

Abide in me

Augsburg College
Baccalaureate Service
May 5, 2012

Abide in me as I abide in you.
(John 15: 4)

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; honored guests; 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, I invite you to join me in exploring what it means that we are called to abide in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, just as he abides in us; this simple idea of thanksgiving for the gifts that abide, that are ours as they have been for generations of those who have gone before us as God’s faithful people in this place we call Augsburg.

The inspiration for my thoughts this morning is in our reading from John’s gospel, where Jesus is teaching his disciples to consider what grounds them, what is the foundation for their work in the world. Using evocative vineyard metaphors, Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” Or again, “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.” And then, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” And finally, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” The point is clear. The call the disciples receive – to bring the gospel to the wider world – is a call from God to do God’s work. Jesus is teaching his disciples – he is teaching us – how to make sense of our various calls as they fit into a larger plan – God’s plan – already in motion in the world. Jesus is teaching us to abide – perhaps one of the most beautiful words in the English language.

For those of us gathered here some 2000 years later, this notion of the call to abide may strike us as fairly obvious. It is, of course, the gift of our vocations, the gift at the heart of an Augsburg education – perhaps the gift you would like to stop talking about. But, of course, the

point is that it is a gift you will never stop receiving because it is at the heart of your life of faith and work; it is the gift 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 come to hear and follow a call. Perhaps the most compelling stories of vocational journeys are found in the lives of Jesus' disciples as depicted in the Christian scriptures. Think about Simon Peter and John and Thomas and Paul and Mary and Miriam and Tabitha– and all of those invited by Jesus to follow – 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.

In these days after Easter, 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, our exploration of what it means to abide?

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. A call to abide in our awesome and loving God, You're not alone with these vocational feelings!

"Where I am going," Jesus tells his disciples in the 14th chapter of 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...abide in me and all will be well.

And now what?

In a recent article, Martin Marty has remarked that faithful people are called to pay attention to the ways in which God is depicted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as generous, a generosity that runs counter to careful, rational, human calculations. From acts of creation to covenants with chosen people to presence in the midst of anguish and suffering, the character of God is marked with generous self-giving. And the appropriate response to this generous God is to give thanks and get to work – with glad and generous hearts. We too are called to abide in this generosity, in this love, and to follow our calls to be God's people and do God's work in the world.

What a rare gift it is for those of us who are part of the Augsburg community to have this gospel inspiration and challenge in our lives. In this community of faith and learning, we too acknowledge the gifts we have been given – the gifts of faith and education and community and service – even as we embrace our calls to abide in God's love and do God's work.

Here are three brief scenarios of how we might pursue our lives of abundance and generosity – scenarios meant not to tell us what to do but to encourage us to live faithfully, to abide in God’s love and plan for the world as we go forth from this place.

We abide in our place

The concept of the abundance and generosity of place is much on my mind these days in our work at Augsburg, especially as we think about our campus and its place in the neighborhood. The original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary and College also comes from John’s gospel, the first chapter: “And the Word became flesh” – and so it does, here, in our midst, God with us. We believe that Augsburg College practices generosity most authentically when it lives as the Word made flesh – abiding, present, rooted, of service, faithful, in this place.

I have long believed that colleges are indigenous communities – that is, they are native to a particular place, a particular environment, a particular set of values and practices that define us – and that means something for the way we live our lives, it means something for the ways in which we understand the abundance and generosity of place and values and presence. For Augsburg, in particular, our place in this neighborhood known as Cedar-Riverside clearly shapes the values and commitments we have as an academic institution focused on education for service,

The poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, writes these wise words in his prose poem, “Damage” – “No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one’s knowledge of one’s whereabouts is insufficient, if one’s judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use.”

Berry’s good advice is extended by the work of friend and Sabo Center colleague, Jay Walljasper, whose *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking* (New Society Publishers, 2007) draws us into his “neighborhood love story” with lots of practical advice to live generously in our place.

A few of his principles of placemaking are relevant to our lives in this neighborhood and to the places where you will find yourselves in the days ahead:

- (1) The community is the expert (no, consultants aren’t better than your neighbors when it comes to good ideas for our neighborhood!)
- (2) You can’t do it alone (look for the right partners)
- (3) They’ll always say “It can’t be done” (take it as a good sign when others tell you why it won’t work – you’re probably on the right track)
- (4) You can see a lot by just observing (look for what works)
- (5) Make the connections (working together adds up to more than the sum of the parts)
- (6) Start with petunias (sweat the small things because they set the stage for real change)
- (7) Money is not the issue (a spirited community will find ways around financial obstacles)

(8) You are never finished (managing after a project is finished will ensure that great places abide.)

