

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<<

The beginning of the 15th year of these Notes – thanks for your faithful readership in my continuing journey to promote reflective practice. I'm a bit late this month as I prepare for a couple of international trips – to China and Norway – where I continue to be fascinated by the question of “who in the world are our neighbors?” A question both theological and practical.

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

>>There is sin in it<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg College chapel earlier this fall – a solid Lutheran perspective on life in the world!

Scripture assigned: Matthew 9: 9-13

Last week, I was in Chicago at the Lutheran church offices for a meeting about theological education. In our conversations, one of my colleagues suggested that we needed to consider what it was about our Lutheran faith that brought distinction and focus to our understanding of theological education. And then he went on to say that one such distinction might be our belief that there is “always sin in it...,” there is always sin in it.

Now, I suppose you could conclude that this is some sort of Lutheran slogan, inside baseball even, shorthand for our Northern European ancestral bias toward the dark side of human experience, but then my colleague went on to add – “because there is always sin in it, there is always as well God in it, offering us a way forward, a word of grace and reconciliation, the good news that we are loved and forgiven.” And that, I would offer, is a fitting summary of our Lutheran faith: There *is* sin in it, in every part of our lives, and that is why our loving God sent God's only son into the world to reconcile us to God, our neighbors and ourselves. Good news, indeed.

Our gospel reading for this morning reads like a script for this dramatic claim about sin and redemption. Jesus, early in his public ministry, is out recruiting disciples. And here sits Matthew, the tax collector, and then there is the meal together with an even wider assortment of those labeled as sinners. And there is Jesus in their midst, claiming in response to the Pharisaic self-righteousness, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

There are three critical theological ideas in that last sentence – enough for another couple of sermons! The first is Jesus’s reminder that he has “come” for this. God has sent Jesus for this reason, that God’s love for God’s people might be known and experienced. The second idea is that Jesus “calls” his disciples to this same work, not to a withdrawal from the world, but rather to be disciples in and for the world. And third, that the call comes not because we are blameless or pure or righteous, but precisely because we are human, sinful and fallen.

This is the remarkable word of grace and reconciliation that is at the heart of our faith. I’m drawn again and again to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler’s thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, “Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid.” This is a prayer of confession that reminds us, challenges us and comforts us with the good news that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. We are called by our God in Jesus Christ to follow, not because we are righteous, but because we are sinners all, sinners who are forgiven and reconciled so that God’s good work in the world might be accomplished in and through us.

There is sin in it, no doubt about it, but that sin does not define God’s people, redeemed, called and equipped for the work of hope and reconciliation. In fact, our Lutheran faith demands that we face the reality of a sinful world with clear-eyed focus. We recognize the messiness, the complexity, the self-interest and greed, the violence and deception. We ask tough questions and call into question the ways of the world. And then we get to work with a sense of hope and promise, believing that we are called to live as those reconciled and redeemed, offering that same wellspring of hope and reconciliation to all.

And that brings it back to us – each of us who believe in this God of reconciliation – and to our work in the world. It is easy to fall into the traps the world sets for us. Because there is sin in all aspects of our lives together, we are sometimes tempted to believe there is nothing we can do. We might be overwhelmed or depressed by the ways human beings treat each other and not sure why or how we can respond. Or maybe we are like the Pharisees of Biblical times, wondering what we have to do with all this sin when we are the righteous ones and we don’t want to be tainted by sin and sinners.

But once again our Gospel offers a simple message about what we are called to be and do – and it is summed up in the call to fellowship, the simple act of sitting at table with all God’s sinful creatures, sharing the word of reconciliation, of love and compassion, of forgiveness, of hope for a new way forward together.

What would it look like to follow this faithful call to be wellsprings of reconciliation and hope as we face the pressing ways in which “sin is in it” in our lives today? Perhaps it looks like this...

Here on campus, it's the work we are called to do with our sisters and brothers to face the realities of environmental sins by advocating for solar panels and composting. And it's the efforts to know that some among us go hungry – often invisibly – and we must stock a food shelf to meet their needs. And it's our vigilance in facing the sin of bias and discrimination and working like hell to ensure that we are reconciled with each other – that we love each other – despite our different ethnic, religious, socio-economic, gender and sexual identities.

