

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Happy New Year, my good friends. I trust and pray that 2015 will be a year full of good spirit and common purpose for all of us. It was good to see many of my Canadian Notes subscribers when I was in Toronto for the annual AFP Congress in November – thanks to all of you for your loyal commitment to our common work.

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>God with us<<

Each year, Augsburg College presents Advent Vespers – a worship service (actually, five worship services for more than 10,000 people!) that combines music and inspirational readings to welcome the Advent season. This year, our good college pastor, Sonja Hagander, suggested that we produce a devotional booklet with reflections on the readings from the Vespers service. I was asked to comment on Wendell Berry's poem, "IX." Here is what I had to say...

IX

The incarnate Word is with us,

is still speaking, is present

always, yet leaves no sign

but everything that is.

–Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry writes much of his poetry on Sunday mornings, inspired by walks in the Kentucky countryside. His so-called Sabbath poems – like IX – often point to the central themes of our faith. The allusions here to the first chapter of John’s gospel (“In the beginning was the Word...”) remind me that Augsburg’s founding motto from John 1:14 – “And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us” – is both a theological and practical claim. God is with us – a child is born – and we are the body of Christ here and now, pointing to “everything that is.” And so we live as God’s faithful people – Advent people, Christmas people, Easter people, Pentecost people – present, incarnate, in the world, walking the countryside and the city streets, writing our own poetry as we witness God’s continuing presence in the world, and doing God’s will as we serve our neighbors.

>>An invitation<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg College Chapel shortly after Reformation Day (October 31), thus the focus on lifting up our Lutheran tradition and its relevance for our life as the faithful.

Scripture assigned: Luke 24: 12-24

The early 20th century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once said that he did theology with the Bible in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other. How about you? How do you “do theology?” Maybe you think that task belongs only to the professional or expert class – like members of our religion department, those who have devoted their lives to scholarly research and reflection. Or maybe you believe it is the work of those called to ordained ministry, the clergy who teach and preach.

This morning, I want to explore with you the Lutheran idea of “the priesthood of all believers,” Martin Luther’s contention that the work of “priests” or “clergy” and even theologians belongs to all the faithful. And that the work of “doing theology” is actually another way of describing vocational reflection, discerning what God is calling you to be and do in the world. So here we go...

A little over a year ago, I was appointed by then ELCA presiding bishop Mark Hanson - now a member of our community - to something called the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Charged with exploring the ecology of theological education within the ELCA, the Council quickly became a target for those who thought our primary role was to consider how to streamline the professional theological education in the eight seminaries of our church (including our friends at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul). And those folks were nervous!

Soon, though, it became clear that our charge was not primarily about the scarcity of resources for the preparation of clergy and other rostered leaders - and there are very real challenges in that realm of theological education, a topic for another homily - but more so about the vast and abundant resources for theological education that exist across our church - in colleges and universities, in lay training schools, in congregations and synods, in camps and so on. In fact, I have come to see my role on the Council as someone who reminds my colleagues that theology is being done day in and out in settings far and wide - and our job should be to tell the story of this expansive network of theological education rather than wallow in our challenges.

Most days we get this work right, but to get it right clearly requires a different understanding of what it means to do theology and who is charged with the work of theological education. And here we have our Lutheran Christian tradition to thank for a more expansive understanding of theological education. For those of you here who went through the confirmation program in a Lutheran church, remember that key question: "What does this mean?" A question that invites us into the work of "doing theology."

One of the joys for me in serving on TEAC has been the opportunity to share the remarkable theological education happening on the Augsburg campus every day - it's happening in the classroom and residence halls, in locker rooms and cafeteria, in this sacred space and out in the community, in Urban Plunges for middle and high school students and Spring break service trips and interfaith projects - and it belongs to all of us!

So what does "doing theology" look like? What are we invited to do when we talk about theological reflection and education? As Martin Luther also taught us, we need to work out our own relationships with God - there is no mediator in the person of a theologian or a priest or a church - and that is the work of doing theology.

And so I invite you to join me in doing theology this morning. Let's start with theologian Karl Barth's instructions to have the Holy Scriptures in one hand and the New York Times (or some similar arbiter of world news and social realities) in the other. And then let's add another critical component of doing theology - situating our theological reflections in the context of communities of memory and practice (like faith and academic communities). The Bible, depictions of what is happening in the world, and our experiences within community.

