

**SERMON FOR THE INAUGURATION OF PAUL C. PRIBBENOW
AS PRESIDENT OF AUGSBURG COLLEGE
Minneapolis, MN
October 20, 2006**

It is part of the ritual of these inaugural occasions that people bring greetings to the college and its new president. The authorized representative of, say, the church, or another educational institution, or the local community has a designated spot on the program to say a few words of welcome to the new president and offer good wishes to the assembled faculty, students, staff, and friends.

In that spirit, I want to begin this morning with a few words as an entirely unauthorized representative of the past. I greet you on behalf of all of us who have known and worked with Paul Pribbenow over the years and benefited from his leadership in many different places. I greet you on behalf of the people to whom he interpreted the mission of Wabash College, Rockford College, the University of Chicago, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I greet you on behalf of the members of community groups he has led, the churches where he has preached, and those for whom he designed programs on peace, service, and education. I greet you on behalf of everybody who ever got a good cup of coffee at the coffee shop in the basement of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Managing that coffee shop was, I believe, President Pribbenow's first experience in transformative leadership, and from my point of view, it was one of the best.

But in bringing you greetings from the past, I am also welcoming you to your own future, because those of us who have worked with Paul Pribbenow in the past know what you can expect in this new phase of the history of Augsburg College that we inaugurate today.

We know that you can look forward to gifted leadership, extraordinary energy and organizational skills, and the ability to focus a wide range of activity into a single, coherent message. You have perhaps already begun to experience that leadership in this inauguration itself, with its themes of abundance, generosity, engagement, and service. As I looked at the program with its multiple events and its common themes, I spotted the Pribbenow imprint of energy and organization. I think that if I took that program, blanked out all the proper names, took it around with me and asked, "Whose inauguration is this?" I believe that approximately 95% of all the people who've ever worked with Paul Pribbenow would be able to answer the question correctly.

The imprint of energy and organization is on these events, and also the imprint of imagination and aspiration: "In ages of imagination, this firm persuasion removed mountains," says the poet William Blake, in a line that has been quoted on many of the program materials for this inauguration.

And I suppose that what you want to know about the future from my knowledge of the past is whether it is really true that this guy can move mountains. I'm here to tell you that he can, and I'm also going to tell you how he does it.

There is a style of leadership that stands before the mountain at the appointed hour, stretches out its hand, levitates the mountain, moves it to where it is wanted, and sets it down again—to everyone's astonishment. Everybody applauds, and nobody breaks a sweat.

Now, I don't know whether you will be disappointed by this, but that's not how Pribbenow does it.

Instead, what happens is this: Pribbenow gets up in the morning, maybe a little earlier than most, goes to work like everybody else, and goes home at night, maybe a little later than the rest. And everybody keeps on doing what they do, and then, some months later you look around and you realize that the landscape has changed. The mountain, that used to be over here, is now over there. The way Paul Pribbenow moves mountains is to figure out what everybody is already doing and tie those activities together into a single mission with a unified message, so that when the mountain moves, it's because you moved it.

That's what real leadership is about, it seems to me, especially in higher education. Institutions that aren't sure what they want often say that they want a leader with "vision," by which they mean someone who will supply the imagination they were lacking when they said they wanted someone with vision.

But vision is greatly overrated as a quality in college presidents. William Blake was a great poet who could imagine sitting down to dinner with Isaiah and Ezekiel and write about it in such a way as to make you believe it had happened. But you wouldn't want him leading your next capital campaign.

Leadership that makes a difference in higher education has the kind of vision that sees the goal in what people are already doing and connects those goals in a way that finds the shared themes in the many different activities that make up the life of a twenty-first century college. That vision binds them together in ways that make a difference to the people in the college and to the world around it. Thus when the vision emerges, it's because you contributed part of it, and when the mountain moves, it's because you moved it.

That is a glimpse of your future, brought to you courtesy of my entirely unauthorized greeting from the past. But there is another word that I have been authorized to bring you this morning, and that is the Word of the Gospel that cuts across past, present, and future, calling us to account, and uniting what we do in what God is doing through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And that Word, as I hear it this morning, also comes to us in the form of a question, which is: "Do you want to move the mountains?"

As soon as we understand that change is not a magic act, we have to face the question whether we really want what we say we want, whether we are ready to become part of something that is larger than we are, and more than what we can do for ourselves. We say we want to move mountains, but the Good News is that the mountains are already in motion. So everything that appears permanent and secure is actually passing away, and only what knows its own vulnerability, feels its own weakness, and understands what it lacks will endure. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek."

Especially for those of us who spend our lives around institutions of higher education, it is hard to hear those words without secretly hoping that they are not quite true, or at least not quite true yet. There are a few things I want to get done, before I join the meek and the poor in spirit. There is still some ambition I have to feed, before I am ready to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

So discovering that I have a new leader who can move mountains always makes me a little nervous, because I know that, whatever I may have said, there is a part of me that likes the mountains right where they are. There is a lot that I have managed to bury under them. I suspect that there are things behind them that I do not want to see—things that I could no longer ignore, if the mountain were somewhere else. The Good News is that the mountains are already in motion. The question is whether we're ready to receive that as Good News.

Education is supposed to be about expanding our vision of the world and changing the way we see our own place in it. It is about asking new questions, and questioning familiar answers. It should change us in fundamental ways, not just fill our heads with facts. Education is inseparable from change, personal and social, change in ideas, goals, and priorities.

