

BIG FOR THE WORLD

Psalm 72

[Augsburg College Chapel, 5 September 2013]

This morning, we continue our exploration of the Psalms and their power to both name the mysteries of human experience and to offer us a glimpse of what God calls us to be and do. In his inimitable way, Pastor Justin told us yesterday that the Psalms can be both an “app” and a prayer.

And in Psalm 72, we find a clear statement of one of the most vexing tensions in our lives – that is, the tension between power and status, on the one hand, and responsibility and moral obligation, on the other.

I wonder if you’re feeling this tension right now as we begin our 145th academic year at Augsburg? It is a big deal to come to college – we are a privileged lot in the world to have the opportunities to be at a college like this and to feast from the banquet table of educational experiences before us. It can be pretty heady stuff – for 18 year olds certainly, but also for folks like me who have never left college and who return year after year at least partly for the thrill of discovery, the allure of the educated life, the status and benefits that come from a higher education. Society tells us we deserve this – we’re entitled. We’ve made our marks, scored well on entrance exams, paid the tuition. But is that all?

Before I came to Augsburg I was president of Rockford College in Illinois. When I first visited the campus for interviews, I was given the college’s admissions materials, and I was dismayed to see the tag line, which read “It’s all about you!” I remembering railing publicly against this notion – in retrospect I’m lucky they hired me – but I was appalled. No, no, no, I said, it’s not all about you, it’s about the world, those your education will serve, those who came before you and made this education possible.

Twelve years later I’ve softened my moral outrage, because I’ve come to understand that college is about you, our students – about your journeys, about how you will grow and be transformed by your education here, about what you will accomplish in your life and work because you came to college and had a remarkable experience with fellow students and faculty members and neighbors. The thing is, though, it’s not all about you. And that is the point the Psalmist and I want to make this morning.

Listen again to the Psalmist: **1** Give the gift of wise rule to the king, O God, the gift of just rule to the crown prince. **2** May he judge your people rightly, be honorable to your meek and lowly. **3** Let the mountains give exuberant witness; shape the hills with the contours of right living. **4** Please stand up for the poor, help the children of the needy, come down hard on the cruel tyrants. **5** Outlast the sun, outlive the moon - age after age after age.

These are words that remind us that leadership and privilege demand of us the obligation to serve the poor and needy. The Psalmist doesn't say do away with leaders; instead, she says give them the gift of wise and just rule, the witness of right living, the heart to stand up for the poor and vulnerable. You are those leaders in the world today – our mission says we educate you to be responsible leaders and we wish for you the same wisdom and justice and intellect and moral courage that the Psalmist wished for the kings of her day.

But the truth is, it's not always easy for those of us who have the privilege to be educated and lead to understand and live out what more is expected of us. The world tends to reward personal achievement – a great job, high earnings, material goods – more than loving your neighbor and feeding the hungry and working for justice.

But here at Augsburg, we join with the Psalmist in both applauding your accomplishments – you are remarkable students whose intellect and passions offer you opportunities for success beyond imagination – and at the same time, reminding and equipping you to understand and fulfill your obligations to the world – we believe we are called to love and serve our neighbor, and to work for justice in the world.

In fact, we've articulated this commitment to educating "responsible leaders" in our college mission statement and in a new college plan. During the past six months, the Augsburg Board of Regents has joined with many faculty, staff and students to work on a plan for the college leading up to our 150th anniversary in 2019. At the heart of this plan is a delightful phrase in our vision statement that says "Augsburg is small to our students and big for the world."

There it is. We are small to our students – in that way, it is about you and making your education here the center of our lives together – but also big for the world – reminding us that this education has utility and purpose and meaning that transcends our personal, self interests and serves the public and common good, the needs of the world.

We are not naïve about this claim to hold the small and big in creative tension. It is counter-cultural and flies in the face of much of what higher education claims as a priority. How many times do you hear some politician say college is just about getting a job? Well, yes, I want you to get a job, a good job, but I also want you to change the world, to love your neighbor and neighborhood, to fight like hell for justice and fairness for all God's people. The good news is that in this college, we are not alone in this work for we are part of an academic and faith community that believes we are called to serve our neighbor; that proclaims that we are both small to our students and big for the world; and that joins with the Psalmist in shouting "Yes and Yes and Yes" even when the world says no.

For many of us, the work of educating wise and responsible leaders is grounded right here in this sacred space and in these daily chapel services. Now you may look around

and wonder, if that is true, why there are not more of us here – but, I would contend, this is not about counting heads. I can't tell you how much I miss these daily gatherings here in the Hoversten Chapel when you are away for the summer. And I feel the same way, when like yesterday, my schedule takes me off campus and I am unable to be here with you for our worship and prayers together. I did have a chance to read Pastor Justin's good words – and I understand you even did some yelling, along with your praying and singing. Good for you in your restless days and nights – and good as well for me and for the world.

And that is what I find so compelling about these daily chapel services. You are here for yourselves as you come to work out your relationship to God – to worship and pray and hear the gospel. But you likely will not be here every day – life happens – and there are many others on campus and in the neighborhood and around the world who also are not here with us, and yet we know that each day there are prayers prayed and songs sung and words preached on your behalf and on the behalf of all God's creatures and creation. In other words, in these daily chapel gatherings, in this intimate, local space and context, the needs of each of us and of the entire world are lifted up, made known, laid at the altar of our loving and gracious God. What a blessing, indeed.

The power of our faith and academic community then extends throughout our entire campus and anywhere you find Auggies at work – in our neighborhood, around our state and country, around the globe. And in the work of our community, we are guided by the faith and values of our Lutheran Christian tradition and the voice of our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, who wrote in his *Freedom of the Christian* these challenging words: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Get it? If not, we have classes to help. Think of it this way. We are free – that is the central theological claim for Luther – we have been freed by God without having to do anything to earn our freedom – but it is not freedom to do whatever we want, it is freedom for our neighbor, freedom to join in God's good and loving work in the world. We call this life of freedom your vocation or calling, but that is a topic for another sermon!

And because we are free – free to ask our questions, to seek better understanding of ourselves and our world, to find better and better ways to love and serve the world, we also have the great joy of listening to many, many voices that help us claim the mantle of wise and responsible leadership. As important as our scriptural and theological traditions are for our work, each of us must find those voices that help us proclaim how we will live out the Psalmist's charge. Earlier this summer, two particularly prominent public voices – voices that have shaped my understanding of what it means to be a wise and responsible leader – were silenced by the deaths of sociologist Robert Bellah and poet Seamus Heaney. In tribute, I will close with their words...

Robert Bellah (and several colleagues) wrote a powerful book in 1985 entitled *Habits of the Heart*, in which they argued that the genius of democracy is the ability to hold in

creative tension individual rights and needs with those of the wider society. What they found was that individualism had taken over our lives and that we lacked ways of thinking and talking about what holds us together, about the commons and the common good. In other words, the creative dynamic was out of balance and democracy was not working well. One potential remedy they offered was for Americans to recover what they called “second languages” of our history – languages of civic virtue and religious meaning, words like citizenship and stewardship and even vocation, words that could draw us back into meaningful ways of describing how our personal interests intersect with the needs and aspirations of our fellow citizens and society. Here at Augsburg, we seek to teach you these second languages so that you can teach them to others and live them in the midst of your life and work in the world.

And then comes Seamus Heaney with his compelling words:

From "The Cure at Troy"

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing

double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

And to that, all I can say is Yes and Yes and Yes. Thanks be to God. Amen.