

Is this the time?

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
May 3, 2008

*So when they had come together, they asked him,
“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”
(Acts 1: 6)*

Grace and peace to you from our God,
who is creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this morning – our graduates, your families and friends; 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, as we near the end of the Easter season, we find ourselves walking alongside Jesus’ disciples as they seek to understand what has happened to their lives since the death of their leader. “Is this the time, Lord?” “Is this when our work with you finally will come to completion and we will see God’s reign breaking in?” This deep longing to have a firm answer, to know what God intends, to be vindicated in our life choices, is clearly what the disciples are seeking. And perhaps it also is what we seek, especially as we come together for this commencement ritual in an institution dedicated to learning, to seeking answers to life’s tough questions, at a moment when many of you no doubt feel you’ve done your time, done the work, made the grades...now, tell me, we demand, “Is this the time?” Perhaps your question is even more pointed: Is this my time? Will I find happiness with this Augsburg degree and experience? Will I find a job, a partner, a path to success and meaning in the world?

I hope you will – truly I do – but I’m afraid that there is more to our story than the earnest seeking of Jesus’ disciples, whether they lived 2000 years ago or today. Jesus answers his disciples with the sort of frustrating dodge that none of us want to hear: “It is not for you to know the times or periods...” And the grumbling begins...Come on. What do you mean it is not for us to know? We’ve worked hard, we’ve sacrificed, we deserve to know. And Jesus continues: “But you will receive power in the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses – to the ends of the earth.” Wow. We can’t know all there is to know, but we are called and empowered to do God’s work in the world even so. How is that for a commencement message? Now let’s get to work!

But, here’s the rub. We have followed Jesus in his remarkable ministry, healing and preaching and calling God’s people to discipleship; we have experienced the horrible loss of

our leader, only to have him in our midst resurrected; and now, as he is about to depart, he tells us we can't know what God intends for God's reign, but that we are called to be God's witnesses in the world. Overwhelming stuff. So what do we do, what do the disciples do, but stand around gazing into the heavens? Perhaps our gazing takes on other forms. We turn to the distractions of the world – to material happiness, to careers, to gadgets, to relationships and lifestyles that are more focused on me than on others, perhaps even to good works that somehow make us feel better. We need our own messengers in white robes to ask us, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” “Why do you turn away from the work God has called you to do?” It's time to get on with it. This is the time. You are Christ's body on earth. The world needs your faithful witness and work, your redeeming work for all God's people.

And so here we are, about to send you forth – your knowledge may be incomplete, but your charge is clear – and I have the great privilege to bring the Word to you; a Word that guides, protects and inspires you along the way; the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, who, as he ascends to his Father, calls for God's protection for God's people. You are not alone.

You are surrounded by the company of witnesses, the community of saints, whose lives of faith offer all of us inspiration and strength. A few weeks ago I had the rare privilege to be in Nicaragua visiting Augsburg's Center for Global Education campus and learning a great deal about the lives and well-being of the Nicaraguan people. Among the remarkable people we met in Nicaragua was Father Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit priest, now in his 80's, who in the early 1980s, joined with the Sandinista government as leader of a literacy campaign. Over the course of a few short years, Father Cardenal recruited 60,000 young people who ventured into the countryside, living with farmers and peasants, teaching them and their families to read. Threatened by reactionaries – threats that resulted in the tragic deaths of several of the young people – Father Cardenal persisted with courage and pursued God's work in his country. And when the project was completed, the literacy rate in Nicaragua had risen from 50% to more than 85%, a remarkable accomplishment in any context. Fast forward some 25 years and find yourself in a country where economic and political well-being are in short supply, where people still suffer in poverty, where government corruption and foreign influences have stripped citizens of their rights and livelihood – and Father Cardenal, sitting in a small seminar room, is asked how he keeps hope and faith alive when his important work seems to have not had a lasting impact. And his answer is simple. “That was our time. We heard the call and responded, despite the odds, and we succeeded with God's help. This is the time for others – especially our young people – to listen for and follow their calls. I have hope because God is in our time, in our history, and God will call God's people to the work that must be done.”

This is the time – your time – and there are countless saints like Father Cardenal who offer you both an example of faithful living and the courage and imagination to do God's work here and now.

You are surrounded by the simple words of challenge and understanding, found in sacred scripture and its interpreters, which offer us a worldview and pathway to do God's work in the world. The Letter to Peter offers these comforting words: “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support,

strengthen, and establish you.” It is a promise. I have found similar comfort and strength in the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer, words we all know – perhaps too well. In a wise reflection on Jesus’ prayer, Pastor Art Simon, who founded the organization, Bread for the World, suggests that when we pray this simple phrase, “Give us today our daily bread,” we are, in fact, asking God for just enough of what we need. It is, in that way, a modest prayer. But then Simon asks whether we have considered that “just enough” may be more than we can imagine when we realize that this prayer for daily bread is about what we need, not simply to live, but to live as God’s faithful and abundant people. It is a prayer that we might have, in this moment, what we need to live as people, confident in our faith, free to love each other and all of God’s creation. It is the simple prayer we make as a college community to have what we need in order to educate students and serve our neighbors. It is the modest and simple prayer that you must utter as you leave this community. Give me what I need, dear Lord, to do your will in this time, on this day.

This is the time – your time – and God will provide all that you need if you but remember to ask.

And finally, you are surrounded by the Holy Spirit, the advocate sent by God to God’s faithful people on earth – and you already have received and known the work of the spirit here at Augsburg. You leave Augsburg to do God’s work in the world infused with the spirit of this remarkable college. It is the spirit you have known in the classroom, the laboratory, the residence hall, the playing field, on stage and in this chapel. It is the spirit of faith seeking understanding; it is the spirit of hospitality and welcome; it is the spirit of justice and compassion; it is the spirit of service to neighbor, here and far; it is the spirit of immigrants who founded this college and who continue to keep it strong; it is the spirit of your own vocations, your various calls, combining to create a college that educates you – yes – but more than that, a college that forms you as well, that calls the spirit to work in you so that God’s reign might break in to the world through you. Our original college motto – on the seal outside this chapel – is John 1: 14, “And the Word became flesh.” And so it does, so it does in and through you, as the Holy Spirit calls you to your work in this time.

This is the time – your time – and the Holy Spirit goes with you from this special place so that you might never be alone.

In her insightful book, *Receiving the Day*, Valparaiso University professor Dorothy Bass suggests that one of the wondrous messages in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – a word we hear in our scripture this morning – is the intersection of two kinds of time – “our short sigh and God’s mountainous eternity.” We know the true value of our limited knowledge and time only when we allow God’s *kairos*, God’s time, to surround us as gift and call. When we pay attention to the community of saints, to the simple words uttered in deep faith, and to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we not only learn how to live as disciples and witnesses, but also how to accept the gift of this time.

This is the time – your time – when God calls you to the great gift of God’s time, what Professor Bass provocatively calls “a meeting place, a rendezvous with God,” and there we shall find all that we need to get to work. Thanks be to God! Amen.