

Peace I leave with you

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
May 4, 2013

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
(John 14: 27)

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. Amen.

It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this morning – our graduates, your families and friends; honored guests; our faculty, staff and Regents; and other members of the Augsburg community. This is a splendid day for all of us as we mark your great achievements and celebrate the mission-based work of Augsburg College. You, our graduates, are our epistles to the world, and we look forward with great anticipation to all of the ways in which your work, commitments, relationships and faith will make God's world an even more fair, just and compassionate place for all God's creatures.

This morning, we meet in our gospel reading Jesus and his disciples in the days after the crucifixion and resurrection, as the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples, calming their fears as they struggle with how they will go on, how they will cope, how they will continue their ministry without their leader in their midst. And these beautiful words we hear from Jesus in John 14 seem most fitting for this commencement weekend as we say farewell to those who will graduate from Augsburg later this morning.

As Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," I am struck by how those of us who have known you well during your time here at Augsburg wish for you the same peace as you leave us. And there I have my simple theme for you this morning: how will you leave us with peace as you set off on your vocational journeys, wherever they may lead?

Let's begin by setting the context in which Jesus and his disciples find themselves. Perhaps we might find a few lessons from the disciples during Jesus' ministry and in the early days after his death and resurrection? In fact, what if we looked at the disciples as 1st century college students to see how their experiences might inform our own vocational reflection?

A few thoughts come to mind. First of all, what about that admissions pitch Jesus used? He's on the road, recruiting a few good souls for his entering class. Not much financial aid to offer. No fancy new campus buildings. And he wants them to

drop everything – their families, their livelihoods, their homes – to follow him and become fishers of people! Are you kidding me? But Jesus wasn't kidding – and neither are those of us who continue to believe that the call to be educated is above all a moral, and even a spiritual, call.

And then there are all those life lessons along the way. There are the classroom lessons, the good news often offered by Jesus in parables that cause the disciples to think differently, to see the world with fresh eyes. Sound familiar? And there also are experiences that can't help but challenge and shape their understanding of the world. The sick who want to be healed. The hungry who want to be fed. The dispossessed who want a voice. The religious who are scandalized. The women who wash Jesus' feet with their tears. I've seen many of you involved in similar experiences in our neighborhood, in the city, around the world.

And the disciples, like all of us, don't always know how to react to Jesus' curriculum and to the life-changing experience they are having. So what do they do but clamor for access and position (who is the greatest among the disciples)? They ask lots of questions (how many times must I forgive?) They gawk at miracles at wedding banquets. They run around trying to figure out how to feed 5000 hungry pilgrims. They chastise their teacher for wasting his time with sinners. They are frightened by storms (of all sorts) and they try to emulate their teacher walking on water – don't try this at home! – only to learn that their faith is not strong enough.

And then there are the final days in Jerusalem – days leading up to what they clearly believed would be a great commencement of Jesus' reign. Triumphant marches into the city – sort of like an honors convocation. Remarkable moments in upper rooms, where Jesus breaks bread and offers the cup, and washes their feet. Perhaps you've had meaningful lunches or dinners with your teacher or even the president! The frightening moments of prayer outside the city – why is our teacher crying out to God? Do teachers cry – are they human?

And then the violence begins. One of the disciples betrays Jesus – have you ever betrayed a teacher? One denies knowing Jesus. Now Jesus has been condemned. He is crucified. A few of us stand at the cross, grieving. And now he has died, taken away to be buried. And we are hiding away, hoping that we won't be next to die. This is not the education we expected. This is scary stuff. This is not what we were promised when Jesus called us to follow him.

And on the 3rd day the women come and report that the tomb is empty. There are witnesses to the resurrection. He is risen; risen indeed. Do you believe? And we realize that our education is just beginning; our vocational journey is ahead of us; God has a plan for us.

And so God does have a plan for us. Just as God had a plan for Peter and James and John; for Paul and Miriam and Tabitha – disciples all. A plan that our teacher(s) have prepared us to live out. A vocational plan, if you will – a call to love and serve. A call to follow even when – like for disciples throughout the ages – the stakes are high, the rewards perhaps uncertain, the terrain uncharted, the future murky at best. You're not alone with these vocational feelings!

"Where I am going," Jesus tells his disciples elsewhere in the gospel of John, "you cannot come." But you will not be alone. I leave you this new commandment, by which the world will know that you are my disciples. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." By this, they will know that you are mine, if you have love for one another. You are known by how you love – how you love God, each other, and God's good world. You're as ready as you're going to be. You've been called...

And now what?

And now, Jesus says, I leave you with my peace. I give you my peace. And so he does for all of us who believe. In our gospel for this morning, I find two distinct ways in which God's peace makes a difference for our lives of faith in the world.

First, we have the peace that centers us and calls us home. Hear this lovely opening verse in John 14: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." What power there is in those words for the journey ahead!

