

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Opening Convocation Remarks
Tuesday, September, 4, 2007

Paul C. Pribbenow
President, Augsburg College

I am so pleased you are here and that we have this rare opportunity to be together before you commence your educational adventures at Augsburg. I can't wait to see what you will learn, how you will make a difference, and how you will help to live out Augsburg's abiding commitment to education for service.

One of the most compelling moments in the Christian scriptures is recounted in the gospel of Luke (10:29-37), where we read:

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?" He said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

And so we, too, ask, "And who is my neighbor?" It is a question at the heart of the mission and vision of Augsburg College – a question that is at once theological, reflecting our understanding of what God intends for us to be and do, and also educational and practical, helping us to link our learning with service.

So, let's do some theology! Ask yourself right here and now in this chapel – who is my neighbor? Is it the Somali woman I met this morning on Riverside Avenue struggling to carry her groceries home from the bus stop? Or is it the family in the ravines of Cuernavaca, Mexico who will offer me both refreshments and life lessons when I meet them on a Center for Global Education trip? Or is it my roommate, who is struggling with being away from home for the first time and who needs my time and comfort? Once the question is asked, we are compelled, as was Jesus himself, to answer with stories and parables – stories of how being educated at Augsburg prepares us to serve our neighbors no matter when or where we encounter them. In that way, the question leads us to think about the links between learning and service.

A central aspect of an Augsburg education is to nurture and sustain the work of civic engagement – the practices of citizenship, negotiating our lives together, navigating what political philosopher and Roman Catholic theologian, John Courtney Murray, once called the “intersection of conspiracies,” his definition of democracy.

Here at Augsburg, we believe we are called to serve our neighbor. I am so proud of our Augsburg community for its abiding commitment to civic engagement, to meeting the needs of our neighbors – there are abundant examples of ways in which students, staff, faculty, Regents, parents, and alumni are modeling for all of us and the rest of the community what it means to be a reflective, productive and responsible citizen of our campus, our neighborhood, and our world.

At the same time, I want to challenge all of us to think at an even deeper level about the work of civic engagement, to see it not simply as acts of service and compassion, but also as the abiding and messy business – the lifelong business – of being educated, of building communities of trust and accountability, and of helping to create a more just and humane democracy.

I'd like to offer two specific challenges today that begin to illustrate what I mean by this deeper understanding of civic engagement and serving our neighbors.

As much as I value and support the remarkable work of the Augsburg community in serving the needs of our neighbors outside of the campus community – something we will illustrate again today in our AugSem service projects – we also must remember that civic engagement is something we need to learn to do right here on our campus. I once heard another college leader talk about his campus as a group of neighborhoods, and he suggested that the work of citizenship meant that the neighborhoods needed to learn to be healthy, vital places for their inhabitants both as separate neighborhoods and as a collection of neighborhoods that had intersecting and common needs and aspirations.

Think of what this means for our campus: We have many neighbors and neighborhoods. We have an arts neighborhood, we have an athletics neighborhood, we have a nursing neighborhood and a philosophy neighborhood, a student government neighborhood, a weekend college neighborhood, and so on – groups of citizens who band together by virtue of activities or proximity. I find these neighborhoods wonderful places to visit – I find in them examples of good citizenship and education, as well as idiosyncracies and rituals and dysfunctions that make them distinctive (and perhaps not for everybody). At the same time, when these neighborhoods do not interact with each other, or share what they have learned with others, or invite others in, they become exclusionary and disruptive of our efforts to build a genuine community of trust and accountability.

Our challenge as citizens (and mine as your mayor!) is to find ways to link the neighborhoods, holding on to all the good they do for themselves, while also building a sense of common purpose for our lives as a city or community. For example, the sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, has suggested that we all need “great, good places” that serve to offer space for hospitality and conversation, and that help create stronger neighborhoods. What are the “great, good places” that serve this community-building role at Augsburg? Asking the question, “Who is my neighbor?” takes on more immediate and intense meaning

when it challenges us to consider our fellow campus citizens as our neighbors. That is the wonderful work of civic engagement – right here on our own campus.

My second challenge focuses beyond our campus, where I also believe that the work of civic engagement requires a more thoughtful and nuanced approach. One of the issues we face as a college (as does any college with our sorts of commitments) is paying attention to how our many and diverse relationships and projects honor the essential link between education and service. It seems to me that the work of civic engagement that we pursue as a college needs to be linked to our primary mission as an educational institution. How can we pursue our founders' remarkable vision of the essential link between education and a stronger democracy?

Several years ago I learned about the work of a man named Earl Shorris, who founded something called the Clemente Project in the Humanities. Shorris believes in the deep connection between the humanities and politics. His project recruits primarily young women – often single mothers, living in poverty – and offers them an education in the humanities, taught by college instructors. His argument is that “training” programs often perpetuate the subservient position of those in poverty. Instead, he believes that offering the humanities to those in poverty offers them the “riches” of a life of citizenship. It offers them the political power of an education.

Each of us has the privilege to be here at this college, working, living and exploring the riches of a liberal arts education. The work of civic engagement demands that we find ways to offer our fellow citizens those same riches and the power of citizenship that goes with them. That is how the education and citizenship are genuinely linked in our work as a college. That is the work of engaged citizens – sharing our various gifts and privileges to build a stronger democracy.

Who is my neighbor? That compelling question – theological, educational, and practical all at once – demands our response, and as we share our own parables and stories about serving our neighbors we shall learn together how to authentically and persuasively model what it means to be educated for service. My dear new neighbors, I can't wait to hear your stories!