

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eleven, Number Five (June 2010)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."
(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Not much chatter out there since my last Notes. I hope you are enjoying a refreshing beginning to your summer. We have our second commencement this weekend and then we turn our attention to the fall!

Long-time subscriber, Joan Flanagan, author and grassroots fundraiser extraordinaire, who now raises funds for the Center for New Community based in Chicago, writes recently:

"I have a friend who says, "Intelligence is great, but plagiarism is easier." You used the Jane Addams quote in one of your essays; I stole it for the end of this blog on Florence Kelly's map.

Please re-post as appropriate – we are eager to grow the blog. In two years we have gone from 0 to 10,000 visits a month. I love technology.

<http://imagine2050.newcomm.org/2010/05/28/how-knowing-respecting-ones-neighbor-can-effect-social-changes/> Check it out!

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 (check out the fine new website!). 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

>>For God so loved the world<<

I'm dedicating this entire issue of my Notes to the following sermon, which I wrote and preached on the occasion of my dad's 50th anniversary of his ordination. It was a deeply meaningful celebration for our family and friends, and my sermon offers you some insight into how many of the abiding themes in my work are grounded in the lessons I learned from my dad. Enjoy and reflect on those who have shaped your practice and work in the world.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3: 16)

As you probably know, our family is gathered here this weekend with many friends to celebrate the 50th anniversary of dad’s ordination to the Christian ministry. It is a wonderful occasion and we are so pleased to share it with the McFarland Lutheran community, which has been such an important part of dad’s personal and professional life. Thank you for your hospitality to our family and your abiding care for dad. You are a blessing for us.

Given this remarkable occasion, I imagine you will not be surprised that my sermon this morning is a love letter to my dad, but I begin with a story about my daughter...

Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.”

I want to suggest that here is an object lesson for this morning, for as much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to avoid the disruption, the surprises, the call to service, the promise of abundance – it is, of course, impossible to do! Thanks be to God! And with the gift of faith – ours in baptism, we are launched on our vocational journeys, to follow our calls to be God’s people and to do God’s work in the world. And we can’t shake it off!

Today we celebrate the call my dad answered more than 50 years ago to be our pastor. And though I can only imagine the many times when he would have liked to shake it off, he could not and he did not. Thanks be to God again and again.

This idea of a calling is, of course, central to our Lutheran identity. Martin Luther extended the theological concept of vocation or calling to include all that we do in the world as God’s people – our careers and professions, yes, but also what we do in our families and schools and neighborhoods. I especially like the definition of vocation offered by preacher and essayist, Frederick Buechner, who asserts that true vocation is the "place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Isn’t that beautiful? Consider for a moment where and how you experience deep gladness in your life – that is the first step in discovering your call.

But then there is the critical second step, which, in Buechner’s definition, is to name the world’s need that you will serve, to explore what in the world you were called to be and do! This is sometimes tougher for us to do, but our familiar gospel for this morning tells us why we must – for God so loved the world, we read, and because God does love the world, God sent his only Son – and because God sent his Son to die for us, we have been saved – and as we celebrate our being saved through the crucified and risen Christ and made whole again in our baptism, we return full circle to our calls to love and serve the world that God first loved. Our gladness intersects with a deep need in God’s world, and there we find our genuine calling as God’s faithful people. And we can’t shake it off!

My good colleague, Dr. David Tiede, former president of Luther Seminary and currently the Christensen professor at Augsburg, is always fond of reminding us that the gospel of John does not say, “For God so loved the church,” or even “For God so loved the college,” it’s always been “For God so loved the world.” But that can be a hard message for God’s people to hear when the world so often places obstacles in our faithful way – obstacles of inequity and violence and anxiety and fear and injustice – obstacles that make it really tough to see how God can have a plan for this world. Forgive as you are forgiven – surely you jest. Do justice, take risks for the vulnerable in our midst, love those who hate us – you’ve got to be kidding. “For God so loved the world” – really, we ask? But dad has never let those human doubts about our work in the world get in the way of his calling as our pastor.

One of the stories I often tell about my dad has to do with what it was like to be a part of the Pastor Pribbenow’s family on Sunday mornings. Dad would instruct us before Sunday services – where we often sat down front – that he wanted us to take notes on his sermon so we could have a family conversation at lunch. At the time, I’m sure you can imagine that we found this rather extreme – “come on, dad, we’ll listen” – but many years later, I came to realize that what dad taught me was the importance of paying attention, of attending to what is most important – in the case of Sunday services, what was most important, of course, was the proclamation of the Word, the sermon. To this day, when asked (as I often am) what my definition of leadership is, I respond that a leader helps individuals and organizations to pay attention, to keep their eyes and minds firmly focused on what is most important.

Dad taught me that, for which I am most grateful, and I think one way to sum up dad’s ministry is to suggest that he taught all of us to pay attention, to attend to our baptismal covenants, to follow our own calls, to love God’s world and do God’s work in the world – and he did it with the hands, the voice, the mind and heart of a pastor.