One of the great myths the world seeks to impose on us in our lives is the sense that we must learn to "balance" all of the competing claims we will face. The balanced life demands keeping work and family, private and public, personal and common in some sort of eternal symmetry. Perhaps you are thinking about this challenge right now as you set forth into your lives in work places and graduate schools, in your families and your neighborhoods. You will long to find the balance in your lives that makes all right with the world. But to this futile longing, Jesus offers us all the gospel word of peace that calls this longing for balance into question. What if, instead, we learned to live in a way that is out of balance, leaving us to rely instead on the pull of a force and power that draws us in and centers us in our home, in our loving God.

This is the peace that Jesus offers as he calls us home to our good and gracious God. This is the centered life, as our Augsburg colleague Jack Fortin teaches us, not the balanced life. Balance is our human longing – surely if we get our lives in balance, all will work out, all will be well. We've all been there in this eternal quest for balance in our lives. But these attempts at balance distract us from what God calls us to be and do. Balance is the wrong metaphor for the life of faith (not to mention it is impossible to achieve) – instead, the center holds us in God's orbit...and the peace Jesus leaves us with centers us in God. And centered in God, we suspend our efforts to make

everything work out, to pursue what we believe we deserve, to rely on the opinions of others to measure our worth in the world. Centered in God, we lean expectantly into what God intends for us to do as partners in the work of making new things happen. Surely that is a gift worth celebrating as we leave with the peace that brings us home to our true center.

And there – in that center – we are offered the second gift of peace, the peace, as Jesus tells us in verse 27, that is not given as the world gives. In other words, this is a peace that passes human understanding, that calls into question the ways of the world that are based on competition and fear of failure and doing all it takes to get ahead. Instead, this peace points us back to the lessons we learn from Jesus' ministry in the world, to lessons about justice and compassion and healing, to a focus on our neighbor and his or her needs rather than our own. God's peace casts aside our fears and ambitions so we can focus on our neighbor, on the needs of strangers that claim us to be hospitable, to do justice, to pay attention to the call to love without condition.

And with that peace, your life will change forever – our lives will change forever as we seek to do God's work in the world.

The great Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, in his sermon "Peace as Rest and as Movement" points to the fact that the peaceless world "is precisely the place for the working out of God's will for truth, justice, purity, beauty." Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaims: "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." We lean into an arc already making its way in the world, a plan already unfolding, justice demanded, love already breaking in, and there we find glimpses of salvation and grace in our midst. If we are distracted or even blinded by our longing, we will miss the remarkable signs of God's will for us that are ours as we live in God's peace and expectation into the arc of God's reign.

The 20th century theological moralist, H. Richard Niebuhr, challenged the traditional images of humans as moral agents in charge of their own destinies or as followers of the law, when he developed an ethics of responsibility, suggesting that the appropriate role for moral agents is as responders to God's creative and redemptive work in our history. What is God doing in our midst, what is God teaching us in the gospel, what is God calling us to be and do? Leaving with God's peace prepares us to respond to God's work in the world, to become co-creators, to follow the call, to be signs of what God expects of God's faithful people. The chief rabbi of London, Jonathan Sacks, has suggested in his own description of an ethics of responsibility that we are called by God to "heal the world." This is what God intends for God's world.

To leave with God's peace challenges our notions of what it means to be called. On this special day when we celebrate your remarkable accomplishments in the college, we learn that to be called does not mean some dogged pursuit of what makes us happy, it means accepting God's peace, leaning expectantly into the arc of God's love breaking

in and accepting what it means for our lives, here and now, as frightening and dangerous and adventurous and awesome as the call may be.

I think of the sometimes daunting and frightening and awesome and remarkable calls you must follow as we prepare to send you out into the world – to do as God needs for you to do, to make peace in your lives, in your families, faith communities, neighborhoods and in the world, to be reconciled with our God and neighbors far and wide. And I have turned to these wonderful lines, first written by Polish Rabbi Nachman, which sum up for me what it means to live with God's peace and lean into the arc of God's reconciling love for faithful people who live in the real world:

*Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.
All time is made up of healing of the world.
Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.
Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.*

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

We're in good and gracious company – called by our gracious God, who has rebuilt our ships, who has redeemed our lives so that we might heal the world, so that we might leave with the peace of Christ, so that we might join in God's loving and reconciling and justice-filled work for the world.

We want so much – we, just like the disciples some 2000 years ago, are anxious and long to know that our lives have meaning and purpose – and Jesus recognizes and names our fear while he also calls us to abandon our longing, to give up our aspirations to make sense of it on our own – heart-wrenching stuff. Here is your home, your center; and there is the world that God loves so much. Can we learn to lean expectantly into the love that knows no bounds, the peace that passes all understanding, the hope that abides in our God who has made all things new? Leave now with Christ's peace and know that God is about to do a new thing in you. And God's people say together, Amen.