

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Fifteen, Number Two (December 2013)

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

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Happy New Year, all! I trust that the new year will be full of good things for you and yours. We are in the midst of one of the coldest winters on record here in Minnesota, but we dress well, seek the light in the darkness, and give thanks for all of those who bring warmth into our lives. I have used my brief holiday break to catch up on stacks of magazines and books – I promise not to burden you with excess recommendations! But I am reminded of all the ways in which our reflective practice is enhanced by the remarkable minds and hearts of our fellow travelers. May 2014 be a year in which we rededicate ourselves to what I have called the “liberal arts life” – thinking, acting and giving a damn!

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

>>Prophets for life<<

We have a new campus ministry leadership team at Augsburg this year and they have done a masterful job of organizing our daily chapels around various themes. On the days surrounding All Saint's Day (November 1), they asked those of us privileged to bring the Word to reflect on the theme “from death to life.” I preached the following homily that week – with an interesting turn of phrase that resonated with our aspirations for our college community and the education we offer students.

(Scripture assigned: Matthew 13: 53-58)

“We continue this morning with our theme of “from death to life,” celebrating the remarkable example of the saints who have gone before us proclaiming the gospel of grace and love and life in the midst of a world that would have us embrace greed and violence and death. And we have, in the scripture assigned for this morning, this rather odd passage from Matthew's gospel detailing Jesus's homecoming, which does not go well.

It is important to set these verses in the wider context of the 13th chapter of Matthew, which are the familiar litany of parables concerning the kingdom of heaven. You will recognize the parable of the sower, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast - all meant to offer to the disciples and the crowds that gather at Jesus' feet images of a kingdom of great value, a kingdom where the believers will be separated from the unbelievers, a kingdom to which Jesus is inviting us to enter with him.

And then at the end of this long chapter, Jesus goes home, leaving behind his wide-ranging ministry to visit his hometown and the family and friends there who knew him well as he grew up. Jesus goes to the synagogue to teach and those gathered are initially astounded by his wisdom, but their astonishment quickly turns to anger and confusion. How could this lowly carpenter's son have this wisdom and power? We know him and his family well, and surely he is not greater or wiser than we are. To which Jesus responds with this familiar phrase, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house," and then departs, we're told, without doing many deeds of power because of their unbelief.

Quite the juxtaposition of adoring crowds gathered to learn from this remarkable prophet and teacher about the kingdom of God about to burst into their midst and the hometown folk who can't comprehend how one of their own could have such wisdom and power, such insight into God's intentions for the world.

It is, though, a juxtaposition that strikes me as particularly relevant for our own vocations as God's prophets and teachers in the world. From the moment of our baptisms, we are offered the gift of faith that calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. (Maya's baptism story) But Jesus's own pilgrimage in the world illustrates for us just how fraught with both promise and tension the call to discipleship, the call to be God's prophets, will be.

The double meaning in my title for this morning, "Prophets for life," gets at both the promise and tension in our prophetic vocations.

As we proclaim and practice in myriad ways here at Augsburg, "we are called," called to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders; called to be prophets of hospitality and justice; called to be neighbor; called to be faithful. In other words, prophets for life means just that - a lifelong commitment to following our calls no matter the cost and obstacles and messiness.

The privilege to be educated at a place like Augsburg, along with the call to be faithful people, means that we have obligations to use our education to make the world more fair and just and compassionate. The education you receive in this college is meant to equip you with the knowledge and skills and sense of community to pursue your calling, wherever it leads. The example Jesus offers in our brief gospel vignette this morning is how, even when we might think we are in friendly territory - let alone among those we may not know or trust - there are many who will doubt and challenge and criticize our work as prophets for life. A prophet may find honor hard to come by. But we know the rest of Jesus's story and it doesn't end here in Nazareth.

And it can't end here or there, because we are called to be prophets for life, to proclaim the messages of God's intentions for God's people, to live as disciples carrying on the work of the kingdom in the midst of human history. Three simple themes arise in our gospel for this morning:

Teaching in the sanctuary – Jesus comes to his hometown and goes to the synagogue to teach. This, in the end, must be our abiding commitment – to believe that we are called as prophets for life to lift up this bold claim that we live out in this college – that faith and learning cannot be separated. Theologian Douglas John Hall, who visited our campus in fall 2006 to deliver the Christensen lectures remarked that he believed the church would look very different in 40 years from what it looks like now because faithful people would need to be much more reflective than they have been about why they are part of the Christian community. Hall thought the church would look more like a synagogue, a place in which study and worship intersect and gain from each other. Learning that is informed by faith (even by other faiths), that asks tough questions about the world and human beings and what God intends for us, that celebrates and ritualizes and understands that faith and learning together provide a basis for responsible and faithful lives in the world – is the legacy of Augsburg College, a legacy that is central to the education you receive here and that we entrust to you for your vocational journeys so that you can proclaim life abundant in your prophetic lives.