Walljasper quotes Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who says “The citizen takes his city for granted far too often. He (and she) forgets to marvel.” In other words, we forget to abide!

“The Word became flesh” is both a theological and practical claim. How can we be even more generous in our whereabouts and place as the body of Christ here and now, as the Word made flesh in this place, as Augsburg College here in Cedar-Riverside and everywhere we are found?

And how will you take your lessons of abiding in this place into your work in the world? God calls you to abide, to take root as healthy branches on the vine, to love the places where you are planted, to be the Word made flesh here and now.

We abide in our common lives

Let us now turn to our lives together right here on campus and in the various communities and organizations where we daily live and work and bring our faith and gifts to bear. Allow me to confess, as a lifelong organizational person, we need all of our glad and generous hearts to help our communities and organizations – including our college – live up to their better natures! We need to discern and embrace our vocations to do God’s good and generous work – to abide in God’s love and our common purpose – in the midst of settings too often shaped by the demands of the world that are grounded in scarcity, bitterness and entitlement.

These days, I’m very excited about the work of Public Achievement, a program of Augsburg’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship, that focuses on teaching the skills and habits that accompany and sustain a change in individuals from spectators to citizens

As CDC director Harry Boyte reminds us, quoting an important hymn of the civil rights movement, “We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For,” we are those called to abide in love and common purpose when the world says no. We have both that power and that obligation.

I’ve watched with great pride as many of you – our Augsburg students and faculty and staff begin to embrace the Public Achievement work – in our Special Education curriculum, where our faculty are training student teachers to work with their high school students to give them the voice they never thought they had; in our Enrollment Center, where staff are identifying obstacles to serving students as well as they would like and are offering up their solutions, instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do; and in our work with youth from the neighborhood, where the Public Achievement model is offering them a way to take back control over lives that are too often buffeted by circumstances controlled by others.

We are called to lives of faith in this community and all of the communities and organizations where we live and work day in and out. How will you follow the call to common purpose by becoming a partner with your fellow citizens – by offering your all, your mind and knowledge and experience – to say yes, to be a co-creator of God’s abundant intentions for God’s people and world, to abide in love and grace for the sake of communities of memory and justice and compassion?

We abide in our lives of faith alongside those who do not share our faith

Finally, I challenge all of us to consider what it means to abide in our faith as we live in an increasingly complex world – with and alongside our neighbors who do not share our faith. We live in diverse communities where our various faiths demand of us a generosity of spirit and means, where we are called to lives together in support of healthy and just and compassionate communities. We are called by the God we know in Jesus Christ to say yes alongside those who know God in other ways – to proclaim that we have been freed for lives of generosity that abide in service to all God’s good creation and creatures. While the world divides and polarizes and demonizes the other, we are called to find common purpose, to live as God intends, to live with and for each other.

I lift up the important interfaith work our community has engaged in recent years in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood (with special thanks to Pastor Sonja for her good leadership). We are convinced that dialogue and service must be interwoven in all we do. We believe that what we learned through recent efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue with our neighbors is something we must do each day. We are working hard on safety, youth activities, infrastructure plans, and economic development to model interfaith living within our neighborhood.

We abide in God’s love – the call of our faith – when we learn and practice this sort of hospitality, this sort of interfaith living. Eboo Patel, who founded the Interfaith Youth Corps in Chicago – and who is a regular visitor to Augsburg – challenged some of our Augsburg colleagues with this question in a recent presentation, a question we have begun to address together here at Augsburg: “What is it in your experience of the cross of Jesus Christ that calls you, that calls us, into the generous work of interfaith living?” How will you answer?

On this very special day, we give thanks for all of you who follow your calls to abide in God’s love. In this college, we have sought to educate you to live as those called to abide in place, in the promise of common lives and purpose, and in the complexities of diverse faiths and cultures. We now send you forth, equipped to be God’s people and do God’s work. As we heard in the epistle from John this morning, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” This is the Word made flesh, God at work in the world, in the cosmos, in our daily lives. This is the good news. I am loved and I am called, and so I join the great and glad work of loving the world – even as we struggle with 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 abide in the One who first loved us. Thanks be to God. And God’s people say together, Amen.