

Who am I – that I would hinder God?

Acts 11: 1-18
Revelation 21: 1-6
John 13: 31-35

[Baccalaureate Service, Augsburg College, 5 May 2007]

Grace and peace to you from God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

What a wonderful day it is for all of our graduates, their family and friends, and for the entire college community! Congratulations – we’re very proud of you and can’t wait to see the difference you make in the world as you commence from Augsburg.

This morning I want to ask you to consider one final lesson in your Augsburg education. It is a lesson you have engaged many times during your time at Augsburg, but I want to return to it – perhaps with a bit of a twist – by asking two interrelated questions: *Who am I – that I would hinder God?* It is a lesson imbedded in our scripture readings for the 5th week in Easter – a lesson that seems most fitting as you reflect on your experience at Augsburg and how it will shape your work in the world.

The inspiration for my interrelated questions is in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, where Peter is offering his explanation for why he is bringing the gospel to the Gentiles – a move that the early faithful found jarring, if not downright wrong. Peter testifies to the call he has received in a dream and to the work of the Holy Spirit in saving a Gentile family. “If God then gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” The point is clear. The call that Peter believed that he had received – to bring the gospel to the wider world – was a call from God to do God’s work. In Peter’s example each of us may find a way we can make sense of how our various calls depend on how they fit into a larger plan – God’s plan – already in motion in the world.

For those of us gathered here some 2000 years later, the *Who am I?* question may strike you as fairly obvious. It is, of course, the vocation question, the question at the heart of an Augsburg education – perhaps the question you would rather forget. But, of course, the point is that it is a question you will never stop answering because it is at the heart of your life of faith and work; it is the nexus of education and service.

I’ve long been a student of vocational journeys – even before I came to this “V-word” school. And I’m always looking for stories of how various people came to hear and follow a call. This year, in particular, I’ve been intrigued by the life of the disciples as depicted in the Christian scriptures. Think about Peter and the other disciples depicted in this morning’s scripture readings – in many ways, the disciples offer us a mirror to our own experiences of trying to live faithful lives in the world. I’ve been struck by how relevant their experiences of some 2000 years ago still are for us in the 21st century.

So I wonder if 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 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?

Surely there are vocational lessons abundant in the lives and experiential education of the disciples throughout the ages. But two simple thoughts strike me as urgently relevant for all of us (especially on this day of commencement) – first of all, no one said it would be easy; and second, we are not left without help as we go forward! Who am I? I am one who has been created and formed and loved and called. And God has a plan for me – a plan that God already has set in motion in the world. And here then is the turn to the second of our interrelated questions. *Who am I, to hinder God’s work in the world?*

As those called to resurrection faith, we believe that God is already at work in the world and the universe, creating a new heaven and a new earth. But what does that look like? I think the answers to that question have already been revealed to us in our education in the faith, in our vocational journeys. We know the truth, and the truth has set us free to live as God’s faithful people in the world. “Through truth to freedom” the Augsburg College seal proclaims! Jesus brought truth into the world, the truth that marks our path today even in the face of a world that still rejects God’s plans, God’s love, God’s light.

We know the truth of Jesus’ life and ministry. It is important, especially in these weeks after Easter, to recall that what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem on Good Friday is in direct response to the ministry and message he has lived and preached. Throughout the liturgical year, we read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry and yet I wonder how many times we stop and think that this is what will turn the world against him – this is the truth that will be rejected on Good Friday. Do we understand the radical claim that the truth of Jesus’ life and ministry make on us, his faithful disciples? Wendell Berry’s powerful essay on “the burden of the gospels.” asks two simple, yet profound, questions: If you had been living in Jesus’ time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers? and; Can you be sure that you would keep His commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so? Think, for example, about the world-changing messages of the Beatitudes; the abundance of the feeding of the 5000; the divine call to heal the sick, comfort the afflicted, and even afflict the comfortable. What is it that we don’t understand about peacemaking, about washing each others’ feet, about loving as we have been loved? This is the truth that the world did not know – this is the gift that is ours to follow, this is the way of the new

heaven and earth that is God's reign breaking in all around us. Will you keep my commandments, will you follow, will you love as you have been loved?

We also know the truth of Jesus' death – the reality that the world cannot accept God's love, that God's plan does not match up with earthly expectations. The cross becomes the cruel sign of that rejection. For the world, the cross is folly, it is a scandal; but we have seen the truth on the tree on Golgotha. Our spiritual father Martin Luther made the cross the center of all theology - it is the central moment of God's sacrifice for the faithful, the ultimate act of redemption for the fallen world. We can find the cross in all of Luther's writings (sermons, commentaries, essays – some 57 volumes). But perhaps we find the theology of the cross most profoundly proclaimed in his prayers: "Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled...I am weak in the faith...I am cold in love...I am poor...I am a sinner...Therefore, I will remain with thee of whom I can receive, but to whom I cannot give." For those of us who are called to carry the weight of the cross, those who stand at the foot of the cross and grieve, we are there with Luther who understood that the truth of the cross demands our humility, our confession, our repentance, so that we might receive even though we cannot give. God has shown us truth on the cross. And it was the outsider, the centurion, who proclaims the truth as Jesus breathes his last – surely this was the son of God. The truth has been revealed in the cross. Will you join with those who gather at the cross to pray to remain with our God from whom we can receive, but to whom we cannot give?

And we know the truth of the resurrection. Imagine yourself as one of those blessed few who experienced the remarkable surprise of the empty tomb – do not be afraid!, the angel said – this was scary and threatening stuff. Those who experienced the risen Christ in those days after Jesus' crucifixion were the gifted ones for they knew that the truth revealed on the cross would live forever in the community of the faithful, in the work of the spirit, in God's continuing love for God's world – but this didn't make their lives any easier. This is the paradoxical truth that lives on in the body of Christ – that continues to proclaim that as we bear witness to the risen Jesus Christ, we bear witness to the truth, the truth that threatens the world. This is the continuing threat of resurrection. The Guatemalan poet, Julia Esquivel, tells this story in her poem, "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection" as she writes:

No brother,
It is not the noise of the streets
Which does not let us sleep.

Accompany us then on this vigil
And you will know what it is to dream!
You then will know
How marvelous it is
To live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake,
To keep watch asleep,
To live while dying
And to already know oneself
Resurrected!

This is the truth of resurrection, the truth of life abundant, truth that prevails even over death, light that overcomes the darkness. This is God at work in the world, in the cosmos, in our daily lives. This is the good news that Peter was called to bring to all God's people. Who am I that I would hinder God's work? I am loved and I am called, and so I join the great and glad work of loving the world – despite the struggle of doubt and rejection; of loving my neighbor – knowing that the hungry and poor and dispossessed are God's special ones; and of loving God – thereby to know myself as Resurrected. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray together.

Good and gracious and loving God, today we give joyful thanks for the life of discipleship, for your call to be your faithful people in the world, people who witness to the truth that sets us free. May your love for us inspire in us lives of service to your creation and to our neighbors. May we live threatened by resurrection, witnesses to the new heaven and the new earth that is your reign breaking in all around us. Be with us in our celebration today of these remarkable graduates, whose lives offer all of your people great hope that your work in the world will be accomplished! In the name of Jesus the risen Christ, we pray. Amen.