

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 spring, all! We have just completed our “very early” commencement ceremonies at Augsburg – the first as Augsburg University – and have sent 925 new Auggies into the world, buoyed by the words of our commencement speaker, Dr. Paul Batalden, who challenged our graduates to consider the “with-ness” of our lives. He asked us to consider how ideas are with each other, how people are with each other, and how democracy is all about our work with others. His challenge not to outsource our learning, our healthcare, our citizenship and our reflective practice was a welcome message to our graduates. Take a moment to consider how your “with-ness” plays out in your lives.

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

>>God is good<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel during the first week in the Lenten season. You’ll recognize how I use a familiar story to explore new themes.

Scripture: Mark 1: 9-15

“God is good,” murmured the Imam as he stepped to the microphone, to which we people of diverse faiths and experiences responded in our hearts, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God intends for us.”

The occasion was a neighborhood meeting in 2008 following the murder of Ahmednur Ali, one of our Augsburg students – a young Somali-American who broke up a fight while he was tutoring children at the local community center and was gunned down outside the center. The meeting was to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, and we all experienced first-hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about more security cameras and heightened safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. Instead of hearts breaking apart, the Imam broke our hearts open to a new path

forward. 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. God is good, indeed.

Here, in these first days of our Lenten journey, it can be difficult to affirm that God is good. Horrific school shootings, polarized wrangling over the fate of immigrants, abusive behavior that traumatizes victims – you can make your own list of the many ways in which evil rears its ugly head again and again.

And even in the arc of the Lenten season, bookended (as we read this morning) by Jesus being cast out in the wilderness and tempted by Satan and on Good Friday by the shame and pain of Jesus' death on the cross. Where is the good in that? God is good? What evidence is there for that claim? Recall that we don't even use the word "Alleluia" during Lent, surely a sign that good is subsumed by the temptation and shame and pain and ashes of our human condition.

And yet we faithful disciples – with all our own frailties and doubts and sins – must murmur together, even in this season of penitence, "God is good, and this is not what our God intends for us and for the world."

I think the writer of the Gospel of Mark understood this challenge for God's faithful people. Mark's spare telling of the story of Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan and his being cast out into the wilderness – as opposed to the much more detailed accounts in Matthew and Luke – makes the point that there is an order in God's mind to how God's faithful people shall live in the world. First, we are baptized – as Jesus was – named and claimed as God's beloved child. And then, and only then, are we sent as God's children into the wilderness of the world, to face the inevitable temptations and tensions, to be tended by angels and to be equipped to do God's work in the world. God is good and therefore we live as those marked by God's goodness.

I have found further insights into this tension between God's goodness and the brokenness of the human condition from theologian Miroslav Volf (who teaches at Yale University). Volf, in a series of essays in *Christian Century*, argues that humans tend to equate good and evil as two forces fighting for power and authority in our lives. Volf claims that this is a false equivalency: "The goodness of creation—its continuation in Adam and Eve coming together and opening up the world to the experience of new generations—is more basic than the reality of sin and evil." For the faithful, we believe that in creation God put an original and abiding goodness in our souls and in our baptisms that goodness is renewed. In other words, God is good and all that God intends for God's people is, according to Volf, is "a reality more basic than lives twisted by sins committed and endured."

Here is how that insight of the fundamental goodness of God shaped my perspective on the murder of Nur Ali ten years ago and since...

Ten years ago, someone broke the commandment, "You shall not murder," and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments. Offered in a specific context to the Israelites, God spoke these commandments directly to God's people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, 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.

With a nod to our own faith tradition, Martin Luther also is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," when he says: This means, "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, equipping the baptized, 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. God is good – and the commandments tell us so. 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 we lived in the aftermath. It is clear to me 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. God gives us commandments so that we might know that God is good – and live as if it were so.

This is what I hold dearly on my Lenten journey. As those named and claimed in our baptisms – pronounced beloved of God – we are called to witness to the good news: God is good – as Jesus traverses the wilderness with its wild beasts and healing angels. God is good – as Jesus hangs on the cross, inviting the criminals at his side and the relatives at his feet to be with him in paradise. God is good – as school communities grieve lives taken violently and too soon. God is good – as we all seek to rebuild the contours of a civil society. God is good – as we experience together broken commandments and promises.

God is good – "repent, and believe in the good news," Jesus proclaimed after his baptism, for God's reign is at hand, on earth as in heaven. Amen."

>>Saving the best for last<<

My 105-year old Grandma Edna died in March after a remarkably long life. Our family reunion at her funeral in tiny Rio, Wisconsin was a celebration of her witness to the power of family and faith. Grandma has asked me ten years ago to preach at her funeral and it was a privilege to bring the Word to those gathered to mourn our loss and celebrate her life.

Scripture: John 2: 1-11

"So, let's get this out there right off the bat. When we remember Grandma, often the first things to come to mind are the donuts, the sugar cookies, and the lefse. Food to feed our bodies and our souls.

Oh, and then there was her steel-trap memory and mind – she could recite birthdays for great grandchildren when I sometimes have trouble remembering my own. A memory that reflected her

love for what was so important to her – her family, sons Jerome, Erwin and Dennis, and all of us who knew her as Grandma and Great Grandma and even Great Great Grandma.

And oh, by the way, Grandma was a faithful member of this congregation for her entire adult life and seldom missed a Sunday service wherever she was even when she needed to tune in electronically. Grandma loved Jesus and the community gathered in his name.

And, of course, she did live to 105 years old, witnessing first hand remarkable events and transformative trends in our world that most of us must read about in textbooks. Grandma was wise in the ways of the world.

