

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Seventeen, Number Three (February 2016)

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

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Greetings in the New Year, my friends. I had the pleasure of participating earlier this month in a conference sponsored by the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, where I presented a paper on the history of the links between higher education and philanthropy in the 200 years of Indiana statehood. More on the paper in a future issue of Notes. What I found especially enjoyable about the conference was the opportunity to catch up with many good friends who have been faithful readers of these Notes. It is always good to be reminded of the reach of our community.

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. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Lost and found<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg Chapel during the Second Week in Lent.

(Scripture: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32,)

Dorothy was a life-long and beloved member of the small Lutheran church I served in Attica, Indiana, and I will never forget her words at a Sunday morning adult forum session when we were working our way through Luther's *Small Catechism*. We were discussing Luther's commentary on the Lord's Prayer and the petition for the day was "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It's a pretty straightforward part of our faith, we all might agree. In fact, Luther's commentary on the petition is clear – "What does this mean? We ask in this prayer that our Father in heaven would not hold our sins against us...and we pray that he would give us everything by grace, for we sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment..." (But here is the kicker) – "So we on our part will heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us." Not much wiggle room there, and Dorothy acknowledged as much when she said, "I get this – *in theory* – I know I that my sins have been forgiven, but you just don't know what bad things people have done to me. I know what the words say and I see what Luther tells us they mean, but let's get real, there are times when you just can't, you just don't want to, forgive." And so there are.

Gregory Jones, the former dean of the divinity school at Duke University, tells the story of a 16th century church member in Switzerland, who, church records tell us, refused to say the Lord's Prayer, because he didn't want to utter the words: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." As if refusing to say the words would excuse him for the fact that he just couldn't forgive those who had hurt him.

Now, both Dorothy and our 16th century church member may have had good, rational explanations of their conclusions—in fact, I know something of Dorothy's story, the hurt and pain she felt because of how family members treated her after her husband's death some ten years earlier...how we do resolve such conflicts between the theory and practice of our faith? How do we learn to forgive?

For some of us—including Dorothy—we might agree with essayist, Anne Lamott, who writes, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind." Funny – yes – but perhaps more true of many of us than we would like to admit.

And then we are confronted with this familiar and powerful gospel from Luke – the story of the Prodigal Son – addressed to the tax collectors and Pharisees, along with stories about a lost coin and lost sheep – and we must grapple with what God intends for God's faithful people, we must come to grips with this remarkable parable of reconciliation and forgiveness, we must contend with the claim upon us that we were lost and now have been found, and that this claim changes everything for our lives of faith in the world. It is hard to forgive, but we are called to forgive – as we are forgiven.

I love this story for the ways in which it depicts the arc of God's reconciling work in our lives and in the world. We can find ourselves in this story. Perhaps you are like the headstrong son who demands his birthright and sets off on his own, only to fall on hard times and lose all with which he has been entrusted. Or perhaps you are like the good and faithful son who stays behind, who also receives his birthright and does what is expected of him, and then with seemingly good reason complains that his wayward brother, who has wronged the father and the family, is being inappropriately welcomed home. As some commentators have noted, there are ways in which both sons are lost, following their disparate paths and not fully grasping what their father intended or how he behaved. Surely there is some of both sons in each of us and in our world. And that is why the parent in this story is the pivotal figure in understanding God's love and grace and truth.

It begins with dividing the family property between the children. Like the father in the parable, God offers all of us our birthright, the free will to pursue our lives as we would choose, the riches of God's wondrous creation as our very own. God generously sends God's children off on their own paths in the world. And God watches closely as we make our ways, sometimes grieving with us in the circumstances of bad decisions and situations out of control; sometimes accompanying those who stay close to home, doing what is expected. But, we're told in the parable, there is perhaps no greater joy for God than the return of those who have fallen away, who have been lost, who recognize their sin and unworthiness, and now have been found again. For those who have been dead and have come again to life, there is for our God the joyous occasion for feasting and dancing and celebrating. Lost and now found. Dead and now alive. This is what God hopes for in all of God's creation – that we would return so that all of the creation might rejoice. It is a remarkable vision that the apostle Paul proclaims, "Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

In powerful ways, this parable also helps us reflect on our Lenten journey. Marked as human on Ash Wednesday, we are sent forth to live as God's faithful people in the world – simultaneously sinful and saved, as Luther puts it in stating one of the central concepts in Lutheran theology – and along the way we make our choices; sinful choices, faithful choices. And our God watches over our journeys, rejoicing in our faithfulness, mourning in our fallenness. But as we near the passion days ahead, we know through faith that there will be feasting and dancing and celebrating for all of us as we return to the saving power of the cross, as our gracious and loving God proclaims us lost but now found, dead but now alive in the promise of Easter morning.

