

The truth of laying down your life for another

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
May 2, 2009

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought
to lay down our lives for one another.*
(1 John 3: 16))

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. 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.

Lots of sheep in our scriptural readings for this morning. We've got Psalm 23 with its familiar and soothing images of the shepherd leading me beside still waters, restoring my soul, anointing my head with oil, filling me with goodness and mercy. And then there is John's powerful gospel proclaiming Jesus as the good shepherd; the one who lays down his life for the flock; the one who brings all the sheep into the fold.

Sheep and shepherds – geez, not exactly the sort of urban imagery I might hope for as I offer you this sending forth into the world as Augsburg graduates. I don't know much of anything about sheep. We've got community gardens, and I've heard talk about chickens on campus. We're about to start a farmer's market, and then there's Professor Adamo's dog, which acts a bit like a herder. And I'm sure there are animals in the residence halls, though I really don't want to know. But sheep? Maybe head groundskeeper Bruce Rowe would appreciate the assistance of a flock with all of the lawn mowing. You, however, don't strike me as sorts of students who respond well to being herded. And so I'm wondering where the gospel word is in these scriptural texts for the 4th Sunday in Easter – a word fitting for Augsburg, its graduates and its aspirations for the sorts of lives you might lead in the world.

Where is the gospel truth in these images of the shepherd and the sheep that speak to you, the Augsburg class of 2009? Perhaps the first problem I'm having is with my definition of truth. As good educated people, we like to believe that we're all about seeking the truth in our

teaching and learning and scholarship. Why else would we dedicate the time and energy and incredible amount of money in an Augsburg education if not for something as noble as the truth? Who cares about the job market? Who cares about what difference all of this makes, the utility of our education? I want the truth. Good luck with that.

When faced with this challenge of defining truth, I often return to the work of storyteller and English professor, Norman Maclean, who wrote "A River Runs Through It" (1976) and has an important point to make about the role of truth in our lives. Maclean, who began his career as a journalist, is the first-person narrator of the story and near the end of the tale he is speaking with his father, a Presbyterian minister, about the recent murder of his brother. Maclean's father says to him, "You like to tell true stories, don't you?" and Maclean responds, "Yes, I like to tell stories that are true." Then father asks, "After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

I wonder whether the gospel truth for this morning demands just this sort of narrative and poetic turn. If it's about sheep and shepherds we may wonder what relevance it has for us. If, on the other hand, it's about being known and being loved, about knowing and loving, then I think there is a powerful and durable idea in our gospel that is more than simply relevant to your lives as Augsburg graduates in the world, it is urgently required. It is about the truth of laying down your life for another. How about that for your final lesson as an Augsburg student? As the good Shepherd lays down his life of his own accord for the sheep, so too you are called to go and do likewise. Yikes.

Now I would guess that right about here you're hoping for another narrative turn, a poetic moment that relieves you of such a radical claim on your lives. But I'm not inclined to go there because I think Maclean is spot on when he says that only when we allow our made-up stories to unfold will we understand what happened and why. Only our poetic – dare I say, fictional – accounts of the difference this claim makes on our lives will allow us to authentically understand those we live with and love and should know. I'm talking about turning our worlds upside down, of not accepting the world's definitions of success and progress and goodness, of daring to tell a story that illustrates how laying down our lives of our own accord for the sake of our neighbors is what it means to be faithful disciples and human beings. I'm talking about the same claim that the author of John's letter makes when he writes, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Truth and action. The truth of laying down your life for another. This is the story I challenge you to tell in your lives as you leave Augsburg.

And there are so many ways in which your unfolding stories of what it means to lay down your lives for others are needed in the world...

Many of you are going off to the workplace – to big companies, small nonprofits, perhaps a family-owned business. What would it look like to lay down your life for another in the context of your work life? Perhaps the person who has had the most influence in shaping a

work culture characterized by a sense of service to the other is Robert Greenleaf, a long-time leader at AT&T, whose monograph, *The Leader as Servant*, is a guide to many of us seeking to tell a story of leadership in organizational life that is not primarily about self-interest or material gains, but is focused instead on what has come to be known as “servant leadership.”