The challenge of unity – But, of course, even with Jesus’s example of proclaiming the words of life and love, there is the reality of disunity and fragmentation, of being rejected even by those we are seeking to teach and serve. The real world is full of fragmentation, neighbor from neighbor, country from country, religion from religion – and in our disunity the ways of scarcity and fear win out. I have been working on an essay about Augsburg’s history and that tension between unity and disunity is found throughout our history – it was in the early Norwegian-American community in our region (why do you think there are so many Lutheran churches and colleges in our region – it wasn’t necessarily because of need, it was because we didn’t agree). And even today our lives are full of tensions – paradoxes even – between the liberal arts and professional studies, between diverse student populations, between access and excellence, between serving ourselves and serving our neighbors. We live in those tensions but we also live with the gospel promise of unity. And like Jesus – realist that he surely was as he named his relationship to his family and friends – we are called not to give in to our divisions, but to celebrate the promise of unity that is ours in the gospel of life. At once both sinful and saved – that great Lutheran doctrine – we are freed to live in the tensions, to learn from each other, to celebrate our various gifts, and then to go forward as Jesus himself did, as prophets for life.

Stewards of God’s many gifts – And finally, ours is a message of stewardship for the many gifts entrusted to us - gifts of faith, gifts of knowledge and truth, gifts of neighbor and neighborhood. In the verses immediately before our scripture reading for this morning, Jesus asks his disciples if they have understood all that he has taught about the kingdom. When they answer “yes”, Jesus then charges them with finding in the treasures of the kingdom all that is new and old and of value to God’s work in the world. We have examples abundant here on campus and in our neighborhood of this call to stewardship. One of the leaders of the Faith in the City partnership of which we are a part said that he loves our partnership with our Lutheran colleagues because it was our common ancestors who came to this place and who, over the course of a century and more, built institutions to serve the people – hospitals, seminaries, colleges, social service agencies, homes for seniors, businesses and so on – and now we have the special obligation as their successors to ensure that these neighborhoods where we are planted have all the best that we can give so that we might pay back and forward the gifts of our ancestors. That is why our work here includes all of our neighbors in Cedar-Riverside and nearby because these have always been our neighbors (though their identities and concerns have changed over the years), and our mission must include them and their many gifts so that we might proclaim life in this place. This is why Campus Kitchens and our partnership with Trinity to do after-school programs for the Somali youth and our efforts with the Native peoples who live nearby

are all so essential to our identity and purpose. Our neighbors are gifts to us as we are to them, and together we share in the work of building community, seeking justice, and being prophets for life.

If honor is what you seek in your life, Jesus has a difficult message for us. But if life abundant is what you believe in and seek to share with others, then Jesus offers us a path forward, a path that leads to redemption and life. We are called to be prophets for life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Turning the tables<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg chapel during the first week in Advent, an opportunity to reflect on how the anticipation of the Advent season is occasion to rethink how we are called to live in the world.

(Scripture assigned: Matthew 21: 12-13)

Here on the cusp of the new Christian liturgical year, in the season we call Advent, I am reminded of all the various new years we commemorate in our personal and social lives.

There are, of course, birthdays and anniversaries of various sorts for each of us. And then there is the calendar new year, where we put an old year behind us and resolve to be better in the days ahead. I know I'm looking forward to putting 2013 behind me and writing 2014 on my contracts and checks – 3s are not my penmanship strength! Here at Augsburg, we mark out new academic years with all the promise and excitement we feel as our community is extended with new students and we all get a fresh start with our various courses of study. And finally, for those of us who must worry about such things, there is a new fiscal year – which here at Augsburg begins each June 1st – a day when I like to exclaim that all sins are forgiven from the previous budget.

But what about the new liturgical year? If you were in church on Sunday or here in chapel yesterday, I think you have a sense that the advent season begins in a dark place, full of mourning and anguish and longing. The epistle lesson assigned for Sunday – from Paul's letter to the Romans – said something about putting off all licentiousness and debauchery – the reader at our church had a hard time even saying the words!

And then there is this gospel text assigned for this morning, the first Tuesday in Advent. Jesus enters the holy temple, only to turn violent, overturning the tables of moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves, decrying the ways in which the temple – his Father's house – had become a den of thieves and not a house of prayer. And in so doing, Jesus upsets the entire economy that has emerged within the temple walls, calling into question the means by which sacrifices are made to pay homage and to atone for sins. Jesus turns the tables, quite literally, and therein it seems to me is the central message of the Advent season, of this new year – Jesus calls us to be transformed of the world's ways, to turn away from business as usual, and to live as those who already know the end of the story.

