

A cup of cold water

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
June 29, 2008

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

(Matthew 10: 40, 42)

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 we join Jesus and his disciples early on the path of their ministry. In our liturgical calendar, we are in the season after Pentecost, these long days between the celebration of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the beginning of the new church year in Advent – what also has been called ordinary time – a time when we follow the unfolding teaching and healing journeys of Jesus and his disciples. It also is our time – time when we are called to consider how we might live faithful lives in the world and many days, just as it was for the original disciples, we're just not sure what that looks like. And in our gospel reading from Matthew, we sit here alongside the disciples receiving our orientation, if you will, directly from our leader (in my red letter version of the New Testament – with red indicating the words of Jesus – pretty much the entire 10th chapter of Matthew is red, a sure sign that this is important stuff!) Now you may think it a bit odd to talk about orientation when you are about to graduate – that's something we do when you are about to begin your educational journeys – but allow me to suggest that we don't call it commencement for nothing. Today you begin, you commence, to live as someone educated – in a particular degree program, a particular discipline of study, a particular professional field – but also as someone formed by the faith, values and vision of this particular college. And it seems perfectly fitting that we begin your commencement day at Augsburg with this orientation to faithful lives in the world!

My sense is that what we hear in this morning's orientation lesson is one of the central – and most radical – of all of Jesus' teachings. And it focuses on this simple practice of giving “even a cup of cold water.” Let's think about what that might mean for us. I don't know about you, but I don't carry cold water with me everywhere I go. Even if I happen to have a biker's water bottle with me, it likely has been sitting in the sun and is not going to offer chilled refreshment. And if someone needs a cup of cold water, it's not going to be easy for me, I'm going to have to go out of my way to get it for her. And here lies the

gospel claim that Jesus makes on all of his disciples – whether 2000 years ago or today. A cup of cold water. Canadian theological educator, Laurel Dyskstra, suggests that this passage challenges us with the claim of radical hospitality. She writes, “Prophets have no subtlety, no appreciation for the daily compromises required for getting along. And while truly good people don’t trash the place, they can make you really look at your own life and upset your routine. Disciples and little ones are perhaps the worst of all. You know who they are: no money, no bag, no coat, bad-smelling, and talking about mercy. To get a cup of cold water, they have to come right into the kitchen.” Right into the kitchen. Now that is radical.

I often wonder about this claim of radical hospitality upon our college, which aspires in its mission to be a welcoming community. A quick story reminds us of how difficult it can be – even when we want to welcome the stranger – to overcome the institutional and personal obstacles that keep us from being genuinely hospitable. My friend and predecessor, Bill Frame, the 9th president of Augsburg, had a deal with the local Somali community that I inherited when I took office two years ago. If they needed space for a meeting or some other sort of gathering, they should come to the President’s office and we would work it out for them. Simple, right? Well, I still recall the day early in my tenure when Omar came into the office and asked my assistant for help in scheduling a room for a meeting. She said sure – how many people do you expect, when do you need it, how long, and so forth? All the right questions. To which Omar replied, 15 people, for an hour or so, right now – and my assistant looked out the window to see the 15 Somalis standing on the sidewalk waiting to get a room to meet. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Counter to all our rules, our schedules, our expectations – now that is radical.

So here we are, ready for the orientation to the rest of our lives, claimed by the gospel call to radical hospitality, shaped by our education in this college with its distinctive vision focused on the belief that we are called to serve our neighbor...now what? Here are my humble reflections on what this means for you and me as we seek to live faithful lives in the world.

