And in that moment, you will know a love that surpasses all human understanding, the love of our God who loves the world so much, so very, very much. Will you follow? Amen.

TO KNOW BECAUSE WE ARE KNOWN

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

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 21st century.

So let me begin with a dinner table conversation at our home earlier this week. Thomas, our sixth 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 Meza Rodriguez in an undergraduate research project that 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.

LOVING THE OTHER

1 John 4: 18-21

Today I turn to the expansively ecumenical nature of the Lutheran faith, which challenges and inspires us to *engage with otherness*, to seek to know the stranger in our midst, to not fear difference. There is considerable evidence of this ecumenical spirit in the many alliances and full communion relationships our church body enjoys—we can be proud of those efforts even as we seek to understand more fully what difference this call to engage the other means for the identity and work of our college.

To more fully appreciate this gift of our tradition, it is perhaps helpful to consider just how counter-cultural this call to engage the stranger is for good people like us, who live in the world.

Let's begin with the situation of the early Christian community—the folks that the writer of John's letter is addressing. If you read the entire letter (it's only five chapters long), you recognize that the community is struggling with the very real fear of diversity and otherness in their lives. Remember, these early Christian communities believed that the apocalypse was just around the corner. Now, here they were, decades after Jesus's death and resurrection, living in the world and trying to figure out how to remain faithful when faced with those who do not share their faith, how to overcome their fear of difference and otherness.

The epistle writer's response is to remind them of the commandment they have received from the beginning, the commandment to love one another—no matter what! In the third chapter, we read, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Love, the author argues, casts out fear. Loving the other in truth and action is what we are called to be and do as God's faithful people in the world. Now that is truly counter-cultural.

But this, of course, is not a situation faced only by our ancestors. We might argue that our fear of the other is the central tension in our 21st century lives—whether the other is defined by political position, ethnic identity, socio-economic status, race, religion, or sexual orientation. We're afraid and our fear polarizes us, leads us into what Robert Bellah calls "lifestyle enclaves," separates us from each other, keeps the stranger as stranger instead of neighbor.

This fear of the other actually gets canonized, if you will, in one of the enduring myths of the American experience, neatly summarized in Robert Frost's ubiquitous poem, "The Road Not Taken," in which he writes,

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

For many of us, these words—uttered at commencements and noted in personal journals—stand for the choices we make in our lives, the choices that supposedly make all the difference to the sorts of people we are, the work we pursue, the lives we make. I took the road less traveled by—and that has made all the difference.

Or has it? Is it the case that the discrete choices we make in our lives truly separate us from the alternative decisions we might have made? Did my decision to take a job as a college fundraiser when I left graduate school separate me from the life of ministry or the life of a college faculty member that were the alternatives I might have chosen? Or do I still face the call of those alternative pursuits even as I go about my chosen vocation? I chose not to live my father's life as a Lutheran minister—I took the less traveled by path—but his ministry still informs my life, instills me with faith and fervor. I chose not to be a religion professor—I took the other road—but the life of scholarship and teaching still fills me with joy and meaning, while challenging me to be more reflective about my chosen work.

The myth of the choices we make—the notion that we can separate ourselves from the choices we did not make, the belief that we need not face the other—truly impoverishes our personal and common lives. The richness and adventures of the many divergent paths never taken are the stuff of which authentic and honest lives are made. We must never leave behind the lessons and insights of roads not taken, because they keep us honest, they challenge the status quo, they guide us to new ways of seeing and practicing our duties in the world. In other words, loving the other helps us learn.

Wendell Berry reminds us, "Having chosen one way, we are never free of the opposite way....Such choices are not clean-cut and final, as when we choose one of two forks in the road, but they involve us in tension, in tendency. We must keep on choosing." ("The Obligation of Care," *Sierra*, September/October 1995).

How remarkable it is to imagine the lessons we will learn from the choices we have yet to make. How liberating to know that the choices we have made are never final. How daunting to consider the adventures that lie ahead of us as we learn to love the other.

The Lutheran theological basis for loving the other is neatly summarized by Martin Luther in *The Small Catechism*, in his explanation of the eighth commandment. The commandment, as you remember, says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” to which Luther adds, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” In other words, we are to love the other, no matter what!

