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Sesquicentennial Sermon: Augustana as a Messenger of Christian Humility

Sermon at First Lutheran Church, Moline, Illinois, by Steve C. Bahls, December 2010

(Texts: Isaiah 10:1-11; Ps 111; Col 1:15-17; John 8:32)

I would like to thank Pastor Witkowski for his kind invitation to be with you this morning. It's a special privilege for me to be here at First Lutheran Church -- the "Mother Church" of the Augustana Synod in the Quad Cities -- and to share this time with you. As First Lutheran is celebrating its first 160 years, Augustana is celebrating its 150 years.

We at the college have taken that as an opportunity to think deeply and broadly about our history as an institution, and how our past informs our future as a college related to the ELCA. In the process of doing this, my colleagues and I have found that scripture has been a source of both strength and guidance to our forebears throughout the 150-year history of Augustana, and that certain passages have played definitive roles in the life of the institution.

Included in this morning's lectionary are two readings that have played important roles in Augustana's history, and I am grateful for the opportunity to consider the significant meaning these and other passages have had -- and continue to have -- to those of us at Augustana.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God

Our first reading this morning from Isaiah describes the Spirit of the Lord as being the "spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." For me, a helpful path for engaging this spirit in the life and work of Augustana College has been through the prescription of Micah, Chapter 6. In 2003, I used this well-known text as one of the central themes of my installation address as the eighth president of the college. What I have come to learn since is that the passage from Micah was of great meaning for my predecessors, as well.

For me, the importance of the admonition to "do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God" is rooted in the person of a Sunday School teacher I had as a child growing up in Des Moines. This teacher was an attorney, and I think part of what drew me to my own career in the law was the example this man set. What was most remarkable about him, however, was the way in which he modeled the words from Micah throughout his personal and professional life.

The same, I believe, can be said of the longest-serving president in Augustana's history. I was delighted -- though not too surprised -- to learn that the same passage from the sixth chapter of Micah was used to eulogize Gustav Andreen following his passing in 1940.

The Reverend P.O. Bersell, then president of the former Augustana Synod, chose this text in speaking about Andreen and the influence he had on both the college and the church during his remarkable 35-year tenure as Augustana's president. In his tribute to Andreen, Bersell recounted the many instances -- large and small -- in

which Andreen's passionate commitment to justice was displayed. Of his kindness, Bersell wrote that Andreen "could consort without embarrassment with the great of the earth, or with the poor and lowly, with king or with peasant. And they would feel at home with him."

"His humility," Bersell wrote, "grew out of his continuous experience of God's grace. He exemplified the truth of the words of Jesus, 'He that is chief among you, let him be as he that doth serve.'"

We strive to point our students toward this kind of humility. Unlike the common definition of humility, which too often gets confused with assumed lowliness, I'm talking about the kind of humility that has been defined as "being the right size." Our students are like Andreen in that they come to us with considerable intellectual assets. We want them to hone those so that they are both aware of and confident in their gifts, and ready to use them with purpose; in other words, never to play a situation in their lives "too small," but to strive to be the right size. At the same time, we want our students to have a grounding -- like Andreen's -- that lets them, in Bersell's words, "consort without embarrassment" with all of the people they will encounter in their lives, from the greatest to the least -- to make them feel at home with them. This means never playing a situation in their lives "too large," but again, striving to be the right size.

The Christian notion of humility is of central importance because it can be traced through each of the readings before us this morning. It is not mere happenstance that this common thread can be found in these four passages, each of which has played an important and meaningful role in the life of Augustana College.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

The 111th Psalm gave to Augustana a text well-remembered by generations of its former students -- including our nation's Greatest Generation, as well as all those whose years at the college came before the dedication of our Centennial Hall in 1960. Before the opening of that building, the primary worship space for the college was a somewhat cramped chapel in the east wing of our Old Main building.

Inscribed at the front of the chapel was half a verse from this very Psalm: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

I would like to think that these words were very intentionally chosen by Augustana's second president, T.N. Hasselquist, who oversaw construction of the college's landmark Old Main. That's because the deeper we dig into this phrase the more we realize just how appropriate it is for a college chapel.

By beginning our pursuit of wisdom from a place of respect, subordination and even indebtedness to God, we shift our trajectory. The real wisdom of which the Psalmist speaks is not that which is based solely on the human intellect. This real wisdom requires an orientation toward humility against which our pride too often rebels. And the result of that rebellion is hubris.

It's this kind of excessive pride or arrogance that leads us to believe that the goal of all learning is only the enrichment of self without regard to the bigger picture. When we pursue wisdom in the utter absence of God or any consideration of such a larger picture, we are prone to see the promotion of self-interest as the exclusive aim of our lives. We need only look around to see the terrible price that is paid for this kind of hubris.

