

CONVICTED

Romans 4: 16-22

Hebrews 11: 1-3

[Augsburg College Chapel, 31 August 2016]

[A few words about the return to daily chapel – a ritual meant to ground our lives together in this community...]

I was driving back to campus with a couple of our fundraising staff members earlier this summer when – quite out of the blue – one of them asked me this provocative question: “Have you ever been convicted?” Well, what do you do with that??

Once I recovered my senses – realizing that he was not concerned about my possible felony record – I was led, as is always the case with good questions, into a wonderful opportunity to explore the dynamics of conviction and its multiple meanings for our lives in this community.

What does it mean to be convicted? There are two meanings, both of which are relevant to our lives together in this community. On the one hand, to be convicted is to be “called out” for our crimes, our sins, the ways in which we have failed and flailed in our personal and common lives. Thus convicted, we plead our guilt, ask for forgiveness, perhaps do our time.

And in response to being “called out” in this first way, we are given the opportunity – the gift, really – to be convicted in the second way, to be firmly convinced of the values and causes and relationships that matter most and demand our attention and advocacy and passionate service. Convicted twice over.

“Have you ever been convicted?” is the question I now ask of each of us as we begin this new academic year here at Augsburg.

What say you? What convicts us in this community? A few thoughts to launch our personal and common reflections.

Surely, we are convicted by the world, by the needs all around us for compassion, justice and solidarity. Canadian educator, journalist and public servant, Michael Ignatieff, has written of the claim to find an adequate language to describe our shared needs and how they press upon us, convicting us first of all the ways in which we do not share or work for justice, and at the same time, convicting us to get to work, to meet the needs of strangers, to fight for justice, to be democratically engaged. As Ignatieff writes, “We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else,

language adequate for the times we live in...” , language, he claims, that must illumine our lives now, not in some nostalgic past.

So, what about now? What convicts us now? I am more and more aware of how we are convicted right here on campus – too many of our fellow community members suffer from systemic bias and discrimination; too many go hungry or homeless or without the means to fully pursue their educational aspirations; too many live in fear and stress and anxiety because of all that presses upon them and their families. Similarly, we are convicted in our neighborhood for the stereotypes that fuel religious hatred and social disruption. And surely, we are convicted in our democracy by our lack of civility and common purpose, our inability to see beyond our personal interests to imagine a common good.

And so I am convicted also to take our stand as a community for equity and justice, for neighbor-love, for a democratic ethic that makes room for all citizens to pursue their dreams. Here is the work we must pursue together as those convicted and convicted again...

Likewise, we are convicted by our education in this college, by recognizing that we do not have all the information and knowledge and experience and wisdom and perspective, so that we are propelled to learn more, to dig deeper, to ask more questions, to seek new experiences and the wisdom they have to offer. University of Chicago philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, calls us to a liberal education, an education that frees our minds and hearts to pursue the “examined life,” committed to our membership in a global community, and called to a narrative imagination that equips us to chart a path forward together across our differences.

In this college, we are convicted everyday in the classroom, in laboratories, on stages, in residence halls, realizing the need to be humble and critical in our inquiry, asking what does this mean about human experience, about our lived environments, about our relationships with each other. We must admit our pride, our arrogance, our fears, our lack of imagination – as well as our shared needs and aspirations – as we are educated to take up the work we are called to do.

Convicted by our incomplete knowledge and wisdom, we are convicted again and again to keep asking our questions, broadening the circle of our fellow learners, seeing our learning in service of our neighbors.

But above all, we are convicted by our faith in the Gospel, by our gracious and loving God who, in our baptisms, names and claims and calls us, who knows the desires of our hearts and minds, and who has sent God’s only Son into human history to forgive and free us, to give the gift of faith in things unseen, to be the author of our lives together in the world God loves so much. Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, in an essay entitled “The Burden of the Gospels,” challenges us to return to the gospel claim that

convicts us to serve our neighbor when he writes, "If we take the Gospels seriously, we are left, in our dire predicament, facing an entirely humbling question: How must we live and work so as not to be estranged from God's presence...?", from the commandments, from the lessons of Jesus's teachings and parables? Will we follow Jesus? Convicted.

And therefore we are convicted everyday in this chapel – our firm commitment to confession and forgiveness and reconciliation. Convicted by the call we receive individually and in common to be God's people in the world, the world which God loves so much. Convicted by the Gospel that calls us to the firm belief that God is in charge and has work for us to do, work that is about love and hope and compassion and reconciliation. Convicted to cry and pray for peace in the world.

Have you been convicted? Like it or not, as members of this teaching and learning community, this democracy, this community of faith, you have been – and therein is the first and abiding step that propels us to true conviction – the conviction to serve, learn and grow as we discern God's plan for God's people – the work of the faithful. Convicted – and convicted again. Thanks be to God. Amen.