

## GROANING AND SIGHING

Romans 8: 22-27

Matthew 5: 13-16

[Augsburg College Chapel, 15 October 2007, the Feast Day of Teresa of Avila]

- I imagine you had some question when you saw my homily title – is the president going to talk about the mid-semester blues, or is this a reflection on the life of a college president, or maybe it's about post-Homecoming thoughts on dealing with alums who think they know best how to run the college...?
- None of those things, happily. The scripture readings for this morning are assigned for today, the feast day of Teresa of Avila, born in Spain in 1515, who lived a life of discipline and meditation in Carmelite convents, and wrote some powerful texts that remain important contributions to the abiding contemplative life of the faithful. I find these provocative words especially meaningful:  
Christ has no body now but yours  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours  
Yours are the eyes through which He looks  
compassion on this world  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours
- Teresa of Avila lived in the tension between what our reading from Romans so poignantly describes as, on one hand, the groaning of creation and, on the other, the sighing of the Holy Spirit – and in that tension she found the strength and imagination and faith to find hope, to live as Christ's body on earth
- I once heard the remarkable Cornel West, who now teaches at Princeton, rail on for a good hour on all the ills of our world – personal ills, social ills, cosmic ills – and as he closed his analysis, he shouted out, “I am not optimistic, there is no evidence for optimism,” and then after a dramatic pause, he continued, “But I have hope.” I have hope.
- So, where exactly does that hope come from? The evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other, surely we all know the reality of earth's groaning. And we could leave it just there – as many do – with no evidence for optimism. Yet we are called to hope. Acknowledging creation's groaning while also believing that the Spirit is sighing on our behalf and in our midst, we find hope in the glimpses of God's reign in our history, in our daily lives. Hope is found in the paradox that Martin Luther proclaimed – a people *simul justus et peccator* – living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of earth's groaning and the mysterious sighing of the Holy Spirit
- Perhaps the greatest prophet of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) this passage that summarizes how we might live in these tensions – how hope can be found and pursued, how hope creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are

saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

- I am convinced that places like Augsburg College – places committed to both faith and learning, and to their deep interrelatedness – are places where this tension between the groaning and the sighing can most faithfully be faced and lived. Here we face on a daily basis in our scholarship and teaching and learning the realities of life in the world, the groaning of creation as if in labor pains (which I hasten to point out, I have no way of imagining!) And here we also have the gift of the Spirit sighing, the gift of the promise of abundant and eternal life, that inspires and informs our work in the world. And there – only there – in the tensions we all know between the groaning and the sighing will we find hope, hope despite the evidence, hope that is not naïve about the realities of the world, and hope that provides a long and inviting horizon for our common work that we live into, each and every day.
- Here at Augsburg, our core intellectual and civic work focuses on the study and practice of creation groaning – we study personal groaning, the experience of illness and discrimination and powerlessness and injustice; we study corporate groaning, the experience of systemic unfairness and inequity, of the abuse of authority, of the ways in which organizations overshadow individual creativity and effort; we study creation groaning, the lack of vision and stewardship, the lack of respect for the ecology of life on earth and in the cosmos. We face this groaning with all of our intellect and imagination, our hearts and minds, seeking to understand and to help create something different and better. Many days the evidence is overwhelming as we face the pathologies of our history.
- Here at Augsburg, though, we also listen and watch closely and carefully for the Spirit interceding with sighs too deep for words. Here we seek to be co-creators with the Spirit in response to the groaning of creation. Here we see things whole, putting aside our narrow conspiracies and agendas to seek the welfare of all creation. Here we pursue with all of our resources and creativity the possibility of abundance in the face of scarcity. Here we seek to live our faith generously so that all might prosper. Here we imagine the promise of genuine engagement in extraordinary conversations with each other and our fellow citizens about how we might work together to respond to the pain and injustice and imbalance in creation. Here we live in service to our neighbors because it is sometimes all we can do in the face of the evidence.
- And here, especially here, we find hope in the paradox, the tension between the groaning and the sighing. We find hope in the belief that our intellectual and practical efforts are part of the longer arc of God’s time, God’s history, God’s work in our midst, and God’s reign breaking in. We acknowledge that “(N)othing worth doing will be accomplished in our lifetime,” and therefore we go on with our work so that our fellow faithful in generations to come might believe what we believe, what we hope. We are the salt of the earth, a city set on a hill with a light that cannot be extinguished and shall not be hid, the only body of Christ on earth now. What a remarkable gift has been entrusted to us! Thanks be to God. Amen.