

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<<

Greetings in these unsettling times. You certainly will recognize in the selections that follow my own efforts to accompany my community in its efforts to live our mission and values in a space that is increasingly polarized and vindictive. These are times that call out urgently for reflective practice. Godspeed in your important work, faithful friends.

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

>>Mercy<<

Here is a homily I preached in our chapel in January...

Scripture: Matthew 5: 1-12

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy..." (Matthew 5: 7)

A year ago last summer, I had the privilege to visit the Holy Land and to stand at the crest of the hill - the mount - where Jesus is reported to have delivered his first major sermon - the words we have just heard. As I stood there my thoughts turned to how these now familiar words to us would have been heard by the Jewish throng gathered to hear from this young rabbi. Surely for those raised to follow the law, these words from Jesus were radical, heretical even, turning righteousness on its head. Jesus challenges these people of faith to pivot into this very disruptive vision of life in the world. And here, 20 centuries later, we hear these words again, and how will we people of faith respond to the disruption that is the life of discipleship? Disruptive discipleship - so urgently needed in our unsettled times.

As a theological ethicist, I have long found great intrigue in these so-called Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the American novelist Mary Gordon has written in reflection on the Sermon on the Mount: "To say yes: for this I will try and change my life. And more: without this I would not know who I am."ⁱ In other words, the Beatitudes offer not simply rules for a good life; they are a way of describing who I am, who I am called to be. And, as Gordon further suggests, who I am and who I am called to be by the Beatitudes is very much tied to the sort of world Jesus

intends for his followers to create – “a world that is safer and more generous.”ⁱⁱ A world that is safer and more generous, a disruptive vision indeed...

This morning, I want to focus on just one verse from the 12 we have heard: Matthew 5: 7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” I am struck by the fact that of the nine Beatitudes in Matthew, verse seven is the only one where you receive the same as you give. Being merciful begets mercy. If you’re poor in spirit, you get the kingdom. If you mourn, you are comforted. If you’re meek, you inherit the earth. But if you’re merciful, it’s right back at you. I suppose we could be a bit disappointed by that equation – it doesn’t seem quite fair given some of the other returns. Instead of being disappointed, though, I want to suggest that this is actually the beatitude that best defines what it means to live as faithful people in the world. The mutual dynamic of giving and receiving mercy are at the heart of the called life that we enjoy as people of God, the body of Christ, here and now in the midst of this neighborhood, city and world. To give and receive mercy are what it means to live our vocations in God’s world. Mercy is at the heart of disruptive discipleship.

There is precedent for this claim about giving and receiving mercy. Religious historian Martin Marty was once asked what the distinctive mark of the Lutheran church is, to which he replied, simply, “Acts of mercy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther himself used the word “neighbor” more than many other important Lutheran words in his voluminous writings and made giving and receiving mercy a hallmark of his ethics.^{iv} There is clear evidence that this commitment to giving and receiving mercy is a hallmark of Lutheran Christians over the past 500 years – witness our legacies of educational, health care and social service institutions, not to mention the abiding hospitality and service offered by Lutheran individuals and congregations around the world.^v

We might have reason to pause here, however, for those who know anything about what Lutherans claim about being justified by faith alone, you might think that our Lutheran Martins are missing something. Why this talk about mercy and neighbor when the central theological claim of our tradition is that we can’t earn our salvation – good works don’t merit redemption? But the fact is that it is precisely because we can’t earn it that we have been freed to live as merciful people in the world, knowing that mercy begets mercy. That is the foundation of healthy and just and faithful lives together in the world. God is in charge, God has a plan, and God’s plan is that faithful people will care for the earth and for each other with mutual mercy. God calls us to serve God’s world.

Theologically, Luther said it this way in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (as translated by our own Professor Mark Tranvik): “From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss.”^{vi} In other words, for Luther, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing. We give and receive mercy.

I am of the opinion that this simple verse from Matthew could be Augsburg’s motto because we do most certainly know what it means to give and receive mercy – to live our vocations in and for God’s world.

Furthermore, guided as well by the wise words of the social reformer, Jane Addams, we believe that democratic engagement on campus and in the world is about the mutuality of citizens, fellow travelers on the road, willing to be neighbor, to understand each other’s burdens and aspirations, to seek common purpose across our remarkable diversity. Disruptive discipleship.

Mercy is the hospitality and pursuit of justice that the Augsburg community practices with neighbors, strangers, students and each other. I am struck every day by the number of different ways members of the Augsburg community offer hospitality. From the diverse students, faculty and staff who find a home at Augsburg, to the faculty and staff who go out of their way to ensure that students have what they need to succeed, to the diverse neighbors who are welcomed on our campus to engage in important conversations for our neighborhood and world, to the remarkable ways in which Augsburg graduates are practicing hospitality in their own lives, and I could go on and on. It's certainly in the specifics of how we practice hospitality, but it's also in the attitude and spirit we bring to what it means to be a welcoming community. And genuine hospitality offers mercy so that it might know the mercy that comes from engagement with others. We welcome so that we might get to know each other, to learn from each other, to work together to make the world more hospitable and just. It's about mutuality, about giving and receiving mercy.

Mercy also is the sort of educational experience we aspire to offer our students. I hear from so many of our students about the relationships they gain here with fellow students, with faculty members and with those in the neighborhood and city who share their educational journeys. It is a hallmark of this place, I believe, to see education itself as a relationship that is marked by its giving and receiving. Parker Palmer has written of the central role of love – in both teaching and learning.^{vii} A teacher loves his/her students – offers mercy – and the students return that love in engagement, questioning, growing in understanding and going out to share what they have learned with others. The poet William Wordsworth has written these words, which are my own creed as an educator, “What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.”^{viii} That is a description of what happens on this campus each and every day as we engage each other as fellow teachers and learners, hungry for knowledge and skills and perspectives so that we might share what we learn with others. It's about giving and receiving and serving God's world.

And mercy is faith in action, the passion to do good not for any recognition or reward but because God calls us to love the world. As our good Regent colleague David Tiede once reminded us, “John 3:16 doesn't say ‘for God so loved the church or the college’, it says ‘for God so loved the world!’” And that makes all the difference for discipleship. Our institutional calling: *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 making the world better for all God's people). I have the privilege to learn about and witness the work of our students, faculty and staff who are practicing mercy – both the giving and receiving of mercy – in the chapel, in the residence halls, in the classrooms, on playing fields, in the neighborhood and around the world. I love to brag about so many of our “faith in action” programs - , e.g., Campus Kitchen, led by our students, which prepares and shares food in the neighborhood, grows food in our community garden and buys food at our weekly Farmer's Market, and now shares our bounty with fellow members of our community who otherwise go hungry. It's all good work – it's merciful work – but it's not simply one-way service. Beth Florence, who graduated several years ago, once told me that preparing and delivering meals was OK but not good enough for her, she needed and wanted to sit with the recipients of the meals, break bread together, and get to know each others' stories. She wanted food to be the occasion for giving and receiving mercy. Faith in action through learning and service for our neighbor and God's world.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Disruptive discipleship. Democratic engagement. What abundant gifts we have been given from our gracious God – gifts of hospitality,

education and faith active in love. Gifts of wise and faithful leaders whose legacy guides our abiding commitment to educating students for vocations that serve God's world. For these many gifts – in this, our 148th academic year at Augsburg – we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God! Amen.

>>The Word Abides<<

And my second homily of the semester...

Scripture: Psalm 119: 9-16

"How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word." (Psalm 119: 9)

I come before you this morning with two simple claims, interrelated and urgently important (I will argue), for our lives of faith in the world now. The first claim is that we need to attend to longer horizons – both into the past and into the future – to discern what we are called to do now. And the second claim is that if we attend to those longer horizons, the lives we are called to lead will be marked by a sense of humility, patience, forgiveness and hope because we will understand that we don't know all and we can't fix everything. Let me try and unpack these claims.

As some of you may know, I am a theological ethicist by academic training, which means I'm often asked how to resolve thorny ethical dilemmas (think the New York Times' "Ask the Ethicist" column) – which can be daunting work because surely in our increasingly complex 21st century lives, we have only begun to scratch the surface of the ethical challenges and opportunities that will accompany new technologies, shifting definitions of roles and identities, deep political divides, diverse and new strategies to do our work, and heightened public skepticism of any attempt at drawing moral conclusions.

But then I was reminded of a lesson I learned well from my friend and colleague, the late Robert Payton – former college president, corporate foundation president, director of the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, and professor to all of us who study and care about our moral lives. The lesson always began with Bob reaching into his wallet and presenting "the card" for you to see.

Bob's card had three lists on it:

- The seven deadly sins: pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, envy, covetousness, and anger;
- The cardinal and theological virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance; along with faith, hope, and love; and,
- Gandhi's "seven deadly blunders," which include (among others): wealth without work, knowledge without character, and politics without pride.

[An aside here. As a college president, I'm often asked by others what I am reading – as if I have time to read! Well, I do read literature on ethics and ethical theory for fun and I have special interest in books on the seven deadly sins. A few years back, a 90 year old grande dame of Rockford College, where I served as president before coming to Augsburg, asked me what I was reading, and it just so happened that I was reading a new series of short books on the seven deadly sins. I gave her the citation and thought nothing of it until we were together a few weeks later at a cocktail party,

where she took me aside and thanked me for the recommendation, remarking with a twinkle in her eye that she had just finished “Lust.” What do you do with that?]

For me, the lists challenge us to think about the moral horizons we share as human beings. The point is that the values and commitments reflected in our lists remind us that many have gone before us and many will follow. We do not need to reinvent the wheel.

For people of faith, our lists point to even more profound horizons and are grounded in a deep theological claim, illustrated in this morning’s reading from the Psalms: the Word abides. “How can young people keep their way pure?” the Psalmist asks, “By guarding it according to your word.” Or again, “I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” We believe that the word is God, creator, redeemer and spirit. We believe that the word was there before creation, that it guided the people of Israel in their many journeys, that it became flesh and lived among us, that it lives still in our hearts and in our communities of faith, and that it will live on in God’s eternal reign. Past, present and future, the Word abides.

As contemporary humans, buffeted by all manner of distraction and fear and greed and violence; by deep fissures in our social, political and economic lives; by truth claims without evidence; by a sense of hopelessness and despair, we are mired in, imprisoned even by, the sense of two competing dynamics. Either we are stuck and there is nothing we can do, or we are compelled to do anything we can to fix things, to resist blindly, to be our own saviors. And the truth is, of course, that neither course promises sure relief because we are stuck in a shortsighted and confounding cycle that lacks both the lessons of the past and the hope of the future.

As people of faith, surely we are called at this moment to come forward with a very different way of approaching our common lives. It is not some naïve claim that all will be well. It is a clear-eyed diagnosis of the reality of our lives in the world, framed by our very real experience of the Word that abides. The Word that creates, that guides, that teaches, that forgives, that saves, and that abides for all time. The Word that challenges us to live now with our eyes and hearts and minds attentive to God’s horizon, a horizon past, present and future, of love and grace and hope.

This, then, brings me to the second intersecting claim upon God’s faithful people. If we believe that we are called to attend to the horizons of the Word that abides – to horizons that draw us out of the world’s short-sighted and futile sense of what is important and possible – than how shall we act, what shall we do? This, of course, is the question of the moment. I don’t have lots of answers, but I would contend that whatever you choose to do – to resist, to retreat, to double down on your commitments and passions, to be a good neighbor – your actions should have wise guides and here are just a few.

First, educator Parker Palmer (our honorary alum!), who writes, “... you may be asking the vexing question, “What can I do?” For me, the answer begins within, then moves out into the world. I must own up to my fears, confess my ignorance and arrogance, seek forgiveness from those I’ve wronged, practice humility, and learn to listen beneath my own and other people’s political rhetoric for what Howard Thurman called “[the sound of the genuine](#)” in each of us. Beneath the shouting, there’s suffering. Beneath the anger, fear. Beneath the threats, broken hearts. Start there and [we might get somewhere](#).

Does that sound like too much to ask of ourselves and each other? Perhaps. But if we can take at least a few steps in that direction, here's something I know to be true... When I draw my last breath, I'll be glad I tried to summon the better angels of my nature. Maybe you will, too."

Or, there also is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose civic nonviolence was grounded in his compelling claims that the "arc of the universe is long and bends toward justice," a horizon that calls each of us to be an arc bender! An arc bender.

And then I turn, as I have many times over the past several decades, to these remarkable words from 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who writes: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness." (from *The Irony of History*)

"I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." The Word abides – past, present and future – and therein is our strength and courage and foundation for faithful lives of compassion, justice and hope in the world. Thanks be to our awesome God. Amen,

PRACTICE THIS

>>Recovering civic virtue<<

Two recent articles in *The Christian Century* – an interview with New York Times columnist David Brooks (February 1, 2017) and an excerpt from Yale University professor Philip Gorski's *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton University Press) (March 1, 2017) – both point to the importance of recovering a sense of civic virtue in our public lives.

Brooks comments: "Our political discussion is overpoliticized and undermoralized. We don't have conversations of the sort that Reinhold Niebuhr or Billy Graham or Abraham Joshua Heschel were leading—at least not in the secular conversation—and therefore we use politics as a sort of symbol for what are actually moral disagreements and moral panics. As a result, our politics turns into a war of all against all, and we can't face the underlying moral issues."

And Gorski calls us back to "a righteous republic," based on a vision of the common good, a vision that draws deeply on prophetic religion – a vision that is grounded in a social ethic that protects the weak and downtrodden, that is egalitarian and committed to social justice and human equality that "requires that we be willing to abridge ourselves for the sake of others."

Gorski's article and book are worth a careful read as a way of understanding and navigating our times. His concrete "antidotes" to our "contemporary corruption" are compelling:

- Banish big money from the political process – people should not be allowed to "buy giant bullhorns" to shout down everyone else in the marketplace of ideas.
- Make civic holidays into holidays again – create spaces for civic reflection and celebration.
- Make character education a part of civic education – seek to instill basic civic virtues such as honesty, courage and generosity.

- Establish a universal system of national service – counteracting the increasing segregation of our citizens by expanding the circle of those in the military or civic service and instill an ethic of service in the young.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I continue to find great wisdom from the work of Eboo Patel, whose *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Beacon Press, 2016) is a guide to our common lives in the new America.

Augsburg awarded an honorary degree a few years back to Father Fernando Cardenal, the Jesuit priest who led the literacy efforts in Nicaragua in the early 1980s. His *Faith and Joy: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Priest* (Orbis Books, 2015), translated by Augsburg colleagues at our study center in Managua, is an inspiring tale of his good and faithful life and work.

Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People, ed. Charles E. Moore (Plough Publishing, 2016) is a helpful compendium of teachings on the possibility of building healthy and faithful communities.

>>The Human Family<<

Maya Angelou's beautiful poem, "The Human Family," as heard recently in her own voice on Apple commercials!

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.

Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women

called Jane and Mary Jane,
but I've not seen any two
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different
although their features jibe,
and lovers think quite different thoughts
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,
we weep on England's moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,
are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Chief strategy officers

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ⁱ Gordon, Mary. *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels*. New York: Pantheon Books. 2009, p. 87.

ⁱⁱ Op cit., p. 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marty, Martin E. Personal correspondence.

^{iv} Luther, Martin. *Works*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing. 1955. A search of the on-line version of Luther's Works (in English) shows that neighbor (or similar words) appears some 2200 times, more than justification or faith, though far behind righteousness (5700). On Luther's ethics, see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1972.

^v As quoted from Gracia Grindal in *The Promise of Augsburg College*. DVD media. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg College, 2008.

^{vi} Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Translated by Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2008, p. 83.

^{vii} Palmer, Parker. *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1983, p. 16.

^{viii} Wordsworth, William. From *The Prelude*, Book Fourteenth. Public domain. 1888.