All of you can be servant-leaders, no matter the size of your organization or business, no matter the role you play. As Greenleaf himself said, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead...The best test [of a servant-leader], and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to be servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further harmed?” The truth of laying down your life for another in your workplace begins with this simple, yet profound, question: Are you willing to serve? If your answer is yes – and I hope it is for each of you – then you have already begun to understand the radical claim of the gospel on your life in the world. And no matter where or with whom you pursue your work, your servant leadership will make organizations and the individuals that inhabit them more fair, just and humane

All of you now enter a society in which your responsibilities as an educated person demand of you the call to citizenship. In what ways does laying down your life for others play itself out in your citizenship? There are to be certain the obvious acts of patriotism and public service that we might associate with the claims of citizenship – serving in the military, giving a year or more of your life to community service, protecting the public safety, even giving up a lucrative career to serve in the legislature or other public office. But I wonder if there is a more pressing claim on all of us as faithful citizens that makes laying down our lives for others more about the daily, mundane acts of civility that help create the kind of society that values all people?

Yale law professor Stephen Carter tells the story of growing up in Washington DC during the late 1960s, part of an African-American family that was a pioneer in neighborhood integration. Carter recalls how he and his family were shunned and ignored by most neighbors, except for one – Sara Kestenbaum, a Jewish woman who lived across the street and who welcomed the Carter family with acts of hospitality and kindness that he has never forgotten. He comments that “Nothing in contemporary secular conversation calls us to give up anything truly valuable for anybody else...Only religion offers a sacred language of sacrifice-selflessness-awe that enables believers to treat their fellow citizens as fellow passengers...I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever.” Indeed, laying down your life for another may be just that simple and yet that profound. It may change many lives forever – most especially yours.

You also leave Augsburg challenged by a world in which those who are different from you – the strangers you will encounter – make a claim upon you that is perhaps more real and intense than it has ever been. Whether that difference is ethnic or cultural, religious, intellectual, ability-based, socioeconomic or political, you will not escape the claim of otherness

in your lives in the world. What does it mean to lay down your life for someone you do not know or understand or perhaps even like?

I have been reading a good bit lately about the work of Jean Vanier, a Catholic lay leader and founder of L'Arche, an international network of Christian communities where people with or without disabilities share life together in a spirit of mutual dependence. Vanier speaks passionately about how his life was transformed by his decision more than forty years ago to live with people with disabilities. He needed to overcome his own fears and stereotypes of those with disabilities. He needed to deal with social myths about people with disabilities. He did this by finding within himself what he calls the "compassion for life" that came when he faced his fears and learned to be present with another human being who happened to be different than he was. Once he learned this compassion and felt its gentleness in his own life, he then devoted himself to building safe communities for others to be present with each other, to live day by day with each other, to seek justice for those who were often marginalized. Laying down your life for another is not simply an act of sacrifice, it is the lifelong practice of learning to be compassionate, to accompany each other, and to seek justice where the world is not fair.

And, finally, you leave Augsburg for a world in which the distinctive faith claims we make as a college community are not necessarily held or perhaps even respected by those you will work alongside, live next to and negotiate life with in the world. How can you imagine laying your life down for others when you don't see the world the same way, when you don't share a faith? To this challenge, I return to our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, who said lots of wise things (and some not so wise!), but one thing he certainly got right when he stated what we now take as gospel around here: 'Whatever our roles in the world happen to be, our mutual vocation is to love God and neighbor.' And whomever we happen to encounter in the world – no matter her faith or lack thereof – we believe that there is a spark of the divine in that person that calls us out of ourselves; that challenges us to lay down our lives for someone whose fears, wants, loves and needs are at least as important as mine; that leads us to proclaim that our God knows us and loves us and therefore that we are called to know and love and serve our neighbor.

This is the gospel truth for this morning – that on this very special day in your lives, surrounded by these colleagues and teachers and friends and family who have meant so much to you, as you commence from Augsburg into the world – you are called to lay down your life for another, for each other. Wherever you go, whatever you do, know this remarkable truth that God so loves the world, that God so loves you, and as the author of John's letter proclaims: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Thanks be to God – and God's people say together, Amen.