

Gustavus Adolphus College Association of Congregations
150th Anniversary of Gustavus Adolphus College
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Saint Peter, Minnesota
April 21, 2012

Thank you. I greet you in the name of our risen Christ this morning.

It's good to be with you and to give thanks to God for 150 years of Gustavus Adolphus in the vocation of higher education, 50 years of the ministry and the vibrancy of the community that gathers in Christ Chapel around the means of grace, and 25 years of the congregations that have gathered as the Association of Congregations that sustain support with your prayers, your engagement in classes, and your welcoming Gustavus faculty in your congregations. I want to say a special word of thanks to your president Jack Ohle, with whom I have been privileged to serve with in leadership in this church when he was at Wartburg and now here. We have a great collegial relationship with those he serves and he serves you well. Will you join me in thanking him for his leadership?

The danger in all anniversary celebrations is that we become susceptible to a contagious virus that I have warned the church about now for many years. And I fear sometimes we need an inoculation. It's a virus called nostalgia. When we come to these milestones we can look back with deep gratitude and loving memories that position us for God's future, or we can succumb to nostalgia. Nostalgia becomes a buttress against the changing realities of the present and the dynamic unfolding future that God has prepared for us. Then we begin to mark everything in the present, as it doesn't quite live up to that past that we know never really existed, but in our nostalgic longing we've made it something romantic.

So this day is about living memories. This day is about the Lutheran vocation of higher education. It's not just about Gustavus. It's not just about colleges and universities. It's about a calling, a vocation that I believe is inherent to our self-understanding as being Lutherans. Our shared vocation in higher education as Lutherans is to be a community that nurtures unquenchable curiosity but set in a culture of insatiable appetites for success, for position, for possessions and for personal satisfaction.

One of my favorite quotes, outside of the Bible of course, is Joseph Sittler in describing his understanding of grace. "What I am appealing for is an understanding of grace that has the magnitude of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment."¹ That's our vocation. As a recipient of the giftedness of the wonder of life, to be a community that asks questions that transcends the moment.

Go back to the creation stories in Genesis. The account of when God began to create and how did God describe all that God has and continues to create? "It is good. It is very good." What in the world does such grace, such goodness blessed by God, have to do with the vocation of higher education? Everything in the world.

¹ Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 14.

As Bishop Jon Anderson said this morning at the beginning of our gathering, we are now coming into marking 500 years of this ongoing movement of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther said that God is present in all creatures. Christ is around us and in us and present in all creatures and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water or even in a rope, for he is certainly there.² Ponder that moment. Ponder those words in the context of our shared vocation in higher education. If God through Christ is present in all creatures, that means God is present in all of life's complexities and uniqueness, in all of its intricate life forms, in all of our complex relationships, in all of the beauty of the creation. All are full of God's presence and God declares them to be good. And therefore, all of God's creation is worthy of our exploration, our wonder, our seeking deeper understanding, our curiosity and our care. I would go even further to say that if we treat and view God's creation as unworthy of exploration and understanding and learning, if we deem it to be unworthy of respect for human dignity and worth, it would be our rebellion against God's promise and God's word of purpose.

If I were in the parish, again I would take three months and invite all of us into a Biblical study of the questions Jesus asks. So often we run to the Bible to find answers. In fact, a lay Jewish scholar friend of mine said, "We Jews go to Scripture expecting it to ask questions we have never pondered. You Christians seem to bring your questions and demand answers of which the Biblical writers never pondered."

I remember a pastor in Hawaii when the bumper stickers were popular *The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.* He went around with a magic marker and wrote *The Bible says it. Therefore, I will question it.* I don't know if he has a call these days or not. (Laughter) But think about Jesus the questioner. At age 12, he said to his mother, "Didn't you know I must be in my father's house?" Jesus becoming the first Gallup pollster of his disciples asking, "Well, who do they say I am?" Well, about 12% Elijah, about 18% Moses, about 28% think you are one of the prophets and then he pushes on and says, "But who do you say that I am?" Even in his dying, Jesus did not cease to ask questions, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" And the risen Christ kept pressing on with his questions. Peter Simon son of John, "Do you love me? Do you love me more than these? Three times. To Saul, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" It was Jesus through his questions opened the ones being questioned to the inbreaking of God's reign of justice and mercy and peace and forgiveness in the presence of this one, the Word made flesh.

When I taught confirmation and it was coming up to Confirmation Sunday, I would meet with the students and, like many of you pastors, I would ask the students to write a statement of faith in their own words. And then I would ask them to write three questions for which they did not now have the answer that had arisen for them by virtue of having spent two years in the catechism and in Scripture. And they would come with their parents to sit in my office and if they didn't have at least three unanswered questions, I felt I had failed as a pastor.