In our neighborhood, it's the work we are called to do in naming and addressing the sin of targeting our Somali neighbors as terrorists whenever one of their countrymen does something amiss. And it's the work of recognizing health and educational disparities that keep good people from living to their full potential, and putting in place tutoring programs and health clinics that reach into the lives of our neighbors and help them help themselves. And it's all we do to ensure that the sins of violence are addressed with both policies and practices that build a neighborhood safe for all.

And in our world, it's the work we are called to do to name the sins of systematic racism and economic injustice that keep people oppressed and hungry, and to become truth tellers to those who propagate falsehoods. It's the effort to address incivility and polarization by showing that reconciled people find common purpose that crosses over political and ideological boundaries and serves God's purposes in the world. It's the work of building what Martin Luther King Jr. called a "world house" – a commitment to fellowship and being at table with each other even when all we see is "the sin in it" and sinners all around – sinners just like us.

The great prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) this passage that summarizes how we might live in the world as sinners already saved and called to do God's work of reconciliation: "*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.*"

There *is* sin in it – and precisely for that reason, we believe that God is in it all – the God of hope and faith and love and forgiveness. What good and grace-filled news! Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Faithful and relevant<<

I had the privilege in August to address the Church wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), our church body, on behalf of our associated colleges and universities. In my remarks, you will note the continuing themes related to my sabbatical research in summer 2012.

"My sisters and brothers in Christ, I bring you greetings on behalf of my fellow presidents of the 26 colleges and universities of the ELCA, and the thousands of faculty, staff, alumni, board members and students they represent. How about a show of hands for all those present who count one of our colleges and universities as alma mater?! An alumni event!

It is a privilege to bring a brief message on behalf of my presidential colleagues, meant to offer a glimpse of the vitality and faithfulness of your ELCA institutions of higher learning in the 21st century. Why me, you might ask? Well, I think it has something to do with that sabbatical I enjoyed last summer, during which I chose to spend six weeks at the church wide headquarters in Chicago, researching the relevance of Lutheran higher education. My friend and colleague, Augustana – Rock

Island president Steve Bahls, also had a sabbatical last summer. He went to Antarctica to explore God's good creation; I went to Chicago and sat in a cubicle. And here I am!

The point of my research was simple. I named five gifts of the Lutheran theological tradition that I contend allow us to lift up the common identity and character of our institutions, and that make the claim that we are both faithful to the Lutheran tradition and relevant to the needs of the church and the world in the 21st century. The gifts I identified are these:

We have the gift of the theological concept of vocation—the belief that God calls us to lives of meaning and significance in the world. We believe that we are called as academic institutions to help students discern their callings and to equip them to live out those callings.

We have the gift of critical and humble inquiry—the belief that already saved through God's salvific act in Jesus Christ, we are freed to seek knowledge and understanding, to ask difficult questions and to make education a central value of a faithful life. We are grounded in the liberal arts, academic freedom and the search for truth among competing ideologies.

We have the gift of engaging the other—the claim that God's diverse creation is good. We believe that we are called to embrace diversity and otherness, to learn from each other and to build healthy communities.

We have the gift of serving our neighbors and seeking justice in human affairs—the belief that God calls us into relationship with each other and that our neighbors, individually and collectively, demand our love and service. We educate for service and justice in the world.

We have the gift of semper reformanda—the belief that only God is permanent and that all human forms are imperfect and in need of abiding and loving reform. We are well positioned to build institutions that embrace change and value sustainability.

All well and good you might say, but what does it look like on our campuses? What does it mean to be faithful and relevant in the 21st century? A few brief stories will paint a picture...

Meet Cody, who came to us as a young man sure that he was called to the congregational ministry. Active in campus ministry, a leader in lots of student organizations, he even won a contest to be president for a day (which certainly dissuaded him from that line of work!) And then he took a tax accounting class – and he loved it – and soon he began to imagine a path toward a very different sort of ministry (focused, as he reminded us in his senior chapel talk, on April 15th!) Vocations are full of surprises. Cody reminds us that God has a wide expanse of important work to be done in the world.

And then there is Brian, a young man who comes to our campus to study filmmaking, but after a year decides that chemistry is more his passion (go figure!). In a summer undergraduate research project, he asks a simple question about biodiesel fuel and environmental well-being, and is directed by a faculty member to a scientist alumnus, who joins in the project. A few short months later there are patents for a new process for producing biodiesel fuel, then a production facility is built and

today there are millions of gallons of biodiesel being produced in a clean and environmentally friendly way. Brian asked his research questions in a critical, though humble way. He was not afraid of the answers and where they would lead him. By the way, Brian won a Rhodes Scholarship – the first for our college. Brian reminds us that God expects us to ask our questions and seek answers for the sake of serving creation.

