

Love and be/loved

Psalm 84

[Augsburg College Chapel, 5 September 2014]

What a joy to gather together with all of you again for the gift of this Sabbath time – a gift we treasure each and every day of our academic year here at Augsburg – a gift that we miss very much in summer when students are away. May the year to come be enriched and enlivened by this time together.

Our good colleagues, Pastor Sonja and Pastor Justin, have set as a theme in this first week of the new academic year the three pillars of our campus ministry program: radical hospitality, Sabbath time and community. I want to offer a word this morning on how being in community is at the heart of our identity and mission as a college – and how our being in community offers an important counter-word to a culture obsessed with individual achievements and needs and rights. A counter-word that we ask each of you to speak in your lives on and off campus.

And our vision for community begins fittingly so in the words of the Psalmist – “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! Happy are those who live in your house. Happy are those whose strength is in you. Happy is everyone who trusts in you.”

Words of thanksgiving and gratitude – gratitude for the gifts we have from our gracious God, for the gift of invitation to come into God’s house with praise and thanksgiving, for the gift of faith that calls us out of ourselves and into community, for the gift of hope in what the Spirit is doing in our midst and how we must respond, for the gift of love that passes all human understanding and frees us to be of service to our neighbors.

Here in this sacred space we come each day to worship our God who creates and sustains and calls us into community. Since we were last together in this holy place, our world lost an insightful and inspiring voice in the poet Maya Angelou, whose poems so powerfully addressed our deepest longings. Ms. Angelou reminds us of how our God calls us into a community grounded and centered in God’s plan for us, when she writes: “While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God’s creation.” As Pastor Joann Lee, who serves across the river at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in Saint Paul, has recently commented on Angelou’s words: “The first truth secures our own selves in who we are, reminding us that we are the Lord’s. The second challenges us to include others in that promise.”

But there is the rub – including others in the promise is not easy when all around us the world rewards personal aspiration and achievement, when the concept of doing

things together is often thwarted by suspicion and competition, when we lack – as the late sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues told us 20 years ago in their book, *Habits of the Heart* – even the words to describe how doing things with and for each other is important.

And here we stand, centered in our loving Creator and Redeemer, believing that we are called precisely here to this community of promise, this community of faith and hope and love, this community of reconciliation, this community of learning. And we have the gifts of resources in our Lutheran and Christian faith traditions to give voice to this vision of community.

Our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther says it well in his *The Freedom of the Christian*: “...the good we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all. Everyone should “put on” the neighbor and act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor’s place. The good that flowed from Christ flows into us...The good we receive from Christ flows from us toward those who have need of it.” Our community, centered in our gracious God, is above all characterized by the love we share with each other, because of the love that has been shared with us. In our community, we love each other.

450 years after Martin Luther penned these groundbreaking words, his namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr., challenged and inspired us to embrace the wonder of agape, “overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative...the love of God operating in the human heart.” For Dr. King, this love was at the heart of the Beloved Community, a community in which there is no discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, no distinction between friend and enemy, only love seeking to preserve and create community. In our community, therefore, we not only love, but are loved, are beloved, no matter who we are or where we come from or what we have done.

Love and be/loved – this is the call we have in our community of faith and learning. here at Augsburg A call that takes concrete form in powerful forms day in and day out on this campus.

- A call to embrace our differences – differences of experience and culture and ability – to bring those differences to the altar and into community, where we celebrate the richness of our diversity and a vision of what our colleague Harry Boyte has called our “democratic excellences” – a diversity that may well mean we will disagree (because humans will disagree!), but that works diligently to avoid division. In other words, in this community, grounded in love, we may disagree – that is the reality of our diversity of experience and perspective – but we will talk together and navigate those differences for the sake of our work together. We will not divide.
- A call to justice – for all God’s creation – for in our radical hospitality as a community, we recognize that not all is well and right in the world and that

we have an obligation as those who love and are loved – all around us, on and off campus, we will witness the need for justice. As a community, we go beyond seeing injustice to working together to overcome it. We will not let injustice prevail.

- A call to abundance – the gift of community carries with it the obligation to bring our imagination, resolve and courage to bear in living out our love for each other in ways that break down cultural norms and bureaucratic silos – that model how we do more and better together than on our own. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and in that promise, love must also challenge those things that keep us from using all of our God-given talents to live up to God’s intentions for God’s people. We are a community of abundant gifts and passions and we will not give in to the world’s claims of scarcity.

It often happens that the gifts of our tradition are complemented by wise voices of other traditions – both sacred and secular. It is most certainly so in our aspirations for community.

- For example, management consultant Peter Block tells us that the possibility of community must focus on how we structure what it means to “belong” to the community. It is not enough to claim the gift of the community, we must work every day to ensure that all are welcome and engaged and given voice. This is not easy work, but never forget – in our community, all are welcome!
- Another wise word comes from Northwestern University professor John McKnight, who reminds us that community is formed by first focusing on the gifts people offer rather than on their deficiencies. What are the gifts you bring to our community and how will we put them to work to make our community stronger and more faithful? We need your gifts to sustain our Beloved Community.
- And finally, Architect Christopher Alexander challenges us to create communities that embrace aliveness and wholeness. Too often, the obstacles and difficulties we face in our communities become sources of despair and status quo thinking. Instead, Alexander argues, how do we find hope even in the midst of messiness and conflict? How do we keep things alive? Here in our community, we choose life and wholeness.

And so, in these early days of the new academic year, we come together again in this remarkable community we call Augsburg College. And wherever we find inspiration for our lives together in community, it is grounded here in the tradition of faith and learning centered in this sacred space. We have been given the promise of life abundant and now we are called to share the promise with others. We love and are loved; we are a beloved community. Happy indeed are those who trust in the Lord. May it be so in the grace and love of our awesome God. Amen.