For two years they had been in the catechism, always being beckoned to say, "What does this mean?" I would also have them write sermon notes. I'll never forget the one student who, at the bottom of his sermon note, wrote, "Pastor Hanson, I'm sorry I didn't do a very good job with my sermon notes this Sunday but then again you didn't do a very good job with the sermon." (Laughter) So he said, "How about next week, we both try

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 36, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 342.

harder?” (Laughter) Believe me, it was a holy moment when years later I got to preach at his ordination. May it come back to haunt him week after week.

Our shared calling to be a community that nurtures unquenchable curiosity is behind the most helpful insight that Professor Darrell Jodock has given the whole church. When I think back to a paper in 2002 to one of your trustees, he began to describe the third way of Lutheran higher education. You know it. It’s your gift to the whole church, Darrell and Gustavus because he said, “Most higher education is categorized either as sectarian or non-sectarian. The sectarian model was probably pretty close to the thoughts of those founding Swedes who birthed Gustavus. To create a community of the church, to serve the church, to prepare teachers and pastors, to keep sustaining the faith and, in some respects, to keep young people of the faith protected in communities that proclaimed and taught and lived the faith.” But sectarian schools see themselves almost as set apart from the world.

Listen to Douglas John Hall in *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey*: “Fundamentalism, whatever the origins of the term, has come to mean a position of such exactness and certitude that those embracing it or more accurately, those embraced by it, feel themselves delivered from all the relativities, uncertainties, and transcendence of human existence. They are provided, they are fed with a firm foundation—a fundamentum—greater than their own finitude, greater than any observations of any of the sciences, greater than the collective word of the human race.”³

One of the unfulfilled dreams of my life is to play the blues piano like Lazy Bill Lucas and have B.B. King backing me up on guitar. I don’t play a note yet so I’ve got a long way to go. You’ve probably never heard of Lazy Bill Lucas but he’s the first blues player I ever heard when I was in college in Minneapolis going to one of those coffee houses in the Cedar-Riverside area.

And why do I like the blues? Because I like the tension and the interplay between the pianist and his or her improv riffing and the tension beneath it with the bass player and B.B. King, which also sometimes has that improve and those chords. I think that’s a metaphor for the Christian life. The base chords are set in our baptismal calling. When the pastor says to those affirming their baptismal calling, “Do you intend to live in the holy covenant God made for you in holy baptism?” You know that question, right? But then the pastor strikes the five notes that are the base chord of baptismal life. “Do you intend to live in the holy covenant God made for you in holy baptism?”

The first one is to live among God’s faithful people. The baptismal life is a communal life. It’s a life lived in community. It’s not a solo spiritual flight between you and the divine. And so too we talk about the vocation of higher education being communal. It’s a community engaged in curiosity and wonder and exploration to be God’s community engaged in the lifelong quest of those intersections where faith and life meet. And so this community opens up students to the intricacies of DNA, the complexities of philosophical thought, the narratives of history and mathematical formulas that I can’t begin to comprehend. It opens up the eyes to the beauty of the painter, the ears to the wonder of the musician, always saying in this life that God has placed us with a sense of

³ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 100.

wonder, a sense of exploration, a sense of gratitude and a call to steward its mysteries.

Our shared vocation in higher education as Lutherans is to be a community of unquenchable curiosity in which faith is nourished, expressed and explored. I didn't see a sign when I came up the hill to the campus that said, "Welcome to Gustavus Adolphus College. Park your faith here. Pick it up again in four years if you think you still need it when you leave." Faith is nourished in this community of learning. I was struck this morning by Jacob Niewinski, the student who addressed us, who confidently said (And I probably could not share that confidence from my life.) that he has never had a day when he did not sense God's presence in his life. There are such students in this community where faith is nurtured. And then I was struck by Reverend John Hogenson, who chairs your association, and I said, "You're back in the place where Jesus got a hold of you, aren't you?" John heard the Gospel here. John was baptized here. What two great stories of how faith is nourished in this community through prayer, Bible study, worship and exploration, and it's expressed.

The question I'm asked most often when I'm with young adults is, "Bishop, what does it mean to be a Christian in a context of many faiths and in relationships where, according to the latest research, the most frequent response among young adults to the question, 'What religion are you?' is none. I'm never asked, interestingly enough, questions about sexuality when I'm with young adults. I'm asked questions about living amidst diversity with integrity and openness as Christians.

On Easter Sunday, I called Bishop Munib Younan, who is the President of the Lutheran World Federation as well as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. I call him every Christmas and Easter and I always ask him, "OK. What did you preach on today?" It's a good bet it was on Christ's resurrection. But I always know he contextualizes the Good News. And he said, "Today, Mark, I preached in Jerusalem and I preached on the power and promise of Christ's resurrection that will enable us to confront the reality and the challenges of religious extremism in the world." I think it's one of the most real, pressing challenges that we face. In a world that more and more hears the testimony of people of religious conviction to be those who use that conviction for the sake of domination and exploitation and intimidation and violence. The vocation of higher education and Lutheran higher education is to simultaneously deepen faith and simultaneously enable us as people of faith to be open to the faith of the other.

I spoke to a college president colleague of Jack's for an hour on the phone. His community of one of our Lutheran colleges was expanding its religious diversity with the presence of Muslim students and Hindu students and acknowledging that diversity needs to be part of the education in the milieu of that campus. He's getting increasing heat from parents, especially, and from donors. Parents e-mailing and calling him and saying, "I'm sending our daughter and son to that school to be deepened in their Lutheran faith and not be exposed to all these other traditions." But it's precisely in that context that we live as people of faith.

About a month ago, I was invited to New York University by the Coexist Foundation. You may know them at least by the bumper stickers. But the Coexist Foundation exists to deepen understanding of people with different religious convictions around the world. At this event they were giving the first award to the person in the local communities who was doing the most to bring about reconciliation in the face of religious divisions. The \$100,000 prize was given to a young woman from Indonesia, who came back to her village where Christians and Muslims were killing each other. This young woman began to organize the women and children in her village as a countervailing force, in one community, and then another and then another till the power of those women and children was a force against violence and they began to see their religious convictions as Christians and Muslims as the occasion to bring reconciliation, not division. This \$100,000 prize would enable her to expand her work.

The program that night was the Grand Mufti of Egypt, the chief Islamic leader of Egypt, Rabbi David Saperstein, who I think is the most passionate, articulate rabbi in the United States, and myself, called to engage in religious dialogue as the program with a narrator/facilitator asking us questions.

At the end, this was his last question to each of us. In two minutes, tell us what is so core to your religious faith that you would never give it away in an inter-religious dialogue for the sake of greater harmony. What are the absolute essentials for you, being a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim? And you have two minutes. I looked at my watch. I'm going to do this. Turn to the person next to you and explain that to them in a shortened version, 30 seconds. What's absolutely core to you as a Christian? And if you're a Muslim or a Jew, do that. Do it for thirty seconds and then the other person. Here we go. (Sharing)

You know it's a good practice. One of the things I appreciate about inter-religious dialogue is it helps me to be a clear Christian. You can't enter inter-religious dialogue without a deeper sense of who you are as you seek to be open to the other. I am friends with the imam at Georgetown University. "Bishop, I have to tell you that the experience of our Muslim students in these inter-religious dialogues with Christian students is, that our Muslim students know the Christian narrative and the Christian Scriptures better than the Christian participants." When I go into inter-religious dialogue, I go in to share the truth claims of our faith and to hear the truth claims of the other. In that dialogue, we may just deepen our respect for each other. It's a possibility that one might be converted to the other.

And this night, Rabbi Saperstein began by saying for Jews there are many pathways to God. And it came time for me to give two minutes on the core of the Christian witness. And I said, we don't begin with ourselves. We begin with God, who, out of love for God's creation is always improvising, trying to create pathways to us. At the core for us is a great improvisational God, who chose Abraham and Sarah and said, "Through you, I will bless all people." Our improvisational God found Moses, a murderer, stopped him in his tracks and said, "I've got a place for you to go." God sent him to Pharaoh and Moses demanded Pharaoh to let the people go. And the people became rebellious in the wilderness. God improvised again and said, "Here, Moses. Here are ten words. Give these

words to my people and if they live in those words, those commands, they will not only respect each other, they will worship only me.” God continued to see the rebelliousness of God’s people and said, “Am I out of things to improvise? No. I know one last improvisational move. I will bend low and I will become one of them in Jesus.” And in Jesus we begin to see the expanse of God’s embrace as he associated with sinners and outcasts, lived on the margins, and for that we crucified him. God looked upon God’s own flesh crucified and said, “Aha. I’ve got yet another improvisational move.” God raised Jesus from the dead. Now into his death and resurrection, I have been baptized and in my baptism God said, ‘Mark, I will love you steadfastly. For Jesus’ sake, I will forgive you mercifully and on the last day, I will raise you up to life eternally. I will graft you into a living community, a community of Christ. And I will send you and that community into the world, with the cross of Christ marked on your brow and the promise of Christ’s resurrection on your lips and I will send you forth in my spirit to share that Good News and to strive for justice and peace in all the world. That’s what we won’t give away. I said this to a friend and he said, “You know it’s hard to say, as Christians, what we won’t give away when at the heart of our faith is one who died: God literally giving God’s self away for the life of the world.”

The vocation of Lutheran higher education is to nourish faith so that faith can be lived and expressed in an increasingly diverse world. It’s our vocation in a culture of, “What have you done for me lately?” to serve for the common good, to prepare graduates for civic engagement. Those other base notes in that improvisational relationship between the baptismal calling and our life is not only to live among God’s faithful, but to hear God’s word, to share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for peace and justice in all the world.

I try to hang out on college campuses as much as I can. This is my fourth one this academic year of our 26 colleges, because when I hang out with young adults, they get it. They get that the baptismal life is a life lived in the world in service and in pursuit of justice and peace. It does not mean as the baptized that we will agree on what it means for just and fair immigration reform. It does mean that we, as the baptized, will be involved in that struggle. We will be asking those questions. It doesn’t mean that we know what the right solution will be in our tensions with Iran, but it does mean that our baptismal vocation is to be a community struggling with those questions. You know that at Gustavus.

When I saw the Building Bridges Conference focus on *Unresolved Conflict: Remember Our Forgotten History*, and calling us privileged white folks that we are, to listen to the painful narrative of those who were here before us and welcomed ancestors to the shore. I realized we have work to do in building bridges between a privileged, white, patriarchal culture and church, and all those who have borne the consequence of our power and privilege.

Martin Luther, in his preface to Romans said, “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God’s grace makes a person joyful, confident and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith.

Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without compulsion, willingly and happily; serving everyone, suffering everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown such grace.”⁴ That’s at the root of our vocation.

I know the 2009 decisions of the Churchwide Assembly relative to human sexuality and the place of gay and lesbian people in the life, leadership and ministry of this church has been joyfully embraced by individuals and congregations, and for others it has become occasion for struggle and great differences and sometimes separation from this body. But we live in the tensions of that division and that joy. When I visited one of our other sister colleges in November, they just put my name on the table that anyone that wants to have lunch with the bishop stop by. I thought I’d be eating alone. A young man came, nervously he sat down and began to cry. He said, “I never thought I’d get to meet you but I’ve always wanted to thank you because the ELCA saved my life. I lived all through high school as a closeted young, gay man. I never thought any church would say, ‘There’s a place for you here. God has called you by name.’”

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, ... [t]hrough faith a person will do good to everyone without compulsion, willingly and happily; serving everyone, suffering everything for the love and praise of God.”⁵ I recommend to you Parker Palmer’s book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. It gets at the heart of part of the vocation of higher education. Parker Palmer says we live in a polarized society and the two poles are the privatized-self and the politicized-self. What we have lost is a sense of the public, the public where we live in community and where we experience each other as related and where we seek the common good. That’s what you are preparing students for. Palmer says that in the public we do our heart work, because all of us know what it’s like to have our hearts broken. When our hearts are broken, perhaps when you’ve lost a job or when you’ve experienced a broken relationship or you confront a difficult disease or you’re living in deep poverty. Whatever the moment is that breaks your heart, he said one of two things can happen. Your heart can be broken into a thousand shards, leaving you bitter and resentful and even sometimes, in a strange way, joyful over the suffering of another. Or your heart can be broken wide open to the suffering of another. Your moment of broken-heartedness becomes the occasion to build relationships with others, relationships of healing and compassion that become occasion to serve the common good and seek justice and peace.

Gustavus and our shared vocation in Lutheran higher education are to become communities that do communal heart work for the sake of the common good. It is to prepare people for varied callings in daily life, callings as people of faith in the life of the church, callings in daily work, callings in relationships of friends and family, callings in relationship as Christians. It’s to be a community of discernment. The ethical questions we are expected to answer today are more complex than any one individual should ever have to confront alone. The vocation of Lutheran higher education is to be communities of moral deliberation. That’s why, as a church, we do social statements. We’re trying to look at better ways to do them, better ways to come to conclusions around social concerns. Bishop Jon Anderson is an integral part of the Communal Discernment Task Force. In the midst of that, we are doing a right thing, I believe. We’re standing together

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 370-371.

⁵ Ibid.

at those intersections of faith and life and we're asking, "What does responsible life look like in the face of the complexities and power of genetic science, and now in the face of criminal justice and justice for women and the environment and peace and race?" When Trayvon Martin was killed and I was trying to think of what to say, I went to our social statement, *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, and asked, "What commitments have we made?" That's what you are preparing people for, to prepare people to be part of communal public, moral deliberation at the intersections of faith and life.

Because like Gustavus, one of our ELCA colleges said, "This is a community that will sustain and support you in your life struggles, that will deepen your self-understanding and prepare you for life in a complex world, a community of faith and exploration." So today I stand before you, as a presiding bishop, as a graduate of one of our colleges, and as a parent who says, "I am so thankful for our shared Lutheran vocation in higher education, a vocation to which God still calls us and I pray and plead that we will say yes to that calling."