We've got this remarkable passage from Luke's gospel as our scriptural foundation. I've got this morning's New York Times right here. And here we are in this particular community of faith and learning known as Augsburg College. That's all we need and here we go!

First, here are three themes from Luke's gospel that offer us insight into the nature of the God we know in Jesus Christ:

- Ours is an inviting God, not a command and control God. We are invited in - and then the choice is ours whether to come to the banquet or not.
- Ours is an inclusive God, urging us to invite not simply those who will feel obligated to come (and return the favor) or those entitled to come, but those vulnerable and forgotten whose place at the table is not secure.
- Ours is a God of fellowship and hospitality - a God who understands that feeding our bodies also feeds our souls, that the banquet table is a compelling metaphor for our lives together in the community. Ours is a God who wants the banquet hall filled with those who hunger for nourishment of all sorts.

And then there is the New York Times - or the Star-Tribune - or some online news source, pointing to the realities of our lives in the world:

- We build walls - to keep people both in and out. Even as we read about the 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, we are surrounded here in our neighborhood by the

“walls” that have been built to separate us from each other – walls in the guise of freeways and concrete jungles and other less tangible means of walling ourselves in and out.

- We argue over whether and how to welcome the stranger to our country and community and banquet table. This entire struggle over immigration reform boils down to our fears – of losing control and jobs and power and safety. The experiences of our immigrant neighbors here in Cedar-Riverside and Phillips are daily reminders of a fearful world.
- People are going hungry and homeless when there is plenty to go around. When food and homes become weapons, we surely have reached a low point in our humanity, refusing to feed bodies and souls. We don't need to go far to witness this barbarism in our own community.

And finally, we have the values and commitments of our Augsburg community:

- I believe that we are a community with an “immigrant sensibility.” Surrounded by immigrants in this neighborhood for most of our history, we have the gift of living alongside neighbors who don't take for granted the freedoms and opportunities most of us enjoy. What difference does that make for our educational work in this college and for our commitments in the world?
- One of the central tenets of our campus ministry program and I would argue for our entire college community is our core commitment to radical hospitality. So what does that look like in daily practice? Why do we have too many students on this campus and fellow travelers in the neighborhood who bear the burden of bias and prejudice in their daily lives? And what are we doing about it?
- Which points to my final thought about the character of this community. We have to believe that, as important as it is, hospitality is not enough. We must believe that gifts of education and community and faith demand of us more than inviting people in; they demand that we fight for the justice that evades too many of our fellow citizens in their journeys in the world – journeys in pursuit of safety, nourishment, meaningful work, a better life.

Here is what doing theology looks like – we discern the character of our God and the nature of God's work in the world in the scriptures that have been passed to God's faithful over two millennia; we seek to understand the realities of the world that challenge God's good intentions for God's people by our vigilance in study and experience; and we discern our vocations as co-creators of God's will and plan for the world in the midst of this particular community and beyond.

So I ask you these simple theological questions that flow from our reflections this morning:

- God invites us in - will you accept the invitation and will you invite others to join you?
- God loves all creation - will we be good stewards of that inclusive impulse?
- God believes in hospitality and justice - will we join in the work to be done?

Here is an invitation – into the work of doing theology, into the practices of loving God's good world, and into the wonder of community where we know God's grace and love in the work of compassion and reconciliation. What a remarkable gift. You are now all deputized and commissioned as theologians. Get to work. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>The poor<<

I'm particularly mindful these days of the fractured public discourse about income inequality in our country. I was inspired to read Pastor Peter Marty's (yes, they are father and son!) column in the December 2014 issue of *The Lutheran* entitled "Permanently poor."

Pastor Marty remarks that "In many respects, Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" has become a war on the poor. Large numbers of Americans want to punish the poor for their poverty.

He further suggests that those who use Jesus's scriptural claim that "the poor will always be with us" as justification for accepting poverty as a necessary reality are misreading Jesus's intent. "(Jesus) was quoting from the Law of Moses, (which says)... 'If there is among you anyone in need... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, therefore I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (Deuteronomy 15: 7-11) This was not a statement of predetermined social reality, it was a call to serve the neighbor.

And thus Marty concludes: "If we can stop thinking of the poor as a problem to be solved, and more as people to be loved, the gap of empathy afflicting America might close just a bit."