And that leads us back here to Augsburg College, whose identity is shaped by this theological gift of the Lutheran tradition—the call to love the other—even as we live in a world of scarcity and fear and anxiety, a world of choices that too often lead us to turn our back on the stranger, the path not taken, the experience of the other.

At the heart of our academic mission is the call to love the other—no matter what—and the central obstacle to living faithfully in the world is our fear of otherness, difference, the unknown, the stranger...

To overcome this fear, we must...

Accept that all of creation comes from our gracious and loving God. This is a theological claim about God’s intentions for God’s people. Engaging and loving the other is at the core of accepting the diversity and richness of God’s creation. The commandments—all of the commandments that we have known from the beginning—then become the moral contours of a good and healthy community. When we fear, commandments are all about punishment; when we love, the commandments help create and sustain a beloved community.

See these diverse brothers and sisters. We must name them and their gifts, their calls and their accountability in our midst. When we first moved to Minneapolis, I was out and about with the kids and a man approached us in a mall parking lot, pointed to Thomas and said, “Vietnamese boy.” Which is who he is—not simply another generic “Asian” kid—Vietnamese boy. God names us all in creation and as we call each other by name, we take the critical first step to accepting that otherness and learning to love them as God loves all of us. On a more social level, I have always been struck by the work of Jane Addams and her colleagues in Chicago, who when they moved into the neighborhood to offer their services, first researched and wrote *Maps and Papers*—seeing, naming, and knowing her diverse neighbors before being of service.

And finally, love these diverse brothers and sisters. Love the difference, love the stranger. This is not about evangelizing—winning them over to our side—or about minimalizing our differences so that we can all get along—those are both extensions of our fear. Instead it is about embracing the messiness of who we are and who our neighbors are, enriching our own learning and lives, finding ways to be even more faithful, seeking a new way ahead in love, celebrating our differences and similarities, learning not simply to tolerate but to love each other. This is why I am so proud of the work of our Augsburg Interfaith Scholars and their efforts to engage all of us in our richly diverse religious experiences. They are inviting us to love the other, and we accept that invitation because we are a Lutheran college, not in spite of that heritage.

Here then is another of the gifts of our Lutheran faith heritage—the call to love the other. “And the commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

LOVING REFORM

John 2: 1-11

Today I point to the concept of *semper reformanda*, the underlying contention of our Lutheran heritage that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

Our exploration of *semper reformanda* seems especially fitting on this day when our Board of Regents have gathered for their winter meetings and when they have invited into a historic conversation almost 60 of us—faculty, staff, and students—a conversation about the future of Augsburg College.

There is genuine enthusiasm and anxiety about these conversations, in part because at the heart of planning for the future we must face the difficult, complex, and challenging questions that portend change—change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change—within our academic community and in the wider society—we here at Augsburg have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world—a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work as a college.

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My title for this homily, "Loving Reform," might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy president and perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that—we must love change for change's sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change—inevitable as it may be—is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg College is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city.

These core values are the "loving" we bring to any exploration of reform.

Martin Luther wrote in perhaps his most well-known treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520, M. Tranvik, trans.) these famous lines:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything...

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all

Here is the creative tension at the heart of Luther's vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ's death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to be of service, to follow our calls to be God's co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God's people and do God's work. Luther's vision of reform was pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God's faithful people. And the passage from John's gospel, assigned for the second Sunday in Epiphany, may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar—sometimes referred to as Jesus's first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus's mother says to him, "They have no wine," to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come." Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future—Jesus can't be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to, "Do whatever he tells you."

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn't allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more

important things on his mind. She reminds us that we, too, are called—as she was—to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, “Do whatever he tells you.”