In other words, dad’s call to serve God as pastor for these past fifty years has been defined by his humble work – as shepherd, as proclaimer of the Word, as fellow laborer in the fields – to help us discern and follow our calls, to be God’s faithful people in the world, to serve our neighbors, to seek justice and wholeness and reconciliation in a world that so needs to know our God’s good intentions. For God so loved the world – and so must we.

And what remarkable work dad has done. I have so many stories about dad....and I know that many of you have your own! I want to share three brief stories from my experience that I hope resonate with you. We celebrate Pastor Pribbenow in our stories of his life and work in our midst.

Teaching me to listen for a call

I remember a Saturday morning some 40 years ago, when my dad and I hopped into a borrowed pick-up truck to commence a day of work on behalf of the Church World Service’s CROP program. Though most of you probably know CROP today through its annual “walks,” in rural areas CROP has long sponsored the grain contribution effort we helped with that day.

For eight or nine hours that Saturday, my dad and I drove from farm to farm in our southern Wisconsin community gathering contributions of grain from generous farmers. When our pick-up truck was full, we would drive to the local grain elevator to unload. At the end of the day, our various contributions were totaled by the elevator operator and the

contributed grain was transported to the Church World Service barge or flatbed, ultimately ending up in Africa or Asia as part of U.S. efforts to alleviate world hunger.

On that Saturday, my dad and I were grain-gatherers. Along with the grain donors (the farmers), the grain-storers and counters (the elevator operator), the grain brokers (Church World Service), and the grain recipients (the hungry of the world), we participated in the common work of a community where each member did his/her part, helping to relieve a need, working to feed the hungry and build a healthier world.

It is a simple picture of a complex set of dynamics. It is, however, a picture that defines who I am and what it is I care about in my work. I was called to be a grain-gatherer. I live out that vocation every day in my professional life. From my early experience, however, I know well that my work makes no sense outside of the community of grain donors, counters, brokers, and recipients, who share my commitment to a more humane and responsible world.

Dad helped me find my calling. I have gathered grain for many important causes during my career – and, as I like to say, if you stay at it long enough, sooner or later they make you the chief grain-gatherer! And now I gather grain as part of a community that shares in the work of loving God's world – in my case, a college that educates students for service. And dad helped me find my call by walking alongside me, accompanying me on a vocational journey that continues yet today. Dad taught me by working with me – not by lecturing me or handing me a book or counting on others – just as he has worked alongside so many of you who have populated the congregations he has served. Dad works quietly, humbly, as a servant – following the example of his Lord and Savior, who emptied himself, as we read in Paul's letter to the Philippians – because he knows how much the world needs faithful people to love and heal and restore God's good creation.

Teaching me to follow the commandments

I was a fairly precocious Sunday School and Confirmation student, and when your Dad is the minister and thus your teacher, there was a good chance that I would regularly push the envelope on Dad's good lessons.

I remember one of dad's confirmation assignments was to write an essay on the Ten Commandments in the context of the interpretation of the commandments in Martin Luther's Small Catechism. I remember writing page after page about each of the commandments, extending their reach to create a complete moral code. My Dad smiled and patted me on the head. I loved the law.

But that was just the beginning. I went on to college and then to graduate school in theology and social ethics. I studied with Martin Marty and let me humbly tell you that I know a lot about ethics and moral codes. Professor Marty smiled and patted me on the head. I had become an expert in the law.

And then my Dad and Professor Marty sent me into the world to live and work with God's faithful people, to follow my calling as an educator and a college leader, and now I know what I didn't know before. These commandments are pretty simple and if you break them, bad and messy stuff happens.

I know this because I now live with faithful people who have experienced the bad and messy. Two years ago in September, a young Augsburg student was murdered outside a community center in our Minneapolis neighborhood, gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children. Someone broke the commandment, “You shall not murder,” and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments.

God spoke these commandments directly to God’s people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, and that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God’s will, God’s reign, God’s intentions for God’s people. What a remarkable gift.

And it is God’s gift that I was firmly focused on as I led a mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and now we had to live in the aftermath. It has become so clear to me during the past two years that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner – we all get that, we’re broken, we don’t live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together.

Martin Luther is truly helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment (I’m sure we all remember from our confirmation days!), “You shall not murder,” when he says: This means that “we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way.” Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder – the law covers the murderer – it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice – it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don’t believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us.

At a neighborhood meeting after the murder to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, we all experienced first-hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were “God is good,” and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood – I think that is what Martin Luther meant as he explained the commandment!

And I know that is what my dad was teaching me in confirmation. It has taken me many years to fully grasp that, but now I understand how much dad loves God’s creation – the world and all that is therein – and how he sees his calling to teach and preach as all about encouraging and challenging and guiding and sometimes even chastising us to see what God intends for God’s good people and world and to work to make it so. It’s not about the law, it’s about the gospel!

