

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<<

Happy Reformation Day! Maybe not an occasion that all celebrate, but on this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation it is instructive to imagine the ways our lives have been shaped by an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther whose fierce belief in God's grace (aided by the printing press) remade both the church and society. I'm in Washington, DC today for the national celebration of Reformation Day, gathered in a church in the shadow of the US Capitol building – a reminder that human institutions must be reformed continuously!

Perhaps it is fitting that we begin our 19th year of these Notes on this occasion and that we remind ourselves that reflective practice is at its heart about learning to do our work and live our lives in ever more faithful and meaningful ways. May it be so.

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

>>Prisoners of hope<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel at the beginning of our academic year.

Scripture: Zechariah 9: 9-12

A year ago, as our community gathered for the fall semester, our hearts and minds were troubled by what we were witnessing in a rancorous and mean-spirited election season. Two months later, the election decided – and no matter what side you supported – we were shocked and buffeted by a polarized electorate, a people divided in their experiences and opinions and aspirations. Many of my friends and colleagues lamented that the stress and anxiety of our lives together was debilitating. We recognized the bubbles we occupied and yet we were sore pressed to imagine any constructive way forward. A depressing and daunting place to find ourselves. Not much evidence for optimism.

"Prisoners of the waterless pit," the prophet Zechariah describes the exiled Israelites. An apt description of our common lives during those difficult days and months.

And then I began to see glimpses of a different story line, a counter narrative that called us back to work. 100 days of engagement here on campus, with faculty, staff and students gathering to reflect, discuss and act as fellow citizens. Folks on campus embracing our immigrant neighbors to show we cared and had their backs. Lots of good people seeking to understand the experiences of others by sharing their stories – even, and especially, if those experiences differed from their own. Students engaging elected officials to make the case for policies and practices that reflected our common aspirations for health and education and justice. And on and on – even into this fall when all first year students learned the beginning skills of democratic engagement and we celebrated our recovery community here at Augsburg and we stood with our Dreamer students to keep our promises to them.

And here too, Zechariah offers a frame for exploring our lives of faith today. For people of faith and all of God's creation, the prophet challenges us with this powerful message that describes what God intends for God's people and world. "...Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit." As with the ancient Israelites, freed from the Babylonian exile, we too are freed from the waterless pit by the God we know as creator, redeemer and spirit among us. But it doesn't end there.

The next line shows us where this newfound freedom leads. "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope." Freed from the abyss, we are sent home – back to our fortresses, our streets, our lives in communities, our campus – now bound not by exile in an alien land, but by the hope that ignites new life as stewards of our places and spaces and homes. Prisoners of hope, sent home.

So – what's faith got to do with it? Islamic scholar, Omar Safi, who teaches at Duke University, commenting on this passage from Zechariah, suggests a difference between what he calls "cheap optimism" – something he says runs deep in the American consciousness – and the cosmic quality of hope, rooted in faith, while at the same time with our feet mired in suffering. Quoting Desmond Tutu, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." Safi continues, "For hope to be real, there has to be a prison. And we, in the prison." Faith makes hope possible in a world defined by hatred, greed, bigotry and darkness.

We have wise guides in our own tradition to how faith calls us as prisoners of hope. Martin Luther writes in *The Freedom of the Christian* that the faithful are perfectly freed through faith alone in Jesus Christ and at the same time perfectly bound so that we might serve the neighbor. Freed from the waterless pit – in exile from our home – so that we might return to our communities as prisoners of hope. Quoting Luther, "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." 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.

Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor literally a prisoner of the Nazis in the 1940s and executed just before the Allies liberated Germany, wrote these compelling words from prison to his friends, Eberhard and Renate Bethge: "The world lives by the blessing of God and of the righteous and thus has a future. Blessing means laying one's hand on something and saying, Despite everything, you belong to God. This is what we do with the world that inflicts such suffering on us. We do not abandon it; we do not repudiate, despise or condemn it. Instead we call it back to God, we give it hope, we lay our hand on it and say: May God's blessing come upon you; be blessed, world created by God, you who belong to your Creator and Redeemer." Surely these are

the words of a prisoner of hope, made so by his deep faith in the redeeming grace of our God who calls us back to our fortresses to be God's blessing hands in the world.

At the beginning of our academic year, I am always full of hope for the wonder of education, for the hearts and hands and minds that come together in this community of learning and faith so that we might discern what God intends for us and God's good creation. This fall, I am inspired by Zechariah's compelling challenge to know ourselves as prisoners of hope, those bound in service to and love of neighbor.

Quoting Omar Safi once again, "Today, we say, Go back to your fortress, O you prisoners of hope. Go back to Ferguson. Go back to Staten Island. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to Chapel Hill. Go back to Syria. Go back to Palestine. (To which we might add, Go back to North Minneapolis and Cedar Riverside and Rondo and Phillips). Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. Let us climb on ahead to the promised land of justice. This is our hope. For us, the prisoners of hope."