And that, of course, is what makes this annual new year commemoration for God's faithful people so very different than our usual practices – this is a new year in which we have nothing to do except to live as those already redeemed. We have seen the Christ Child, the teacher, the healer, the Savior – we have known the manger, the masses gathered to hear God's word, the blind man made to see, the cross, the empty tomb, the road to Emmaus – we have experienced God breaking into our history for the world God loves so much. And now we have the reminder and challenge – the renewed call – to live as those who have nothing to prove, nothing to earn, nothing to resolve,

except to follow, to be God's faithful people in the world, to be transformed so that we might be agents of God's transformation and love for all of creation, to turn the tables on the world so that it might know the compassion and mercy and justice that is ours through our awesome God.

Now, I'm not in a position to say exactly what this transformation looks like for each of us. I suppose a little less licentiousness and debauchery, but beyond that, as Martin Luther taught us, our relationship with God is personal and the call we receive will take us down paths we cannot imagine. This Advent season might be a most appropriate time for you to listen and watch even more carefully for what God is calling you to be and do in the world. The light from the Advent wreath, signifying the love of God breaking into the darkness, may be just the place to start. Where are the light and the darkness in your life, and where is the light leading you? Where are the wellsprings of compassion and hope in your life, and how can you follow God's light even further into those places, turning the tables on the darkness that is so near by? Longing for transformation, where might we find that peace and justice and love that passes all human understanding?

What I am able to say is that God does not leave us alone or comfortless or without what we need for our vocational journeys, and one of the remarkable ways we know God's guiding hand is in the embrace of communities and institutions that have themselves been formed and transformed by God's saving love in Jesus Christ – communities and institutions like Augsburg College.

Our founders believed deeply that this college was meant to embody the Word made flesh – that is the reason why they chose John 1: 14 as our founding motto – “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Augsburg is an incarnational community, grounded in this place, attentive to the needs of the world, and called to equip our students with the education and skills they need to “turn the tables” on the world.

A few ways we live out that calling and help our students to “turn the tables”:

First, we educate “off the main road.” I first coined this way of describing our approach to education after a visit to our campus in Windhoek, Namibia. As you come into Windhoek on the fancy highway, you see what the local tourism council wants you to see – new and well-kept buildings, few signs of struggle or poverty, industrious business and business people. But just a few blocks off the main road, you get a different view – a view of vast tin villages, comprising thousands who have sought relief from meager existences in rural settings and have come to the city to find work, only to find a squalid life. A view of clinics and orphanages and other agencies struggling to meet the needs of too many with too little. A view of systematic racism, keeping people in their places according to the hierarchy of power based on the color of one's skin.

And it is in these places off the main road that we are called to be educated, to see Christ's face, and to be God's people fighting for wholeness and justice. I would argue that Augsburg's academic mission – and all of its programs – is all about education off the main road, here in Cedar-Riverside and Phillips and wherever we are found. In the classroom, in the neighborhood, around the world, we believe that God calls us to those places where the tables must be turned, and where our faithful work is most needed. In the texts we read, the conversations we engage, the service we offer, the communities we help build and sustain, God calls us off the main road so that God's people might know God's redeeming grace.

Second, here at Augsburg we are a community that believes that hospitality is not enough and that we are called to the work of justice and compassion for all God's people. Professor Lori Hale from

the Religion department offered this phrase “hospitality is not enough” in a chapel homily a few years back and it has haunted me ever since. It haunts me because it can be easy to comfort ourselves with the ways of hospitality – our expanding diversity as a college community, our commitments to being of service to our neighbors, our values as a place of welcome – these become excuses sometimes for not addressing the underlying reasons why hospitality is needed in the world. Strangers need to be welcomed because they have been excluded. Neighbors need our help because they have been discriminated against. The vulnerable long for justice because they have been marginalized.

But turning the tables means that hospitality is not enough – it is, in fact, just a beginning as we must fight for justice and safety and health and compassion and wholeness for all God’s people. We must use our intellects and minds to name and understand injustice and violence in the world. We must use our hearts and spirits to accompany those whose journeys are disrupted by injustice and violence. And we must use our feet and hands to stand with and fight alongside those who suffer from injustice and violence. God calls us to turn the tables on the world and to embrace the work of both hospitality and justice – of breaking bread together so that we might know and share God’s love and justice for all people.