And then our work as God's people begins anew as we live as those who have been welcomed home. But – like Dorothy and the other saints in our lives – we struggle with what it means to live up to the good news of radical reconciliation and forgiveness and generosity and love that we witness in the story of the prodigal son. It is hard to accept the grace of God's reconciliation, especially when it makes the claim upon us that we too are called to forgive, to be reconciled to God and each other, to prepare for the bountiful feast and celebration that brings all of God's creation together. But even when it is difficult – even we don't quite think we can forgive – God is there, showing us the way, walking with us, loving us even when we are lost, longing for the day when we will be found and return home.

At theological moments like this, I have turned again and again to these wonderful lines, first written by Polish Rabbi Nachman, which sum up for me the promise and the implications of the story of the Prodigal Son, this story of the arc of God's reconciling love for God's faithful people who live in the real world:

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.

All time is made up of healing of the world.

Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.

Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken. This is what the father in our parable teaches us. My son who was lost has broken my heart. I mourn that he was lost, that he has squandered all he was given. But now he returns and I run to greet him and welcome him home. For me, this is a remarkable statement of how our God enters into the messiness of our human history, grieves our fallenness and awaits our return with generous and joyful anticipation. Our God shares in our pain and suffering, waits patiently and expectantly for our return, and thereby calls us to the feast of reconciliation. This is the work our reconciling God calls us to be about.

All time is made up of healing the world. Those who have been reconciled to each other, those who believe that all has been accomplished through Christ, those who live in the mean time, are called to be vigilant to where Christ is in our midst and to what Christ requires of us. We are called to heal the world. We are called to be what Luther called "little Christs" as we serve our neighbors no matter what. This is a meaningful part of our work at Augsburg. Our institutional calling, which we currently articulate this way: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*, makes the claim that faith, learning and service can never be separated because God intends that what we believe (the gift of

faith), calls us to be educated (the privilege of an education), so that we might be of service (the obligation of reconciliation for all God's people).

We are called to the work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we are called to heal the world, we are called to serve our neighbor, and we are called to the great feast that lies ahead. We will grapple with our doubts – like my friend Dorothy and so many of the rest of us – but we also know what God intends for us and we believe that all has been accomplished in the cross of Christ. “Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.” What a remarkable gift, what an awesome obligation. May God grant us the courage and wisdom and strength to be God's faithful people in the world, once lost and now found. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Called into the messy middle<<

I preached this homily on the Friday in January when the Augsburg Board of Regents was on campus and about to make one of the most momentous decisions in our history – to begin construction on our new Hagfors Center for Science, Business and Religion (which they did!). It was fitting to remind ourselves that God is in charge, even as we took up our responsibilities in the messy middle.

(Scripture: Psalm 23, Matthew 2: 1-12)

As we conclude our week of chapels around the theme of Augsburg's vocational claim that “We believe we are called to serve our neighbor,” I recall a story I have told before, but that bears repeating this morning – at this time, in this place, on this occasion. Cornel West, theologian and social critic, had been asked to address the “Aims of Religion” at a University of Chicago convocation – not a small topic! What I recall is the searing indictment of our the human and social condition he offered, pounding on the chapel pulpit as he proclaimed, “I am not optimistic, there is no evidence for optimism!” But then he paused and concluded, “But I have hope...” Hope, despite the evidence; hope, because I believe; hope, because God is in charge.

This sacred time we call Epiphany calls God's faithful to what the British poet, W.H. Auden, called “the time being,” the time after the wonder of the Christ child, the witness of shepherds and wise ones, the proclamation of angels – the time when we must go on, living as God's faithful people in what social worker and Ted Talk rock star, Brene' Brown, has called “the messy middle,” the time when we are too far in to turn back and yet we cannot see where we are headed except through the eyes of faith and hope.