In Suzanne Robbins', *The Hunger Games*, there is a telling exchange between President Snow, who fears that Katniss Everdeen's victory will foment revolution in far-flung districts, and the game-master Seneca Crane, the one responsible to make the Games serve the needs of the oppressive empire.

President Snow says, "Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it is contained.

Seneca Crane asks: "So?" and Snow replies, "So, CONTAIN it." (Adapted from "A Sermon on Hope," Timothy Safford, 7/19/15)

Hope unleashed. I wait with great anticipation to see how and where the hope you all instill in our community might be made manifest here on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world. My anticipation springs from my faith that our remarkable God calls us back to our fortresses and homes and neighborhoods and institutions so that we might hear the final message of the prophet Zechariah: "...today I declare that I will restore to you double." The message that we prisoners of hope, now returned from exile, will know God's abundance and love and grace many times over in the lives we lead, in the blessings we offer, in the promises we make, in the world we love.

As always, with our God, the best is yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>No matter who<<

A moving song that was interspersed throughout the text accompanied the following homily. The lyrics of the song are: "No matter who, no matter who, no matter who, no matter who, no matter who will stumble and fall, we will raise them up." (Lyrics and music, Bret Hesla)

Scripture: Isaiah 58: 6-8

Earlier this summer, I had the privilege to accompany 30-some Augsburg faculty and staff on a tour of the Protestant Reformation and Luther sites in Germany – a special trip to celebrate the legacy of the Lutheran Reformation in its 500th year and to explore the continuing relevance of that legacy to our faithful work in the 21st century. One moment stands out for me with special meaning and power.

We stood on the balcony of the Francke Foundations building in Halle, looking out upon a large campus of buildings that once served as orphanages, schools, libraries, a publishing house and social welfare agencies. Established in 1695 by August Hermann Francke, a pastor and Lutheran theologian at the university in Halle, the foundations were a response by Francke and his colleagues to the ways in which Lutheranism in the 150 years after Luther's death had more and more developed a dogmatic approach to the faith. In response, Francke and his fellow so-called Lutheran Pietists sought to focus on the personal relationship the faithful had with God – the justification by faith alone that Luther had preached – which then freed them to meet the needs of their neighbors in ways that are very much part of our Lutheran faith tradition today – in schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, social service agencies, and so much more.

As I stood on that balcony, I was reminded of what my teacher Martin Marty has said are the distinctive marks of the Lutheran Christian tradition – “acts of mercy,” he said. Acts of mercy. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor – no matter who (*Sing verse one of “No Matter Who”*).

Our colleague Marty Stortz reminds us that Luther's focus on what he called the “priesthood of all believers” has concrete implications for our lives of faith in the world. The work of serving those in need, once the exclusive domain of the clergy and the religious (priests and monks and nuns), now belongs to all of us. We now are called to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread, to house the homeless, to cover the naked – as the prophet proclaims, this is the fast we must choose. To walk alongside our immigrant neighbors, to undo the sins of white privilege and stand up for our fellow citizens, to care for the earth and all God's creatures, to welcome the stranger, to love our enemies – this is the work we are called to do.

As I stand here in this sacred space, able and privileged to peer beyond these walls to the city streets that surround us, I pray that acts of mercy may abide as marks of our faithful lives together in this place. I pray that the wideness of God's mercy may propel us to ever more courage and resolve and imagination as we do God's work with God's good creation – no matter who (*Sing verses two and three of “No Matter Who”*).

As the faithful at Halle understood, the work of the priesthood of all believers – the work we are called to do – is not simply a collection of acts of kindness and charity. Indeed our Lutheran Christian tradition compels us to think and act critically in addressing the root causes of the social ills that make our service to neighbor necessary. In other words, charity is not enough, service is not enough, hospitality is not enough.

In the midst of the flurry of new books and articles about Luther and the Protestant Reformation published in this anniversary year (several of which have been written by our own distinguished colleagues in the Religion department), I am especially intrigued by *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*, edited by Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee, which includes several provocative essays drawing our attention to the ways in which Luther and his colleagues offer us a roadmap to the work of reconciliation, restoration and justice in the world today.

In particular, Carter Lindberg's essay “Luther and the Common Chest” shows how Luther and his colleagues fought against an ideology that “dresses up greed,” that privileges the building up of personal profit at the expense of the common good, the needs and aspirations of all. As Lindberg states, “the biblical mandate to feed the poor is non-controversial. What is controversial is why people are poor and hungry.” Luther focused on analyzing the causes of poverty and promoting

government policies that moved beyond remedial philanthropy and charity to address the social and political roots of injustice and need.

