

## GENEROSITY

### And the Word became flesh...

John 1: 1-14

[Augsburg College Chapel, October 27, 2014]

- Eight years ago this month, we celebrated my inauguration as Augsburg's 10th president (only 10 in 146 years!) with a week-long celebration that focused on four key values that I saw as core to Augsburg's identity and daily life as a teaching and learning community. The four values were abundance, generosity, engagement and service - the first letters of which created the acronym, AGES. We spoke of the Ages of Imagination that would propel Augsburg into the future. The hymn we sang this morning was written for my inauguration with music by alum David Cherwien, the music director at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and conductor of the National Lutheran Choir, and words by alum Gracia Grindal, who recently retired from the Luther Seminary faculty. You might note that the beginning letters of each of the four verses spell "AGES" - you couldn't get away from it that week!
- I have returned to those four values of abundance, generosity, engagement and service time and again during my tenure here, because I genuinely believe that they not only reflect our legacy as a college, but even more powerfully, our future vitality and success. Today, I turn to one of those values - generosity - by dwelling in the gospel word as found in John, with its stirring philosophical and theological claims – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through Him...”
- The final verse from our Gospel reading this morning is the original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary and College: “And the Word became flesh” (originally in Norwegian, of course!) – and so it does, here, in our midst, God with us. Can you imagine any more generous act? Augsburg College practices generosity most authentically when it lives as the Word made flesh – present, rooted, of service, faithful.
- My teacher, Martin Marty, taught me that colleges are indigenous communities – that is, they are native to a particular place, a particular environment, a particular set of values and practices that define the institution – and that means something for the way they live their lives, it means something for the ways in which we understand the generosity of place and values and presence...
- What does it mean to think about Augsburg College as an indigenous community? What does it mean that the Word has become flesh and lives among us here?

- That is a question much on my mind these days as we continue to explore the relevance of our historical commitments as a college, especially as it has to do with our "place" here in Cedar-Riverside, the neighborhood we have called home for almost 145 years.
- It is a question that, it seems to me, we need to ask each and every day of our lives here at this special college. What does it mean to be generous in this place, to be the Word made flesh in this neighborhood, this community, this place?
- The poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, writes these wise words in his prose poem, "Damage" –
  - o "No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use."
- I sometimes think about this quote when talking with all the experts who are happy to offer their advice (for free and for a fee!) about running a college. Our responsibility is to have knowledge of our whereabouts, otherwise all the experts in the world will be of little use. If we don't know our place, our mission, our history, how can we expect to enlist others in pursuit of our aspirations? If we don't know and care about our whereabouts, how can we be generous?
- My point is, of course, that we must know our whereabouts, our history, our values, our place in the community and in the culture, before we can seek solutions to the issues we face as individuals and as a community - before we can be generous with each other, with God's creation, with the world...
- And it is the generosity of our whereabouts that we celebrate today. It is our nature and identity and character that we lift up. Our links to this particular place and culture and set of values and practices that make us Augsburg – as we have been known since 1869.
- So today I lift up for our attention three simple aspects of our whereabouts – three ways in which the Word becomes flesh here, in which generosity is practiced here - that I hope we might continue to explore in the days and months and years ahead:
  - o Perhaps the central focus of our whereabouts is that wherever Augsburg College is found – here in this neighborhood, in the city, in Rochester, or around the world – our most authentic work is learning and teaching. And the wonder of learning is that it involves acts of generosity in its every detail – from teachers who teach what they love, to students who seek to learn out of curiosity and passion, to texts that bear the wisdom of the ages for our reflection, to conversations that help us pay attention to the Word, to each other, and to the world. One of the joys of my life at Augsburg is teaching the senior honors seminar each spring. In the classroom I witness the generosity of what educator Parker Palmer has called "the grace of great

- things," the gathering of a community around important issues and problems - great things! I think about last spring's course on homelessness and affluence - on income inequality - and how students wrestled with issues of justice and compassion and the social realities of inequity and people living with both too little and too much. Around those difficult issues, we found the grace of great things, the generosity of learning from each other.
- o A second aspect of our whereabouts is the way in which this city, a particular place – much different now than in 1869 – is still a place that demands our attention and respect and concern. Democracy still is practiced in this place with our neighbors. Education still happens in this place with learners and teachers all around us. Engagement and service still are at the center of our lives with each other in this place. Sustaining this urban place, this urban environment, is an act of generosity – for our diverse neighbors, for our diverse selves, for the whole of creation, now and into the future. Our presence here cannot be passive or defensive. It must embrace the challenge of an indigenous place, loving and caring for the land, the river, the environment, the people – God's creation in this place. Our good colleague, Jay Walljasper, a senior fellow in the Sabo Center, quotes Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who says "The citizen takes his/her city for granted too often. He and she forgets to marvel." We are generous in our place when we don't forget to marvel at all that God is doing here in our midst and all that we are called to do in return!
  - o The final aspect of our whereabouts I want to lift up is our firm grounding in the Lutheran Christian faith – a confident faith that frees us to learn, to live, to practice hospitality with all of our neighbors, to be a force for good in the world, to affirm our calling as people of faith and a college of the church to be God's people in this place and to know that grace and truth abound where the Word becomes flesh. This indigenous place we call Augsburg College is a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a faith community called to live in the world as people of God, to proclaim God's love, to seek the truth, to pray for God's good creation, to know that our call is not to be God but to do God's work. The Word is flesh here – day in, day out – is there any greater generosity than that?
- I'll end with another brief quote from Wendell Berry, who, a couple of years after writing "Damage" wrote "Healing" to point the way:
    - o "The teachings of unsuspecting teachers belong to the task and are its hope. The love and work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health. Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace. Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night. Order is the only possibility of rest."

- "The Word became flesh" is both a theological and a practical claim. Here at Augsburg, we ask how we can be even more generous in our whereabouts and place as the body of Christ here and now, as the Word made flesh in this place, as Augsburg College here in Cedar-Riverside (and wherever else we might settle). We accompany and settle alongside our neighbors - even when we come from very different cultures and religions and experiences - and together we are creating and sustaining a safer, healthier, more vibrant place where generosity abounds. This morning, let us recall the concluding words of John 1:14 that remind us that the Word made flesh is "full of grace and truth." Oh, how the world needs a Word of grace and truth. And here it is! Thanks be to God. Amen.