

Augsburg's Bold Promise

[September 8, 2020, Augsburg University Chapel]

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

I want to talk with you this morning about promises – bold promises, in the spirit of the theme for this fall's chapel services – bold promises that we make and keep with and for each other here at Augsburg – bold promises that are urgently needed in these pandemic times.

The first promise is kept right here in this gathering of the faithful – in person or virtually – and it is the promise of our awesome God, who calls us in our baptisms to be members of what the Apostle Paul calls the body of Christ. In that baptismal covenant or promise, we are named, claimed and called to be God's child.

One of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for the church is that we have not been able to gather as we normally would – I've logged 26 straight weeks of livestreamed worship in my living room – but I also am reminded every Sabbath that we are the body of Christ, wherever we may find ourselves. And though I miss the in-person community, and long for its return, I am more and more convinced that the body of Christ lives and breathes in the everyday acts of justice and compassion and service to neighbor – the work God calls us to in our baptisms.

The 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila captures this baptismal promise in these provocative lines:

*Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours*

The second promise is made possible because of the foundation that is set by God's promise to us in our baptisms. Augsburg University exists because generations of faithful folks have believed that God calls us to the work of education for service to neighbor. It is our mission as a university that promises our students what we call a "three-dimensional education." I share this promise with our students each summer during their orientation to Augsburg.

We promise you an education to make a living – yes, to gain the knowledge and skills and networks that will equip you to pursue a career or profession. We believe in the dignity of work – it is part of our distinctive heritage as a Lutheran institution – and we know that work of all sorts, the many gifts that Paul names in our scripture for today, help to create healthy economies, communities and organizations.

But it doesn't end there. Though work is important, it is not the whole story. We also promise you an education to make a life. What else matters beyond work? We believe that your calling or vocation goes beyond your work to include your many roles – as a child, a sibling, a parent, a member of a faith or moral community, a citizen – and much of what we do here at Augsburg seeks to help you discern how those various aspects of your life fit together. It is how you make a life.

The final dimension of our educational promise is the claim that we equip you to make or build community. This is the bold promise that the ways you make a living and make a life are never done in a vacuum and we believe that the wisdom and skills of building a community are essential to living out our vocations in the world. In my now 15 years at Augsburg, I have witnessed time and again how this commitment to building community is baked into our culture and programs – and we see the impact of our graduates who carry these community-building values and skills into the world.

And this, then, is the foundation for the third promise I want to name. Earlier this summer, Bishop Mark Hanson, who leads our Interfaith at Augsburg Institute, reminded me that the Apostle Paul's use of the body of Christ imagery – which is described later in the 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians – must be understood in the context of the claim he makes in our reading for this morning. It's a simple line in verse four, where Paul writes, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Ah, there it is – often overlooked. The promise – **the bold promise** – is that everything we do as we live out our baptismal promise; as we learn to make a living, make a life, and build a community; is intended to serve the common good, to serve our neighbors, to be God's compassion and justice in the world. We name that bold promise on the side of the old Science Hall, where we proclaim that Augsburg is "small to our students and big for the world."

What do these promises look like in action? I have had the honor this past summer to watch with great pride the work of Professor Katie Clark from our Nursing department to live out these various promises, and just last week I accompanied Professor Clark as she went about her efforts to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness and living in encampments. In addition to her work as a faculty member, Katie also heads the Augsburg Health Commons at Central Lutheran Church, a drop-in center for those experiencing homelessness that focuses on meeting basic needs for hygiene, safety and human relationships. I believe that Katie Clark personifies the bold promises we make with and for each other here at Augsburg, and I think we can learn important lessons for our promise-keeping through Katie's example. Here's what I've learned from Katie...here's her public narrative of promise-keeping.

“Katie Clark, child of God – called in her baptism to the work of healing the world.

Katie Clark, nurse and teacher – making a living (though she likely deserves to make more!) with work that has meaning and dignity and purpose.

Katie Clark, citizen nurse and teacher – making a life as mother, spouse, daughter, sibling, caregiver, healthcare provider, repairer of the breach in our city.

Katie Clark, human being – building community as a caregiver who focuses on the need for relationships and networks of support, and not simply on the transactions that too often define health care.

Katie Clark, public servant – generously sharing her gifts of the Spirit in mutual service to the common good.”

So, what’s your public narrative of promise-keeping? Let’s tell each other how we live out these promises in our lives, because the world so needs our promises made and kept.

Both Katie and I have been inspired by the work of poet, essayist and farmer Wendell Berry, who writes in his essay, “Health is Membership” these powerful words:

“I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness...”

And maybe that’s the boldest promise we know – a promise kept by our God who loves us so much – a promise we now make with and for each other – a promise to love those afflicted with a virus; to love those unhoused and unfed; to love those oppressed by systemic racism; to love those who hate us; to love as we are loved. To love so that the world may be redeemed. We promise. May it be so. Amen.