I chose this haunting version of the 23rd Psalm from Bobby McFerrin because of how it provokes our thinking with its alternative language – “though I walk through a dark and dreary land” – sounds like the messy middle – “you will not forsake me.” “you set a table before me and my foes,” “surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life,” – the stuff of faith and hope and God in charge.

I wonder if Epiphany is all about how we are called into the messy middle. There are many, like the Psalmist, who have gone before us and offer a way forward...

This morning, I want to draw on the story of the wise ones, the wise men (or kings, or magi) found in Matthew's gospel (and only there!) It is the quintessential Epiphany story – those outside the circle drawn to the light – and it is a love story, a story of longing and fidelity and surprise. It is a

story that helps us understand both the nature of God – as Emmanuel, with us – and also what God hopes for and expects of us – a love story, God and God’s people falling in love again.

The story is fairly straightforward – even cryptic some might say. The star appears in the East and these three men – rulers, magicians, priests – are drawn to leave their home countries and travel to see what the star proclaims. Along the journey, they meet up with Herod, who attempts to trick them into being his spies. They finally come to the place (not the manger, but a house) where Jesus lives with Mary and Joseph, where they likely are amazed to find a child. And they leave their valuable gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh, worshipping God for what has been made manifest for God’s people. They depart rejoicing by an alternative route so as to avoid Herod’s edict.

I have learned much about the wise ones story through the lens of Auden’s magisterial prose poem, “For the Time Being.” In a section of the poem entitled “The Summons,” Auden has each wise man remark on why he might follow the star. I find in these remarks an intriguing way to consider the logic of the story.

The first wise one comments, “To discover how to be truthful now - Is the reason I follow the star.”

Imagine the situation. These mysterious kings from the East see a star – they feel its pull, its majesty, its danger, its promise - and they step outside their positions of power and privilege, they take the risk of leaving comfortable and predictable circumstances to follow a star. They want to know the truth in a world where what passes for truth is wrapped up in narrow and confining formulae, in dizzying reams of information, in insecurity and blind allegiance. They want to be free – and to be free they must be truthful. That is why they follow the star – to find the truth – and therein we learn one of the important lessons of the love story: God calls us out of our ordinary and comfortable circumstances to follow, to discover how to be truthful. Lovers step out of the expected to learn the truth of each other.

And the second wise one adds, “To discover how to be living now – Is the reason I follow the star.”

The wise ones undertake the journey occasioned by the pull of the star – who knows the risks, the burden, the sacrifices – and therein they seek not simply to remember a distant past or to dream of a possible future, but to understand what God intends for us now. The star calls them to seek out the glimpses of truthfulness and fidelity and good that are here now to be embraced and engaged – not to dwell on precedent or speculation – and therein to find genuine faith. Here is the second lesson of this love story: God is with us, present now and here, and our journeys must be open to discovering what it means to live faithfully, to do God’s work in the here and now. Lovers don’t glorify the past or put all their hope in the future – they are there for each other in the present, in the messy middle.

The third wise one continues, “To discover how to be loving now – Is the reason I follow the star.”

The wise ones follow where the star leads them – to a surprise, a baby lying in its mother’s arms – so counter-intuitive, so outside the realm of the world’s definition of success. And here is perhaps the most startling aspect of the story. Think about it – you can step out of your comfort zone, even take the risk of a journey that challenges you to be open to life in the here and now, but when it comes down to it, as humans we expect that at the end of this sacrificial, risky journey, we’ll be rewarded with a result that measures up to our sacrifices, that satisfies our human longings in ways we understand. But instead it is a child, living in pretty squalid conditions. This is it? This is what

we gave it all up to find? Surprise, yes this is what it is all about. Lovers are open to the awesome and life-transforming surprises we will know in each other.

And finally, Auden has the wise men together proclaim, “To discover how to be human now – Is the reason we follow the star.”

Here is the culmination of our love story. The wise ones have reached their destination and they do only what they can do – they give rare and precious gifts, they stand back in awe at God’s grand and mysterious ways. They suspend disbelief and proclaim God’s great wonders and love for God’s people. They learn to love again, to love a child whose work in the world is to save God’s people. Lovers fall in love with their beloved, and therein find themselves most fully, find what it means to be truly human now.

