

A Word We Need

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

John 1: 1-5, 14

[Augsburg University Chapel, 11 November 2025]

A wise pastor I greatly admire often begins his preaching by proclaiming (and praying): “We don’t need another sermon, Lord – dear God, not another one – but we are deeply in need of a word, the Word. Send the Word into our midst.” And so we might pray today and everyday in our noisy, full-of-distractions, too much talking lives. Dear God, please send your Word - a Word we need!

We live in perhaps the quintessential world of words – a college campus – where people like to talk and talk and talk. This is my 50th straight year on a college campus, so you have to wonder how many words I’ve spoken and listened to – and you might also ask how many I remember. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, to ask what we are doing in our university to listen to the Word, to be the Word, in the midst of so many other words.

I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad’s sermon so that we could have a discussion at Sunday dinner. “Punitive” comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual – “of course I listen to what you’re saying, Dad!” But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to “pay attention,” to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to pay attention to love breaking into our lives as God’s faithful people.

This morning’s scripture readings teach us how to pay attention as they offer a Word that can give point to our labors, meaning to our history, and direction to our future – a Word, I might suggest, that we need - let’s listen once again.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is especially meaningful as it provides a still (and perhaps never more urgently) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word will be proclaimed by the community of believers. I think we can assume that the Corinthians were having their own issues in hearing and living the Word in the midst of the noisy and frightening early days after Jesus had left them. So Paul offers this remarkable hymn of love as a pattern for their lives – a Word of Love to help the Corinthians (and us) make sense of our lives. If all I have are the words of mortals (or even angels), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If all I have are human power and knowledge, I am nothing. Even if I give away all I have and give up my body, I gain nothing. Unless I have the Word, unless I have Love, I will not find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Wow – this concrete word to a very real community of the faithful – just like this one here gathered – is the call to live as the beloved, to live in the midst of the world as the Living Word, the body of Christ. It is the call to pay attention. It is a Word we need!

And so the story continues – as it has now for almost 2000 years – here at Augsburg, as we seek to live as the beloved community, to be the living Word in a world that more than ever needs to know the Word of love.

And it continues especially in our reading from John's gospel, which contains the original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary, which was written in Norwegian, of course, but (in translation!) continues to offer us a way to consider how to hear Jesus' call and to follow Paul's map to faithful lives. From the 1st chapter of John's gospel, the 14th verse, "And the Word became flesh." And so it does – each and every day – on our campuses (in Minneapolis, Mexico, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Bethlehem, Norway, Italy, and Namibia) as we seek to educate students for lives of faithful service in the world. Here is both a theological and practical claim on our lives together.

So how do we honor the call to be the Word made flesh in the city? Here are three simple, yet profound, ways that John's gospel guides us as we seek to educate our students for vocations of service in the world and thereby live as the Word made flesh in the city.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. I have the privilege everyday to witness how faculty, staff, students and community members linked to Augsburg are embodying the Word in their work on and off campus. In a neighborhood full of immigrant diversity, we are working to be the Word by being neighbor. Our Campus Kitchen has, for more than two decades, been a source of food for our neighbors, as well as the occasion for fellowship and community. And our community garden brings together neighbors and campus folks to grow nutritious produce in the heart of our urban neighborhood.

The Word came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. Nobody said this would be easy and that is a central message in our vocational work with each other. Certainly John's gospel is a stark reminder that the Word is not easy for the world to hear. We kill our prophets because we are people who cannot imagine the year of the Lord's favor or love that is kind and patient. As we seek to be the Word made flesh and to support each other to discern our calls, we also must remind ourselves that faithful work, God's work, will not necessarily make us popular or comfortable. I am struck by how critical it is that we lift up for our students witnesses to the faith and to the Word - witnesses in our community and beyond - who have faced with courage and resolve and imagination the fact that the world rejects the way of love. We need the company of witnesses to the Word and the way of love.

And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. I love the juxtaposition of grace and truth in this passage. The Word surely is grace. It is nimble and forgiving and imaginative and surprising. It is practical and resourceful. It creates miracles of abundance where the world sees only scarcity. We see glimpses of grace everyday at Augsburg as we engage with local faith communities through the Riverside Innovation Hub, which equips people of faith to better serve their neighbors. We see glimpses of grace in our international work through the Center for Global Education and Experience, transforming the lives of students

by teaching them about privilege and introducing them to global neighbors whose lives do not regularly intersect with ours. We see glimpses of grace as we work around our usual institutional rules to meet the needs of our Somali neighbors, and when our students spend time in one of the mosques in our neighborhood, learning about the various ways in which God's covenant is present in our world – in our neighborhood.

And the Word also is truth, a word that speaks to a way and a life that we are called to follow. It is a call to discipleship, to love beyond human understanding, to God's intention for us and all of creation. It is the word of a God who has known us forever. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," Jeremiah reminds us. To be known and named is the promise of the Word, the truth of life abundant and eternal. This is the Love that hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. This search for the Word of truth is always incomplete, of course, for "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." But what a wondrous gift it is to pay attention as God shows us the way!

This is the story of God's faithful people. This is the Word we need - that the world needs. Pay attention, for in a world so full of words, we have the Word to live, to share, and to shout from the mountaintops. I'm proud to be part of a university community, grounded in the rich faith of the Lutheran church, alive in the vibrant city, allied with God's faithful people around the globe, that is paying attention to its call to be the Word made flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen