What Must We do? Understanding the Place of Augustana’s Core Values

Augustana University Chapel Homily
April 11, 2016
Dr. Joel Johnson

Text: Acts 9:1-6

In this brief passage from Acts, we learn of Saul’s dramatic conversion from a persecutor to, ultimately, an apostle of the Christian faith. We’re reading this during a week in which we celebrate the five core values of our community. I do not want to force the connection between the text and our celebration this week, but I do think the story of Saul is interesting for us to consider, for two reasons.

First, this story reminds us of the difficulty/challenge of establishing and preserving a faith community in the face of unremitting persecution. In the upper Midwest it is easy for us to take faith for granted. Religious belief is protected, in all its variety, by both constitutional safeguards and social norms. Yet in other parts of the world, religious belief is still a matter of physical life and death—just like in Saul’s time. When Saul breathed his murderous intentions, he wasn’t merely being a product of 1st century Rome. These days, Saul the persecutor is out-sauled on almost a daily basis. Although the faithful of all the world’s major religions tend to coexist just fine in most places, there are many places where openly practicing one’s faith is very dangerous.

I’d like to focus here, though, on a second takeaway from the story of Saul. As in many other Biblical stories, there is a moment of calling and a subsequent transformation. God says to Saul “Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the Apostle. He is, in some respects, the same person, but the orientation of his life is completely changed. He commits himself to sharing the Christian faith.

At Augustana, we’re not looking to convert persecutors into proselytizers. We have more modest ends, perhaps, but they are crucial, nonetheless. College is a transformative experience. We enter as one sort of being, and exit another. Along the way, there are moments when we become aware of our blindness and our limitations—and then, perhaps through a flash of insight or through recognizing our calling—we step past the barriers of our old life and enter into a new world of opportunities and responsibilities.

God told Saul, enter the city and you will be told what to do. We can reframe that as a question for ourselves, as we pass through this place and go out to the city. What are we to do? What values will we make our own, that we will dedicate ourselves to in a conscious and heartfelt way? What will we stand for?

We claim that there are five values at the core of the Augustana experience: Christian, Liberal Arts, Excellence, Community, and Service. We declare to all who will listen that we’re going to do these five big things, and we’re going to do them well. And as we go out into the world, we’re going to bring something valuable to it as a result of this shared commitment.

It is noteworthy that there are five values, rather than just one. We could imagine dedicating our institution to just one of those values. We could claim, for example, that what matters most is the liberal arts, or service, or Christian faith. Think about what that would do for your sense of this place, however. Are we just a service organization? Are we just striving for excellence? Or community solidarity? No. We have declared all of these values to be important. That’s because, when all brought together, the five values help us live a complete life, a life that is both introspective—looking inward—and outward reaching.
In fact, each of our five values encourages us to look inward and reach outward in its own way. We foster the development of mature faith, which involves both probing one’s own doubts and beliefs, but also engaging the doubts and beliefs of others. As we dig deeper into our chosen field of study, the liberal arts beckon us to other meadows of learning. The sort of excellence we seek involves great internal discipline, but ultimately leads to public benefit—whether through scientific innovation, musical performance, or, say, winning national championships. As for community, we do not aim for the sort of solidarity that becomes more and more exclusive and insular as it becomes stronger. Rather, we see the ties of community established here as preparing for a life beyond this campus. A life, in fact of service, which though a matter of reaching outward, is best done after careful introspection about one’s calling. Again, with each of these values—Christian, liberal arts, excellence, community, and service—we are pulled inward and pushed outward. Devoting ourselves to one of these values would be fine. But how much better is it to pursue them all—to have ourselves developed in all of these ways. It’s deeply rewarding.

This is not to say that every student will have an identical experience, with equal portions of each value dished out to each person. Rather, the five values manifest themselves in different ways for each member of the Augie community. Depending on the person, one or more values will be more prominent. Some will find that their calling is much more about exploring the liberal arts than about engaging in service, or developing a mature faith more than achieving classroom excellence. The students nominated for the Covenant Awards are a testament to this variety of experiences, providing outstanding examples of each of those five values. Yet for all of them, as for Augie students as a whole, all five values play some part in the years spent here.

We’ve had plenty of occasion, recently, to shout “Go Augie Go!” This is usually to encourage our student athletes on to victory—to crush the opposition, to win the prize. We’re Vikings, after all. This comes naturally to us, and we’re awfully good at it. However, what if we were think of that cheer as voicing not just our communal solidarity and our pursuit of excellence in sports, but as expressing our devotion to the whole package of core values we believe in. Go Augie—and reflect carefully on your beliefs. Go Augie—and find connections between bodies of knowledge in the liberal arts. Go Augie—and seek excellence in the classroom and lab—as well as on the field or court. Go Augie—and celebrate the community that is welcoming and dynamic. Go Augie—and enter the city—and serve the world.

This is where our core values lead us—toward active engagement with and service to the wider community, guided by the wisdom that comes from careful study and the prudence gained from experience, spurred onward through courageous action and open to others, even as we are devoted to our own principles. We stand for something worth standing for, and the world desperately needs more people with those sorts of commitments. As we celebrate our five values this week, and the individuals who most clearly embody them, let’s take that cheer that we seem to use in only one setting, and think of it as celebrating the whole core of our existence here. Go Augie Go! indeed. Amen.