Or Beth, a young woman questioning her faith and purpose in the world, until she becomes active in our Campus Kitchen program. Campus Kitchen collects leftover foodstuffs from our cafeteria and area restaurants, prepares and then delivers more than 3,000 meals a month to our neighbors. Beth begins to deliver and eat meals with our neighbors who are Somali immigrants. And then she is tutoring the Somali children, invited to meals in the nearby Riverside Plaza apartments with Somali families, even learning a bit of the Somali language and the Muslim religion. After graduation she was off for a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and then to law school so she can practice immigration law in the Twin Cities. Vocations are journeys, not destinations. Beth reminds us that engaging those of different cultures and faith can help to create healthier and more just communities. And Campus Kitchen exemplifies how we must not be afraid to consider how our work can be done differently. Leftover food, extra land, food and justice in a world where too many people go hungry. *Semper reformanda*. We can all take a lesson!

These are the stories of the colleges and universities of our church, expressions of the Lutheran faith in the midst of our increasingly complex and diverse world. We could not be more proud to live out our academic missions in the world, faithful to the tradition we have inherited and relevant to the needs of the world that our good God loves so very much.

Thank you for your prayers and for your support. And God's abundant blessings on the work you are called to do."

PRACTICE THIS

>>Philanthropy as R & D for business<<

A recent McKinsey and Company commentary, authored by Doug Conant (www.mckinsey.com/Insights/CorporateSocialResponsibility), argues that corporate philanthropy should be understood as "a discovery phase in investment in a social issue."

Conant, former CEO of Campbell Soup Company, details how philanthropy helped Campbell's to pilot efforts to address heart health and childhood obesity, and to reduce the company's carbon footprint. He also points to the impact of corporate philanthropy on employee development efforts, deploying company personnel in communities with specific needs for expertise. Conant's argument is that corporate philanthropy is a critical aspect of an overall corporate social responsibility strategy and plays a particular role in helping to companies to learn about communities and their needs while also testing new business strategies.

>>Governing together<<

My friend and colleague, Steve Bahls, president of Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, is an attorney by profession and has brought his experience in legal matters to his work leading a college, particularly as it relates to organizational governance. Steve is currently finishing a book on shared governance for colleges and universities, which we all look forward to as a guide to the complexities of leading institutions with many stakeholders and firm traditions of shared leadership.

At a presentation earlier this year, Steve outlined four “ideal types” of views on shared governance:

- Shared governance as equal rights to governance and decision-making – the notion that we all get to be involved in all major decisions
- Shared governance as a rigid set of rules of engagement – the notion that there are clear lines of demarcation for involvement in institutional governance and decision-making
- Shared governance as a partnership between faculty, administration and board members – the notion that we are all in this work together and the complementarity of our efforts helps move things forward
- Shared governance a system of open communication to align priorities, define shared responsibility for the institution, and create a system of checks and balances to ensure mission-centeredness

As with any set of ideal types, no one position completely reflects the reality of the situation. Instead, the types become helpful frames for seeing individual perspectives and looking for the blend of approaches that must be pursued within particular contexts. We are engaged right now in these conversations at Augsburg and are most grateful for President Bahls’ helpful roadmap to this critical work.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I’ve been reading a bit of World War II history, including Susan Dunn’s *1940: FDR, Willkie, Lindbergh, Hitler – the Election Amid the Storm* (Yale U. Press, 2013). I’m so impressed by historians who take us deep into a particular period of time in such compelling ways.

I also have enjoyed the work of fellow Minnesotan Nate Garvis (co-written with Gene Rebeck), *Naked Civics: Strip Away the Politics to Build a Better World* (2012, available as an e-book at www.nakedcivics.com). Nate has an inspiring vision for reimagining our common lives in the 21st century – and he’s a very cool guy!

>>All the Saints<<

Sometimes it’s important to reflect on the saints in our midst. Jesus taught some valuable lessons about how saints should live in the world. Here is Eugene Peterson’s distinctive translation of Luke 6: 21-34 in *The Message*.

“You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding. You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry. Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal. You’re blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like! —for even though they don’t like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your *self* will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

“There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

“To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

“Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them*! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.”

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Urban settlements
- Citizenship and work
- Public work

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