Finally and simply, we are a community that is committed to the deep links between faith and learning. Our Lutheran heritage teaches us that faith and learning belong together, and we give away that gift each and every day to all of our students whether they share our particular faith or not. We should not take this gift for granted. Faith without learning is naïve, and learning without faith is foolish. Whether in the classroom, the residence halls, here in this sacred space, on athletic fields, or wherever our teaching and learning community gathers, we are called to explore and share our faith so that our learning might be redeemed. In this Advent season, this particularly Christian liturgical time, it seems most fitting that we lift up all of the ways in which God is present in our lives, reflecting our diverse experiences and faith traditions, informing our learning together, so that we might all know the call to “turn the tables,” to be the light in the darkness, to be God’s people and do God’s holy work, and thereby to live as those transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Seeing things from above<<

My graduate school colleague, Stephanie Paulsell, who teaches the practice of ministry at Harvard Divinity School, also writes an occasional column in *The Christian Century*. She recently reflected (*Christian Century*, November 27, 2013) on the wisdom we might find by seeing things from above. I quote:

“The philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot wrote that “the view from above” is the “philosophical way par excellence of looking at things.” Seeking a cosmic perspective on human existence, ancient lovers of wisdom cultivated a view from above through spiritual exercises. Distance, they argued, reveals connections, correspondences and patterns that cannot be seen up close. From a bird’s-eye view, as the poet Goethe wrote, we can see “the mad labyrinths of the world spread out before us.”

She then reminds us that the parables of Jesus are meant to offer this same sort of view of our lives. “A story about a disobedient son who squanders his father’s fortune becomes a story about the joy of finding what was lost and restoring to life what we thought was broken beyond repair. A story

about a man who thanks God that he is not a sinner and a tax collector who prays for mercy turns out to be a story about the humbling of the exalted and the exaltation of the humble.”

So, what are the “mad labyrinths” of your life and experiences that can only be known and negotiated by this view from above? What stories will you tell that turn our world upside down? May the New Year be a time for such reflection and story telling!

>>Money and the moral life<<

I’m about to co-teach an honors course we call “Separate Worlds,” which challenges students to learn about and experience life at both ends of the income spectrum – both as those experiencing homelessness and as those who are incredibly affluent. It is a course that challenges all of us – students and teachers alike – to reflect on our own attitudes toward money.

In a recent column in *The Lutheran* (December 2013), the Reverend Peter Marty (yes, of that family lineage!) offered these helpful tips about how to think about the role of money in our lives:

- Be honest about our tendency to deny personal wealth – no matter our circumstances, our North American context places us among the world’s most wealthy!
- Spend more energy focusing on things that money cannot buy.
- Find a conversation partner who has wrestled with the dogged pursuit of money – someone who has struggled to create a life while making a living.
- Don’t just praise or condemn money, confess your addiction to the powers of money.
- Give generously and with a glad heart.
- Be in touch with people who have little interest in money and attach your life to theirs in whatever way is workable. They will teach us how poor we are!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I’m intrigued by a new book entitled *The Generosity Network: New Transformational Tools for Successful Fund-Raising*, written by Jennifer McCrea and Jeffrey Walker (with Karl Weber) (Deepak Chopra, 2013). Though I have yet to delve in, the reviews and overviews promise an approach to fund-raising that focuses on partnerships and the nobility of the profession, all grounded in a systems approach.

My Augsburg colleague, Harry Boyte, has edited an important new volume entitled *Democracy’s Education: A Symposium on Power, Higher Education, and the Meaning of Citizenship* (Vanderbilt, 2014). His lead essay, “Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work,” is particularly insightful.

>>Che Jesus<<

Our 34th annual Advent Vespers – Augsburg’s Christmas gift to the Twin Cities – is a remarkable pageant of word and music responding to a central theme – this year, “Behold, the Child of our longing.” Each year, I am struck by the new insights I find in the chosen readings and songs, insights into a story whose end I already know. This year, the following passage was particularly meaningful.

(Attributed to an anonymous source, Cordoba, Argentina, Christmas 1970)

Che Jesus

They told me that you came back to be born every Christmas.
Man, you're crazy!
...with the stubborn gesture of coming back every Christmas
you are trying to tell us something.

That the revolution that all proclaim begins first of all in
each one's heart.

That it doesn't mean only changing structures but changing
selfishness for love.

That we have to stop being wolves and return to being
brothers and sisters.

That we...begin to work seriously for
individual conversation and social change
that will give to all the possibility of having bread,
education, freedom, and dignity.

That you have a message that's called the Gospel,
And a Church, and that's us—
A Church that wants to be servant of all.
A Church that knows that because God became human
one Christmas
there is no way to love God but to love all people.
If that's the way it is, Jesus, come to my house this Christmas.
Come to my country.
Come to the world of men and women.
And first of all, come to my heart.

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augsborg.edu, ask to be added to the list, and the listserv will confirm that you have been subscribed to the list. Please feel free to forward your email versions of Notes to others—they then can subscribe by contacting me. The current and archive issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com.

>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Urban settlements
- Citizenship and work
- Public work

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2013