Fidelity, duty and love: the stuff of ordinary lives

There are many parts of my dad's life that are not as transparent to those who know and love him. I have inherited some of his reticence to say all that is on his mind and in his heart. But my dad has never failed to show us all in his deeds, in his work in our midst, how much he loves all of us. He is a remarkable man, if I do say so myself, not perfect by any means, but full of good spirit and hope and faith and great skills that are exemplified in the mundane, everyday ways in which he has been our pastor – and also our father and brother and friend.

I made a long list of some of the memories that best illustrate what I mean – dad is a carpenter and a gardener, who loves to work with his hands and share the bounty; dad made summer Bible camp a staple of our growing up, teaching us to love the outdoors and the Lord; dad is a hands-on volunteer and leader in service to others, from his furniture ministry to Habitat for Humanity to the Befrienders program in area hospitals; dad is Papa Jerry to 16 grandchildren and one great-grand child; dad has a deep commitment to mission work around the world and has done so much (with many of you) to support pastors and families from other countries and to learn more about their countries and lives (leading up to his life-changing and affirming trip to Tanzania a few years back where he was fittingly celebrated by Christians there for what he had done from afar for their pastor and their ministries) – and I could go on and on.

And, of course, I must say a word about the great loves of his life because a pastor so needs a loving partner. Dad was married to mom for 46 years, raised six children, and loved and cared for her as she lost her valiant battle with cancer. He then found new love with Judy who lost her own battle with illness. And now he is so happy with Su as his special friend. It could be a sad story and there certainly is sadness for us all, but it also is a powerful story about how Jerry – our pastor and father and friend – models for all of us in his daily life what God requires of us in our vocational journeys to love and serve God's world.

It's about fidelity – faithfulness. It's too easy today to say that I don't want to deal with the pain, the messiness, the anxiety, so we walk away – being faithful to God and to each other, loving the world, no matter the pain and messiness, dad teaches us, is at the center of our baptismal covenants and calls.

It's also about duty. We get too easily drawn into this notion that only if I have the time, the energy, the inclination, I'll do my part. But it's not always a choice, God's call can be inconvenient, disappointing, even frightening, but we can't shake it off. Dad – this kid from tiny Rio, Wisconsin – has gone where God has sent him. And so must we.

And it's about love – the richest and most meaningful of all human capacities, our gift from a loving and gracious God. Love is a tool and attitude and promise that we need to battle all that seeks to tear down God's world...hate, war, injustice, hunger, degradation of the earth. Jerry Pribbenow loves us and walks the talk when it comes to showing us the difference love makes in serving his God.

So these are my stories and the lessons I have learned from my dad. It's not all fun stuff, there's plenty of heartache and struggle to go with the fun and adventure, but it's all full of grace as we learn to pay attention, to attend to God's intentions for our faithful lives in the world. Fifty years is a long time and fifty years of faithful service is especially daunting for those of us who have many years to go to meet that mark. But, of course, it is not a contest

and dad, thanks be to God, intends to continue to be our pastor and partner and friend in the years ahead as we seek to be faithful to God's call in our own lives.

I think a good bit about these sometimes frightening and awesome calls we must live into as a central part of my work as president of one of our Lutheran church colleges. Every day, I have the gift to work with young people who are trying to figure out how they will live out their calls, how they will make a difference, how they will love God's world. And I have found these moving words from the great American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, to be an inspiring guide to my work – as I find them an apt description of what I have learned from my dad about how to live faithfully and hopefully in the world:

*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*)*

We're in good and gracious company – called by our loving God at our baptisms to do God's work, to be God's people, to heal the world, to be instruments of God's loving and reconciling and justice-filled intentions for the world. For God so loved the world, he sent his only Son that we might be saved. And then he sent Jerry Pribbenow, who fifty years ago heard and accepted his call to be God's good and faithful servant in our midst. And then he sent us to be God's faithful people in this world God loves so much. And we can't shake it off. What good news! Thanks be to God. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have two books on my reading list, both of which came to me directly from the authors.

The first is *The Secret of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (Crown Publishers, 2010), by Jack Weatherford, retired faculty member at Macalester College and honorary degree recipient from Augsburg. Jack writes beautifully of a world few of us know or understand beyond our stereotypes.

The second is Greg Mortenson's *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Viking, 2009). Mortenson, who attended one of our sister Lutheran colleges, is the author of *Three Cups of Tea* and is a compelling personality for many young people these days.

>>Invocation<<

Here is Wendell Berry's beautiful invocation from his *Sabbath Poems* (2002) – which seems fitting in the theme of this issue, honoring my dad...

“Teach me work that honors Thy work,
the true economies of goods and words,
to make my arts compatible
with the songs of the local birds.

Teach me patience beyond work
and, beyond patience, the blest
Sabbath of Thy unresting love
which lights all things and gives rest.”

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for the next issue (August 2010)<<

- Asking the right questions
- Evolving social arrangements

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