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. “Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief steward,” he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle—the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity—but the fact is that they participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God’s abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural—no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God’s way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God’s loving intentions for all of creation. “Do whatever he tells you,” Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Our friend and colleague, Christensen Professor Marty Stortz, recently reminded me of a 2010 *New York Times* opinion piece by columnist David Brooks entitled, “The Summoned Self.” In the column, Brooks outlines two ways of thinking about our lives. Coincidentally the first way he suggests is based on a commencement speech by Clayton Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, whose book, *The Innovative University*, is the beginning point for our planning conversations this afternoon. Brooks labels Christensen’s way of thinking about life as “The Well-Planned Life.” In the well-planned life, you spend time when young finding a clear purpose for your life and then you dedicate and discipline yourself to live with that purpose clearly in mind—granted, with a

few tweaks and refinements along the way, but ultimately leading to a well-rounded fruition.

Brooks then describes a second way of thinking about life, which he calls “The Summoned Life.” In the summoned life, you do not live as an unfolding project to be completed, but rather as an unknowable landscape to be explored. In this mode of living, you focus on the important commitments that precede choices you make—commitments to faith, family, nation or some other cause—and you tend to be skeptical about applying so-called business concepts, with their focus on utility, to other realms of life.

The well-planned life emphasizes individual agency and is widely admired in our American context as we lift up the entrepreneur, the pioneer, the lone free agent who blazes new trails and creates new worlds. The summoned life focuses on context and circumstances, observes the world carefully and asks questions about how we can be most useful in this time and place.

We might recognize the summoned life as a fairly close description of what we describe as “the called life,” and I would contend that at our best as a college, we keep this vocational focus firmly in mind as a way of understanding our roles in the world. It is counter-cultural and deeply rooted in our faith tradition. I couldn’t be more proud of our commitments to the summoned life.

At the same time—as Brooks concludes in his column—if we choose only one of these two options for looking at life, we may miss important guidance for what he names as a third option, “The Well-Considered Life.” Looking only at context and circumstance without a longer horizon of naming our life’s purpose can lead to passivity. On the other hand, focusing only on achieving long-term goals by planning out well in advance the steps we will follow, may well lead to rigidity and disappointment.

I would argue that our Lutheran heritage actually leads us to embrace the well-considered life. We believe that we are called to serve our neighbor. We are freed for service in the context of our daily lives in the world. At the same time, we also believe that God has a plan for all of creation and that the best is yet to come. There is a clear purpose for our lives in the world.

Loving reform—*semper reformanda*—is the challenge to live at the intersections of God’s call and God’s plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts—gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith—to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.

TO HEAL THE WORLD: ON THE CALL TO BE NEIGHBOR

Philippians 2: 1-11

This morning, we turn to the call to be neighbor, the belief that we have been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we might accompany each other as neighbors in our journeys in this world. Here we affirm the belief that we have been freed, not so that we might do whatever we wish, but so that we might live for and with each other as neighbor. Here, surely, is a commitment at the heart of our life as a college of the church in this remarkable neighborhood and world.

And it could not be more meaningful to me to offer this word on our work as a college at the beginning of this Holy Week, these sacred days when we journey with our Lord through the final days of his life, through his death on the cross, to the tomb now empty, and then further on the road to Emmaus, where the Risen One is known in the breaking of bread.

Our text for this morning, assigned for yesterday (what we now call Passion Sunday) is to my mind one of the most powerful and poetic passages in all of scripture as it describes theologically what we might consider the ultimate act of human agency: the choice Jesus—though in the form of God—makes to empty himself, to not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, to humble himself unto death, even death upon the cross. And all of this so that every tongue shall confess Jesus as the Christ, the one sent from God to redeem the world. And this, as we read in the verses just before the theological formula, so that we—God’s faithful—might be of the same mind, having the same love, looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. In other words, redeemed and called to be neighbor.

It is in the extravagant grace of the cross that we are called to lives of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called in his 1962 speech “On Being a Good Neighbor,” dangerous and excessive altruism, lives of love and peace in the face of hatred and violence, lives of abundance and promise in the face of scarcity and betrayal, lives of faith and courage in the face of anxiety and fear. Lives that turn the world on its head. Lives as neighbors to each other in a world of strangers.