How do the wise ones offer us a map for our lives of faith in the messy middle? Are we willing to be drawn out of our usual places of power and privilege and comfort to undertake the journey of faith, to be open to surprises of love and to offer our gifts in response to the wonder of God breaking into our lives? How do we love as we have been loved? This is the love story of the wise men. This is our love story as God’s faithful people in the world, called to the messy middle, called to be and serve our neighbor, called to fall in love again and again, here and now – and the wise ones teach us how!

My beloved friends, may the epiphany of our good and gracious God inhabit your hearts and minds as we journey together in this new year to discover the surprises God has in store for us. May we be drawn into the love story that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. And may we proclaim, along with the shepherds and wise ones and angels, this wonderful chorus that concludes Auden’s poem:

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life. Joy, even in the messy middle! Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Serendipity and education<<

I vividly recall the moment in 1977 when a conversation with a religion professor at Luther College, my alma mater, offered me a way of thinking about my vocational journey that has changed my life. When I admitted my doubts about following my dad's path to the ministry, the professor shared his own journey to divinity school and the study of theology, the sort of study I had begun to explore in his class. The rest is history, as they say. I went on to study ethics and theology in divinity school and to pursue my own calling for leadership in higher education.

A moment of serendipity that changed my life – unexpected, unplanned and so very meaningful – made possible by a teaching and learning community and a teacher that created the opportunity for such moments.

Such serendipity in education is a hallmark of the educational experience at Augsburg. I'm sure that you have your own stories of the faculty or staff member, maybe the fellow student, or perhaps the community member who offered you the insight, the experience, the counsel or the challenge that shaped your path.

One particular moment from last fall stands out for me. Our groundbreaking River Semester gave 13 students the educational experience of a lifetime as they spent the entire fall semester on the Mississippi River. When I went to St. Louis to meet with the River Semester students and faculty halfway through the semester, I heard tale after tale of serendipitous experiences along the river. But then one student took me aside and said that for Professor Joe Underhill, who organized the class, this was the trip he had always dreamed about, given his passion for the river. And, the student continued, he could have done the trip with his family or friends – surely an easier way to spend three and a half months on the river? Instead, the student said, he chose to do it with us, his students. He chose to do it with his students.

That, my friends, is the “stuff” of serendipity in education. Teachers who choose to create the space for serendipity to happen – in the classroom, in the cafeteria, on the playing fields or performance stage, even on the mighty Mississippi. May it always be so.

>>The art of philanthropy<<

“The Utne Reader” (September/October 2000)—a sadly no longer published journal of the alternative press—reprinted this provocative list of 15 ways to practice the art of philanthropy, originally proposed by William Wimsatt in his “No More Prisons” (Soft Skull, 1999). I'm drawn back to this list as we experience real shifts in how philanthropy is practiced in our era of increasing income inequality – it is good to be reminded of first principles.

- You don't need to be rich to be a philanthropist.
- Spread love—giving away money is not enough.
- Seek our originality and imagination.
- Support unpopular truths.
- Fund players with a long view.
- Look out of the loop and under the radar.
- Be effective and cost-effective.
- Fund passion.
- Invest in self-help.
- Attack root causes.

- Fund doers, not grant writers.
- Foster combinationism.
- Go for net gains.
- Pay operating expenses.
- Trust what inspires you.

No matter which side of the philanthropic ledger you occupy, you might find here artful lessons, good reminders, provocative challenges for a lifetime of loving humankind.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I'm once again enjoying the story-telling prowess of Erik Larson (he of *Devil and the White City* and *In the Garden of Beasts*), out with his recent *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania* (Crown Publishers, 2015).

For those of us dedicated to exploring how the theological concept of vocation shapes higher education, it is happy news that a fine collection of essays, edited by David Cunningham, has just been published, entitled *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (Oxford U. Press, 2015).

>>Ash Wednesday<<

T.S. Eliot captures the wonder of this Lenten season with these excerpted lines from his magisterial poem, "Ash Wednesday."

*"This is the time of tension between dying and birth,
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks...
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the mountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood,
Teach us to care and not to care,
Teach us to sit still Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in His will And even among these rocks,
Sister, mother, and spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated.
And let my cry come unto thee."*

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Chief strategy officers
- Health as membership

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