

God has us where God wants us

Ephesians 2: 7-10 (The Message)

(Augsburg University Chapel, September 1, 2023)

How good it is to be back together on campus and in this holy place. Our daily chapel services during the academic year are sabbath moments for each of us and for our community – moments for prayer, music, reflection, and celebration of all that binds our community together. It is always a great joy for me as these chapel services resume each fall. Thanks be the God!

I love this opening line from Eugene Peterson's translation of Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "Now God has us where God wants us."

Initially, my human brain goes to the adversarial nature of this claim. God has us dead to rights. We are in God's crosshairs. You get the picture. And such an interpretation makes sense in the context of the human games we play.

Since we have the football team with us today, let me use a couple of football examples of this human interpretation.

Here's Cade, our fine Augsburg quarterback, and he's back to pass. Down the field our wide receiver is step by step covered by the opposing cornerback. All of sudden, our receiver feigns a move outside. The cornerback takes the bait and our receiver cuts back to middle, wide open for a big gain. That cornerback's misstep meant that Cade had him just where he wanted him, out of position.

Or maybe it's Marcus, a linebacker on defense, who has his eye on the opposing running back. Suddenly, one of our defensive linemen puts a great block on the opponent's tight end who was tasked with blocking for the running back. Marcus is salivating right now because he has that running back right where he wants him, unprotected and about to go down.

The human games we play count on our abilities to get our opponents just where we want them. And we're very good at those games...

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a football fan like many of you and I would cheer loudly if Cade or Marcus found themselves in the situations I've described! For the Apostle Paul, though, this was not about human games. Instead, God having us where God wants us is not some sort of adversarial targeting, but both a theological and a practical claim about the game God is playing – what we might call a game of love and grace.

First, the theological claim. "Now God has us where God wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all God's

idea, and all God's work." In other words, where God wants us is as God's saved and redeemed people. We can't do that on our own, Paul proclaims – only God does both the making and the saving.

And then the practical claim. God has us where God wants us so that we can join in the work God does, the good work we have been created and saved to do, the work we are called to do.

Let's bring this back to this moment in the Augsburg University community. At the beginning of this, our 154th academic year, we believe that this is the very place where God wants us to be. Each of us belongs here. God has us exactly where God wants us to be, not as targets or adversaries, but as those beloved and named and claimed as God's own, created and saved and called. You are here because God loves you and calls you here – just where God wants you!

And now there is work we had better be doing, as Paul tells us...and that is work that must seek to overcome our human tendencies to see our lives as transactional and adversarial – a sort of zero-sum game where we only win if others lose. Instead, we are called to create a beloved community where each of us follows our call, contributes our various gifts, and lives as those who have been showered with grace and kindness.

And that is hard work in an academic community, which has been shaped by our human inclinations to get ahead, to climb the ladder of success, to outdo our opponents.

I'm a fan of the Indigo Girls, whose anthem "Closer to Fine" includes this telling verse:

*And I went to see the doctor of philosophy
With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee
He never did marry or see a B-Grade movie
He graded my performance, he said he could see through me
I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind
Got my paper and I was free*

Pretty cynical, right? But perhaps truer than those of us who have spent our lives in higher education might like to admit. Students as targets, empty vessels to be filled up by credentialed experts, victims just doing their time so that they can get their paper and be free. That's the human game playing itself out on a college campus.

But surely that is not where God wants us and that is not what this beloved community aims to be and do. Here at Augsburg, led by grace and kindness, we are called to be a university that is:

- Grounded in the belief that genuine education is relational, that it is co-created between participants in communities of teaching and learning, and where classrooms and campuses and neighborhoods are marked by on-going engagement, seeking the wisdom of all participants in response to the issue or topic or challenge – the mutuality

of learning – blurring the boundaries between student and teacher, between teacher and citizen, between classroom and neighborhood.

- Believes in democratic excellences, an argument against the meritocracy of the academy and on behalf of the remarkable gifts and experiences and “excellences” students bring to the work of teaching and learning. We admit that our privileged understanding of excellence – crafted in primarily Western and white contexts – has much to learn from other experiences, traditions, ways of knowing. We have the humility to admit that we do not know everything and can continue to learn throughout our lives – learning new ways to recognize and celebrate all forms of excellence.
- Buoyed by the faith-based claim of *semper reformanda*, the theological concept that only God is permanent and everything human must be open to constant reform. We follow the call to think differently about how we put the pieces together in our organizations, institutions, communities, etc. What are the new social arrangements to achieve our aims – collaboration, anchor institutions, blurring boundaries of disciplines, departments, organizations – think about the new Schwartz School of the Arts, bringing together our music, theater, and art & design departments to do new great things.

Indeed, God has us exactly where God wants us – right here in this remarkable university community, led by grace and kindness, where we all belong, doing the work God calls us to do. May it always be so. Amen.