It begins with our openness to the stranger in our midst. The world is filled with such fear and most of that fear is grounded in our anxiety about what we don’t know or understand. Jesus knew that. Those who taught you in this place know that. You know that. And I believe that it is because we know how fear paralyzes and distracts and fragments that we come together in this community to seek education, to learn about new and strange things, to broaden our perspectives on the issues and people and systems that define our world, to seek even to figure out what it all means. Genuine education, as Parker Palmer reminds us, is about overcoming the fear that so pervades our personal and social lives. Radical hospitality begins with the openness that authentic education provides to take pleasure, to find joy, to be intrigued by what we don’t know, what we might be able to learn, who we might come to respect and love. Certainly our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Los Angeles, offers all of us daily opportunities to welcome the stranger, to learn from those who do not share our life experience, our culture, our faith tradition. But that can be scary, too. I think about the student who was with me as part of a service project in the neighborhood, who noticed a Somali woman in traditional garb, with a suitcase, attempting to hail a cab on Cedar Avenue. After several cabs passed her by, the student crossed the street, asked the woman where she was headed, hailed a cab for her and made sure the driver knew where to take his passenger. That morning, our

student learned a life lesson about otherness and privilege – about not having to worry whether or not a cab would stop – but that student could just as easily not chosen to cross the street to be of assistance. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Are we open to the strangers in our midst, who might teach us important lessons?

Hospitality is more than random acts of kindness, it is a way of life. I think that one of the great temptations of the way in which we read scripture – passage by passage, often out of context – is that we lose sight of the radical claim it puts on us to live as people of the book, of the gospel. This really isn't just about inviting someone into our kitchen for a cup of cold water, an act that might push our comfort zone for a while but that will not fundamentally alter our way of seeing and being in the world. This is about a life of hospitality, a life reshaped by the claim of the gospel to live as the people of God, a life in community that is often messy, even sacrificial, but that ultimately is about faithful and grace-filled lives that proclaim God's reign. You don't meet many people who have fully grasped the radical claim of hospitality that Jesus calls us to live out – and there's probably a good reason why. This hospitable way of living is tough – just ask the disciples, who floundered and denied and betrayed their teacher! In their book, *Radical Hospitality*, Father Daniel Homans (a Benedictine monk) and Lonni Collins Pratt, describe what it was like for the monks of St. Benedict Monastery to open their worship lives to the public, when they had long saw themselves only as “professional pray-ers,” watching the world from afar.. “It is easy to pray for ‘the world’ and ‘God’s people’ when you don’t have to look into their tear-reddened eyes, or fetch more toilet paper after mass on Sunday. Something sacred and unexpected has happened since we opened our doors and our hearts...we have become a part of each other’s lives.” And there you have it. It is easy for hospitality to position us as the “professional do-gooders,” patting ourselves on the back for our good works. But the call of radical hospitality is to the messiness of daily, mundane life together, sharing the good, the bad and the ugly, the pain and the joy, the boredom and the richness, because that is what it is like to be human, and that is what Jesus calls us to understand. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Not just once, but every day, all the time. Are we ready for lives of radical hospitality, really radical...? I hope so, because...

The world so needs our lives of radical hospitality. This is serious business, my friends. The founders of this college understood that when they chose the motto for Augsburg. It's on the original seal of Augsburg Seminary, written in Norwegian, from the gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh.” Our college was founded upon the greatest act of hospitality we could ever imagine, the act of a gracious and loving God who entered into our world so that we might know God's radical welcome. And what did we do – what did the world do – but reject God's hospitality? There you have it. Out of fear, ignorance, injustice and hate, we turn our backs on God's hospitality, God's abundant and eternal welcome. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him,” the gospel proclaims. But God knows how much the world needs radical hospitality, and so God abides (perhaps the most lovely word in all the scriptures), God persists, God fulfills God's plan for God's people. For God loved the world so much, God sent his only Son...And here in this college community, the community that has educated and shaped you to commence this next part of your lives, we stand firmly on the shoulders of our founders who believed – as we believe – that we are called to serve our neighbors, that we too are called to abide in the face of a world that needs our lives of radical hospitality. We are called to be prophets of peace, to work for justice and fairness, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to be the word made flesh

in the world. A cup of cold water, Jesus teaches us – strangers right into our kitchens – lives of radical hospitality, no matter the cost, no account for the joy. The Word made flesh, full of truth and grace. Here ends our orientation. Here begins the work we are called to do and the people we are called to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.