Wise words for faithful lives.

>>Reflective professionals<<

As I return to the classroom next month to teach the Senior Honors Seminar entitled "Place Matters: Exploring Chicago and the Twin Cities," I also return to Parker Palmer, who is guide and mentor to all of us who aspire to teach and learn. Here is a piece I first penned in December 2007.

"In recent months, Parker Palmer has offered some wise counsel for those of us who care about reflective professionals. Originally written as a new afterword for the 10th anniversary edition of Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*, versions of "The New Professional: Education for Transformation" (Jossey-Bass, 2007) also have appeared as "Heart at Work" (in *The Christian Century*, October 2, 2007) and as "A New Professional: The Aims of Education Revisited" (in *Change*, November/December 2007).

Palmer's challenge is familiar: "If higher education is to serve humane purposes, we who educate must insist that knowing is not enough, that we are not fully human until we recognize what we know and take responsibility for it."

Palmer specifically calls for the education of "new professionals," those whose education prepares them not only as competent in their specific disciplines but also as skillful and courageous in confronting, challenging and changing the institutions in which they work – institutions that too often get in the way of and threaten the highest standards of professional work.

Palmer offers five proposals for educating these new professionals:

- (1) We must help our students uncover, examine and debunk the myth that institutions are external to and constrain us, as if they possessed powers that render us helpless –**

an assumption that is largely unconscious and wholly untrue. The victim mentality we sometimes have concerning institutional dynamics must be overcome. (Parenthetically, I think this is why I chose to teach organizational behavior to nonprofit managers and other professionals) We must get beyond the notion that we can have no impact on institutional life and take back the power of the human heart to remake our organizations and the world.

- (2) **We must take our students' emotions as seriously as we take their intellects.** We must reverse the traditional academic notion that emotions must be suppressed in order to become technicians – instead, we must learn to stay close to emotions that can generate energy for institutional change.
- (3) **We must start taking seriously the “intelligence” in emotional intelligence.** We must learn to extract from our emotions the knowledge they contain, knowledge that may well help us understand how to translate private feelings into public action. Emotional intelligence is at the heart of some of the most remarkable social movements in our time – civil rights, women's rights, the environment, and so forth – helping to move us beyond the status quo to strategies for social change.
- (4) **We must offer our students the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities required to cultivate communities of discernment and support.** Emotions are important sources of knowledge but as with all knowledge, emotional knowledge must be verified by viewpoints other than my own, in communal settings. Disciplined group inquiry – the creation of circles of trust for professionals – provides both support for deep and difficult learning and organized groups of people who can support each other when the demands of being a change agent are overwhelming.
- (5) **We must help our students understand what it means to live and work with the question of an undivided life always before them.** This final proposal is grounded in the entire corpus of Palmer's work. As teachers we must be role models for a life that integrates knowledge and passion, reflection and action. We must help students to live in the tensions between our highest values and the reality of daily life as a professional.

Palmer's quest is to revive the root meaning of the word “professional,” someone who professes faith in the midst of a disheartening world. As he challenges all of us – teachers and students alike – “in the midst of the powerful force field of institutional life, where so much conspires to compromise the core values of my work, I have found the firm ground on which to stand – the ground of personal and professional identity and integrity – and from which I can call myself, my colleagues, and my profession back to our true mission.””

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

We had a bit of a dust-up on campus earlier this fall regarding a student group that was formed in support of the State of Israel. What could have been a terrible situation for our community became an occasion for civil dialogue around very different perspectives on the situation in the Holy Land. For me, this situation brought me into relationship with various Jewish and Israel leaders, including the Israeli Consul General in Chicago, Roey Gilad, who was kind to bring me a copy of *Israel: A History* by Tel Aviv University professor Anita Shapira (Brandeis U. Press, 2012).

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities around the world, has written *Signs: Seven Words of Hope* (Paulist Press, 2014), a book of short essays grounded in his life-giving work.

I'm reading a couple of books on my I-Pad: Azar Nafisi's *The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books* (The Penguin Group, 2014) and Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, 2014) – both inspiring in their own ways.

>>How beautiful are the feet<<

I love these words from Isaiah 52, assigned as scripture for Christmas morning. May we all be messengers who announce peace in the new year!

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Public work
- Architecture and place-making

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