Evidence of what this means for us here at Augsburg is found everyday here on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world. Being a neighbor—neighbor-love—takes many forms. In our Lutheran Christian tradition, these various ways of being neighbor are detailed in Martin Luther’s many writings and sermons, and summarized elegantly by Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a Lutheran theologian who teaches at Seattle University. Professor Moe-Lobeda suggests that for Luther, there are basically three forms of neighbor-love:

- The first is service to the neighbor, acts of kindness and charity and generosity, even if it requires sacrifice for me;
- The second is disclosing and denouncing oppression and exploitation of the neighbor who is vulnerable and needs to be empowered, the work of enabling our neighbor to live a full and rich life; and,
- The third is living in ways that counter the cultural norms that exploit the vulnerable and defy God’s intentions for the world, the work of justice and peace-making (Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church*, p. 24).

I might paraphrase further by suggesting that the call to be neighbor for Luther means “becoming the hands and feet of Christ” as we serve, empower and struggle for peace and justice for all of God’s creation. In this way, we are called to live faithfully with each other as neighbors, to heal the fractured world, to be the body of Christ here and now.

Now I have to say that I find all of this inspiring—surely Jesus (and the various other heroes and heroines of the faith) is a paragon of faithfulness and courage and love—and at the same time deeply troubling—how can I hope to live out my baptismal faith, my call to do God’s work in the world, when confronted with the messiness of the world and the many difficulties and obstacles in my path?

I don’t mean to be depressing, but there are real questions here for even the most faithful among us. And we must pay special attention to those questions, because they are the questions that you, our students, are asking, as you look out on a broken world. And I would suggest that they are questions all of us—God’s faithful people in the world—need to ask as we consider what we have been called to be and do. How do we love our neighbor, how do we love the world, how do we live as the body of Christ, even when...?

But then I return to our lives together on this campus and in this neighborhood and my faith is renewed as I witness—as we all do—the remarkable ways in which our students love our neighbors—it’s the main reason I come to work in the morning.

A couple of my favorite student stories—I apologize if you’ve heard them before—show how serving, empowering and struggling for justice for our neighbors is at the heart of our work as a college.

First, there is Mary (not her real name), a young student at first questioning her faith and purpose in the world, until she becomes active in our Campus Kitchens program, and begins to deliver and eat meals with our

neighbors who are Somali immigrants—serving those in need. And then she is tutoring the Somali children, invited to meals in the nearby Riverside Plaza apartments with Somali families, even learning a bit of the Somali language—surely this is what it means to empower and to be empowered as she entered into a deep relationship with neighbors who do not share the same experiences or faith. And then after graduation she was off for a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and then to further schooling so she can work to ensure justice for immigrants in the Twin Cities and beyond. Called to be neighbor.

And then there is Steven, a student out in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood with a group of us doing a service project, and I see him watching a Somali woman in traditional Muslim garb, toting a suitcase, attempting (and failing) to get a cab to stop and pick her up. Now, as I reflect on this scene, I can imagine a variety of responses from Steven. He simply could have kept on with his valuable service work and left the woman to fend for herself. He could have stood and watched as the neutral observer, gathering data for his research, waiting to see if a cab would stop or if someone else would help the woman. Or he could do what he did, which was to cross the street, to engage the woman in conversation, to offer his help, to make sure she was safe on the sidewalk,

to step into the street and hail the cab himself, and then to ensure that the woman was safely in the taxi with instructions to the driver to take her to the airport.

He acted with neighbor-love—love that builds up—and through his act of love, he connected with another of God's people and learned important lessons about the experiences of his neighbors, about his own life of power and privilege, about what God intends for God's people. Through his act of love, he gained knowledge that is the foundation for serving the neighbor and the neighborhood, the foundation for striving for justice and compassion, the foundation for seeking to change policies and behaviors, the foundation for faithful discipleship. Called to be neighbor.

As we embark upon our Holy Week journeys over the next few days, may we know the remarkable faithfulness and courage of our Lord and Savior, the Word become flesh, who was sent by God to redeem the world God loves so much. May we be of the same mind during these sacred days as we hear once again the call to be neighbor and to heal the world; the call to serve, empower and seek justice for all of God's creation; and the call to be a community of the faithful who are the hands and feet of Christ, the only body of Christ in the world here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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