However, a student who needs a degree does not always want an education, at least not when the student begins to understand what real education means. What many students want most from higher education today are measurable skills that are fitted to specific tasks. And, I might add, our accrediting agencies are accommodating them by insisting that outcomes assessment is the way to evaluate institutional effectiveness. For those students and those evaluators, predictable outcomes suited to known opportunities for employment are the goals to be sought. If those are your goals, you don't want the mountains to be moving around. When the landscape changes it tends to move the goalposts, too. So, let's move mountains, by all means, but not until I've had a chance to score a few points with the goalposts right where I've come to expect them. Instead of leveling the playing field, professor, teach me how to score on the slant.

But students are not the only one's who may not be ready to have the mountains move. Education is supposed to be about the creation of knowledge, as well as its transmission. Education is about research, artistic creation and performance, as well as thinking and writing. It is about finding new ways to see the world and testing them in honest engagement with the critical insight of other people who share the same discipline, whether those people are in the office across the hall or on the other side of the world. That is the essential service performed by research and scholarship. It is the reason why we need colleges and universities. It is the reason why faculty occupy the privileged place we do, in our schools and in the wider society. Institutions of higher education rightly expect this creativity from their faculty. Sometimes they demand it, for example, at times of tenure and promotion reviews. At their best, schools occasionally do things that actually recognize and enable it.

But a faculty member learns quickly enough that life in higher education is one of the most stable and sheltered routines that is available in our society to persons who are not actually confined to a mental institution. And, most often,

people who have settled into those routines do not want any mountains moved. Not right now, anyway, thank you. New programs, higher standards, or a curriculum that crosses departments and disciplinary lines – these things raise the possibility that there are problems that were not solved in my dissertation. Behind that mountain there are people whose poverty has not been relieved by my lectures on economics, whose questions about new medical technology are not touched by my book on ethics. There are people whose lives are full of hopes and fears that are never spoken in the kinds of literature I have taught for ten, or twenty, or thirty years. Leave the mountains where they are for now, where we have all come to expect them to be.

But students and faculty are not the only ones who are not be ready to have the mountains move. Education is supposed to be about the pursuit of truth, even the sometimes inconvenient truths that challenge social assumptions, and reveal a history that is different from the stories we've told about the past. Education might ask uncomfortable questions. Questions like whether the God we worship in our churches is the Creator of heaven and earth, or whether that god is perhaps the creation of some 19th century hymn writer. These are uncomfortable questions, and they are not made any easier by knowing that the people who ask them do not always get the answers right the first time.

Still, that is the vocation of colleges and universities—the pursuit of truth. That is why we have a right to make claims on the abundance of our society and the generosity of our donors. That is how we seek to engage our churches, too. We cannot claim that we always deliver the truth, that we deliver only the truth, or that we can produce truth upon demand and dispense it in convenient packages. Even so, society, donors, and churches have a right to expect that we will pursue the truth with energy and integrity, making good use of the resources they have committed to us.

Yet behind that ideal lie the controversies that every campus knows—the commencement speaker who raises questions that parents and the public were not expecting to hear, the student dramatic production whose language and emotions are just a little too raw for local sensitivities, the Bible class that challenges a freshman's literalistic faith, or the history text that questions patriotic assumptions about the past.

It is at that point that even a president who can move mountains may wonder whether he wants to move them, just now. It is easier to go to donors, parents, and church leaders with a traveling exhibit of the safe old truths that we found once, truths that everybody is now comfortable with, than it is to engage the campus and that wider constituency in the pursuit of truth now. Comfortable faculty members do not want to ask hard questions. Consumerist students and their parents do not want to have their assumptions questioned. Free expression of ideas among colleagues sharing a common purpose is exactly what society does not want. We prefer our ideas presented in talk show format, where we know what side the host is on before the exchange begins, and the pursuit of truth occasionally involves participants throwing the furniture at one another.

To lead a college in the genuine pursuit of truth, with honesty in the inquiry, mutual respect among the participants, and integrity in the presentation

of the results is a risky vocation at this point in our history. But then, there never has been a Christian vocation that was without risks, because we are always called to those places where God is making all things new, where blessings take the unfamiliar forms of sorrow, humility, peaceableness, and a hunger for justice.

The word of greeting I bring you from the past is that great things are possible for Augsburg College, beginning today, because you have a leader who will listen to you, who can see the possibilities that you see, and who can bring them together in new ways that will empower you and energize all these people who want a future of abundance, generosity, engagement, and service for this institution.

But the word I bring from the Lord, the word that cuts across past, present, and future, comes to you today in the form of a question. It is addressed equally to students, faculty, and staff, addressed to alumni, supporters, and to the church. And it is addressed to the president. The question is, "Do you really want to move the mountains?"

The opportunity to move mountains is a gift of grace that comes to us rarely, or perhaps just a gift that is seldom recognized. So we should not waste it, or push it off because it is too hard, or surrender it to fear. I think you recognize the opportunity, and I pray that you will enjoy the blessings that come with accepting the vocation: That through humility and even sorrow, your hunger for truth and justice will be satisfied; that through integrity and generosity in judgment, you will see God; and that through the knowledge you create and share, the world will find peace, and you will be called the children of God.

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