The most concrete of these public policies and practices was the so-called Common Chest, established in Wittenberg in 1522, and a precursor of the social welfare systems we still recognize today. Funds intended to meet the needs of the neighbor were collected from various sources and held in common in an actual chest, overseen by wise stewards who would distribute the funds based on need – some were used for medical care, others to educate young children, still others as loans to help artisans establish businesses – a professional and institutional approach to providing health care, social services, education and business development that would build up the community – the precursors to the institutions we know today as expressions of our Lutheran faith – hospitals and universities and immigration agencies and social service providers – faith active in love for the neighbor, no matter who (*Sing verses four and five of “No Matter Who”*).

As we gather here today – grounded in the belief that we have been freed through faith to serve our neighbor, no matter who, may we find abiding inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we celebrate today:

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace!

That where there is hatred, I may bring love.

That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness.

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony.

That where there is error, I may bring truth.

That where there is doubt, I may bring faith.

That where there is despair, I may bring hope.

That where there are shadows, I may bring light.

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted.

To understand, than to be understood.

To love, than to be loved.

For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.

It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.

It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

May we continue to be instruments of peace – may hope and history rhyme in our work together as God’s faithful people – may justice rise up in our acts of mercy and our plumbing the root causes of social ills – may the needs and aspirations of our neighbors, no matter who, be the inspiration for our continued proclamation of the wideness of God’s mercy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Stewardship and leadership<<

I originally published this short piece in the first issue of Notes in 1999, but find it as relevant as ever. In fact, a recent conference at Augsburg, focused on the “Seeing Things Whole” organizational model (more in a future issue of Notes), had as one of its key themes the role of stewardship in institutional life. See what you think.

“I believe that the great American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, had a point, when, in a 1931 essay, he asked “Is Stewardship Ethical?” Niebuhr’s message was that the use of stewardship by mainline Protestant churches had become so watered-down (just a synonym for fund-raising, he said) that it was no longer ethical. He said that if these churches truly understood stewardship, they would radically change their lives.

I believe that the same can be said today about the use of stewardship in our organizations. Stewardship changes your life if you genuinely accept the notion that we are gifted people; people to whom much has been given and from whom much is expected. Stewardship demands that we take responsibility for how we order our common resources—if you are gifted as an organization (the Biblical writers teach us that stewards managed households!), then how do you take care of those gifts by ordering/organizing your life to full advantage?

Some people conclude that being good stewards means being conservative, not risking anything. I contend that genuine stewardship actually challenges us to seek change for the better. I have spent a good bit of time reviewing the recent literature on organizational change and want to contend that a stewardship perspective on management and leadership (taking care of the gifts we have been given) gives us at least four very effective tools for being change-agents:

- Stewardship teaches us that life in organizations is value-based and thus one of the things we must do as we face change is to articulate and embrace those values—they will be our anchor as change happens;
- Stewardship teaches us that life in organizations is multifaceted and full of the tension between good and evil (stewardship is realistic!). Therefore, a stewardship perspective on organizational change requires that we have a holistic understanding of what is going on in an organization as it faces change. The problems we face in organizational change may be about structure; they may be about the fit between organizational and personal needs; they may be about power; they may be about meaning and culture—likely, they are about some combination of all four aspects of human experience. Our responsibility as good stewards is to understand these tensions and dynamics—imagination and strategies reside in the tensions.

- Stewardship teaches us that organizations must be cultures of accountability, not cultures of entitlement—especially when facing change, when accountability may be our only tool against the fear that change always precipitates.
- Stewardship teaches us that organizations must be teaching and learning communities, places where change is faced with all of the gifts we have been given, no matter where they are found and who possesses them. Only teaching and learning helps us to find all of the gifts we need.

If you want to read more about stewardship and organizational life, I highly recommend Peter Block's "Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest" (Berrett-Koehler, 1993), which offers a very concrete plan for implementing stewardship."

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Two complementary books I have recently explored.

I recently spent time with Bill Bishop, whose *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Mariner Books, 2009) is a journalistic take on the ways in which Americans have sorted ourselves into "tribes," creating echo chambers of thinking and acting that threaten to divide us and undermine our democracy.

Yale sociology professor Elijah Anderson was a speaker at our annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum, sharing his work in *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (W.W. Norton, 2012), which provides an ethnographic description of places and spaces (he uses the Reading Terminal in Philadelphia as an example) where people of various backgrounds find common ground – the cosmopolitan canopy. Perhaps an idea worth pursuing in light of the big sort!

>>Reformation<<

The Lutheran nerd I am, I can't help but include one Martin Luther poem (which was the lyric for one of his many hymns) on this occasion. It is the iconic Lutheran hymn, perhaps a bit militaristic, but our reminder that God is in charge.

"A mighty fortress is our God"

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
 Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
 For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
 His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
 On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
 Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
 Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
 Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
 And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

(Translated from the German, Martin Luther)

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Faithful and relevant
- Seeing things whole

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