The concept of vocation

But if self-interest is not a sufficient starting point in our pursuit of higher education, what is? The reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians guides us to the answer. It's a very meaningful passage for many of us at Augustana, since this was the text chosen for Dr. Conrad Bergendoff's memorial service, following his passing in 1997 at the age of 102.

Bergendoff was Augustana's fifth president, serving from 1935 to 1962, and he is remembered with great fondness by alumni who attended Augustana in those years. In all that he did -- whether as teacher, scholar or college president -- he gave witness to this text from Colossians, and the belief it represents in the centrality of Christ across all of human experience. As my predecessor, Thomas Tredway, who spoke at that memorial, has said of Bergendoff, "he saw Christ as the very center of life and learning."

Since its first days, Augustana has been a place where students are invited to encounter this centrality. And this means all students, including those who are not Christian. That's because even though we neither ask nor require students to sign a statement of belief -- Lutheran, Christian or otherwise -- we do introduce them to the Christian concept of vocation. The notion of calling is built into the very fabric of our academic program, and the result -- for our students -- is nothing short of transformational.

I call upon Frederick Buechner in helping our students and others grasp what vocation means in a Christian context. Buechner noted that Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. This is essential to a Christian understanding of calling, because it reminds us that our talents -- and our passions -- do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are gifts from God to which God asks us to respond by putting them to use in service to our neighbor, our community, and our world.

Our concept of calling, then, is informed by Service. And that brings us to a second theologian I rely on in understanding Vocation. In describing what we today call "servant leadership," Martin Luther wrote this:

"If there is anything [good] in us it is not our own, it is a gift of God. . . . Thus my learning is not my own, it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe to them. My wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. ... We must empty ourselves in order that the forms of a servant may be in us, because it is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and," Luther wrote, "intervene on behalf of those who do not have them."

These thoughts -- from Frederick Buechner and Martin Luther -- serve to create the underpinning of Augustana's work in helping students discern their vocations. Through our Center for Vocational Reflection and our Community Engagement Center, our students are given the opportunity to put their learning to work within the context of vocation.

I hope you're seeing a pattern here, especially concerning the manner in which the concept of Christian humility -- "being the right size" -- has been and continues to be part of the DNA of Augustana College, and indeed a distinguishing factor that sets Lutheran higher education apart.

The truth will make you free

If we were to try and distill all of this history into a single Gospel passage that both describes our past and charts our future, I think the task would be daunting ... but not impossible. But I feel confident that one passage certainly deserving consideration would be a single line from the eighth chapter of John's Gospel: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

The applicability of these words from Jesus might seem plainly evident at a college like Augustana; but I find great meaning in a sermon on this text delivered by the great 20th century Lutheran thinker, Joseph Sittler. Sittler spoke several times at Augustana and numerous other Lutheran colleges and universities, and in the process had a profound impact on our Lutheran understanding of higher education.

Preaching on this text, Sittler held that the kind of truth represented by knowledge and learning could only take you so far.

This kind of scientific truth-seeking is obviously of great value, and results in all kinds of blessings, from greater agricultural production and improved health care to alternative energy sources and new art-forms undreamed of a generation ago. And this kind of truth does have the power to set us free: freedom from hunger, from illness, from poverty, and -- in the case of literature, music and art -- freedom from the insularity and loneliness that can accompany an unexamined life. But Sittler holds that this is not the kind of truth Jesus was talking about in the eighth chapter of John.

That's because this kind of truth -- as powerful as it is -- is still insufficient to set us free from the most prevalent form of bondage in all of human experience: slavery to self.

"The core of man's un-freedom," Sittler wrote, "is his self-imprisonment. He is a slave because he permits himself to be enslaved to his self's tyrannical power." For Sittler, the truth that sets us free is the truth of the Gospel -- the "good news" that we are redeemed through the love of God. And Sittler warned of becoming "a prisoner of a love too small" for the scope of God's grace.

This too, is a message of Christian humility. For a college related to the church, it reminds us that while we strive to provide an education that equips students to pursue the truth that redeems them and sets them free, we can't take them all the way there. As Sittler wrote, "Education is not [in itself] redemptive because damnation is not simply ignorance or inaccuracy about fact. But knowledge is related to redemption because and insofar as it serves the truth."

It is our engagement with the church and its people that allows Augustana to continue to benefit fully from its distinctive DNA, and to provide the kind of transformative experience for our students that sets Lutheran higher education apart. That's why I am so grateful for your visits to our campus, and for your kind invitation to be here this morning.

As I mentioned earlier, in preparing for this sermon I had occasion to review the memorial service that was held for Dr. Bergendoff in 1998. In doing so, I found a prayer written by Pastor Richard Swanson, who was chaplain at the college at that time, and it struck me as being appropriate to our time together this morning. And so I close with that prayer:

"O God... breathe your creative, nurturing, encouraging Spirit into our lives. Make us not only good and grateful

stewards of the past, but also good and grateful stewards of the future, that the life we hold here may always be a joining of the yesterday, today and tomorrow which come from you."

Amen.



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