

Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation

[October 29, 2020, Augsburg University Chapel]

John 8:31-38

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

As we conclude our year-long celebration of Augsburg’s 150th anniversary, in the midst of these unprecedented times, I have been reflecting on some of the mottos and slogans Augsburg has used throughout its history. From our founding scriptural motto – “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1: 14) – to the familiar “Education for Service” to the more recent “We believe we are called to serve our neighbor” to the iconic phrase first used as part of Augsburg’s 100th anniversary, “Through truth to freedom,” each phrase points to abiding values that are at the heart of the education Augsburg offers to its students.

In this week during which we mark the 503rd anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (on October 31st), I am particularly struck by the claim made in that centennial motto – a claim grounded in our Lutheran Christian faith – and I wonder what it might mean to explore how “Through truth to freedom” shapes our teaching and learning community in the midst of these pandemic times.

At Augsburg, the possibility of this education for freedom is grounded in claims of truth. Above all, a theological claim of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ – stated so powerfully in that founding scriptural motto from the first chapter of John’s gospel – a truth that makes all things possible in our lives and work in the world. At the same time, the truth we find in our commitment to a liberal arts education – to the belief in scientific knowledge, in social analysis, in artistic expression, in cultural wisdom. And finally the truth we find in the lived experiences of our students and the communities from which they come – truths that reside in rituals and traditions and practices that invite us into worlds rich in knowledge and wonder.

“Through truth to freedom” strikes me as a compelling response to this moment when we find ourselves living at the intersection of three pandemics. The novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of how we live and work, and has pointedly illustrated the tension between public health and economic well-being. Following in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic pandemic threatens our social fabric with massive unemployment and business closures worldwide. And, most recently, the racial inequities exacerbated by the senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers has created a third pandemic

that threatens to tear our country apart. Surely this uncharted terrain presents unique challenges for all of us as citizens, trying to imagine how we will navigate to some as yet unknown future.

In a public presentation last winter, Professor Mary Lowe from Augsburg's religion department offered a provocative challenge when she asked us what it might truly mean to educate our students for freedom. What a counter-cultural notion! Educated for freedom from ignorance, from oppression, from division and hatred and violence. Educated for freedom to make the world fairer and more just and healthier, to be good neighbors, to take care of creation. Educated for freedom for the sake of the world, for the good of others, for the promise of wonder and creativity.

But is this path from truth to freedom as linear as the motto seems to claim? Here, lessons from our faith tradition offer an important corrective to the power of our truth claims. One such lesson comes from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden Eden. It reminds us that the sin of seeking perfect knowledge separates us from God, each other, and creation. Therefore, the search for truth uncovers separations and sins that demand reconciliation before there is freedom.

Similarly in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus invites his Jewish audience to find freedom in the truth he offers and to admit that they are slaves to sin – the sin that separates them from true freedom. As we seek the truth, we find the many ways in which our human nature continues to separate and divide us from the freedom that our ancestor Martin Luther powerfully declared – freedom for the neighbor, freedom to do God's reconciling work in the world, freedom that comes only when we confess our sins, our complicity, our failings, our need for forgiveness and reconciliation.

There are myriad examples in our own lives and times for how this path through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation – must be traveled. In his recent book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own*, Princeton professor Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. describes the lie that persists in the United States – the lie of white supremacy and its insidious implications – America's own original sin that must be confessed so that there might be reconciliation and finally, freedom, true freedom.

As Glaude writes, "In the end, we cannot hide from each other...We have to run toward the trouble that makes us afraid of life. We have to choose life...Salvation is found there: in accepting the beauty and ugliness of who we are in our most vulnerable moments in communion with each other. There, in love, a profound mutuality develops and becomes the basis for genuine democratic community where we all can flourish..." Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation.

In our own Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, our remarkably diverse Augsburg students and faculty engage every day with our immigrant neighbors – primarily Somali-Americans, devout Muslims – and we witness their struggles with Islamophobia, with racist

behavior, with poverty – all the result of lies we tell each other about Christian exceptionalism, about white supremacy, about capitalism. It is only when we face and confess the lies that we find common ground, reconciliation, the genuine opportunity to live as neighbors aspiring for freedom. This, I would argue, is the authentic work of democracy, an ethic of living “with” each other.

Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation – then is a fitting motto for all of God’s faithful people in these times. The questions we will ask at Augsburg – questions at the heart of our academic mission and our commitment to social justice, questions I believe all of higher education is poised to pursue – are about where is the truth in the midst of these pandemics?

Further, what is the truth about keeping each other healthy in the face of a novel coronavirus? What is the truth in an economy that more and more creates remarkable inequities? What is the truth in centuries of systemic racism and oppression?

And in the truths we will find – always evolving and emerging and transforming – the sins and lies that we tell each other about knowledge and privilege and justice. Only when we face the truths we find, confess our complicity in the sin and lies we tell, and humbly seek to be reconciled with each other and the creation, will we be freed for the work we are called to do as “informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders” – Augsburg’s mission!

Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation. May we make this our anthem as we seek to live ever more faithfully as God’s people in the world. Amen.