The extraordinary life of an ordinary woman – mother, wife, sister, grandmother, great grandmother, great-great grandmother, friend, and citizen – who loved her family and loved her Lord.

So why, you might ask, on this day when we gather to celebrate Grandma's life and mourn the fact that she is no longer among us, have I chosen a gospel story about a wedding? A good question that takes us deep in the familiar story of Jesus's first miracle at Cana – a story that features another remarkable woman who loved her family and her Lord. I want us to pay attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the role she plays in the story of the wedding miracle.

As an aside, I visited the purported site of this miracle a couple of years ago during a trip to Israel and was struck by how out of the way, down narrow alleys, in the midst of an ancient neighborhood, it was. Not a grand place at all, and here was where his ministry began – here is the ordinary setting for an extraordinary event. Imagine then, Jesus and his mother, Mary, in the midst of this family celebration...

I'm sure we all recognize the broad outlines of the miracle story. At the beginning, Jesus is with his mother and disciples at the wedding, when the wine gives out. The story ends with this surprising act as Jesus turns water into fine wine.

It's the interactions that happen in the middle of the story that I want to focus on. It's Mary who comes to Jesus with news that the wine has run out. And Jesus's reply is where I want to pause: "Woman, what *concern* is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." Now, I don't know about you, but I've always heard this reply as a rebuke of Mary. Go away, Mom, this is not my problem – I'm all about bigger and better things.

But I want to suggest that there is a deeper and more nuanced meaning to Jesus's response. Mary does not make a request, she simply states a fact – there is no more wine. Jesus responds with a question that gets at the heart of his entire ministry – a question that proclaims the truth that we are inextricably bound up with each other. What concern should we have for each other? Jesus points to the fact that to be concerned is to be truly human.

And the interesting thing is that Mary seems to get it. Instead of responding with some sort of moral argument for why Jesus should be concerned, she turns to the servants and instructs them to do whatever Jesus tells them. She understands that the concern Jesus has for the needs of others demands obedience, not arguments.

This, I think, is what Grandma also understood about what it meant to live a faithful life in the world. Grandma loved Jesus and she lived as a disciple called to obey and walk as a child of God. And she followed her call in all of the ordinary ways she loved us – in the donuts and sugar cookies, in caring for us for a lifetime, in remembering even to the end important days in our lives, in her active engagement with her faith community, in being a good neighbor.

And here is the lesson for us in this story – here is the vocational challenge for faithful people. The gift of faith from our gracious God carries with it both Mary's statement that the wine is gone and the response Jesus gave to his mother: "What is this to you and me?"

Roman Catholic theologian Michael Buckley challenges us with this lesson for our contemporary lives in the world.

"Those parents who watch their children grow up without education, without much hope for a better life...they have no wine. The millions of aged, hidden away in our cities or in dreadful convalescent homes...they have no wine. The despised or feared or uneducated, whose lives are terrorized by the violence on our streets...they have no wine. Women demeaned and threatened by violence and their disproportionate level of financial insecurity...they have no wine."

Jesus calls all of us to grapple with what concern this is to you and me, to recognize our common human experience, and to get to work as those called to follow him. Obedience, not arguments.

I love how this story is told at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, because from here – from this claim that being concerned is at the heart of the life of faith – we then are offered lesson after lesson of what Jesus calls us to be and do. We are called to heal the sick, to free the imprisoned, to feed the hungry, to comfort the heartbroken, to fight for peace and justice for all God's creation.

What Grandma taught us in the example of her life is that a calling to follow Jesus is not simply a personal possession, unencumbered by the demands of others, an upwardly mobile life trajectory. She taught us to be concerned – for ourselves, for each other, for our neighbors, for the world.

The message we faithful must proclaim for all to hear is that your vocation, your calling, is never separated from the needs and aspirations of the families and communities and organizations and neighborhoods in which we live and work. Grandma spent 105 years living out the call she knew to be faithful. Like her journey of love and peace and grace, our callings are an obedient response to those who have no wine, because we are called by our Lord to be concerned. No arguments, follow Jesus. We affirm the fact that at the core of our lives together in the world, our gracious and loving God intends for us to love each other as God loves us, to be concerned for each other as our God is concerned for us.

And here's the cool thing about all of this as we return to our gospel story. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, to draw some out and take it to the chief steward, who then exclaims to the bridegroom: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

The story ends with this powerful lesson. For those who follow Jesus, for those who are called to be concerned and do God's work in the world – for those like Grandma, faithful to the end – the best, the very best, is yet to come – “one last surprise” as hymnwriter John Ylvisaker proclaims. The very best. Thanks be to God for Grandma Edna, for all those who are concerned, for the great cloud of witnesses to God's gracious and loving presence in our lives. And God's people proclaim together: Amen!”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Seeing things whole<<

Shortly after I arrived at Augsburg, I was introduced to the “Seeing things whole” (STW) model of organizational dynamics. Almost twelve years later, STW is based at Augsburg and we are finding ways to share the model with colleagues across our various networks. I wrote the following piece back in 2007 and stand by its good insights that have shaped my leadership at Augsburg. For more on STW, visit our website at www.augsburg.edu/seeingthingswhole.

“As part of our transition work between my first and second year at Augsburg, we have become engaged with the work of an organization called “Seeing Things Whole” (STW) (www.seeingthingswhole.org), which was founded at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, in partnership with the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. Seeing Things Whole provides an organizational framework for planning and problem solving that is grounded in a compelling and evocative theology of institutions.

The groundwork for the program is found in an essay entitled *Toward a Theology of Institutions* (Greenleaf Center, 2003, by David Specht, with Richard Broholm). The authors extend Robert Greenleaf's call for a servant-leadership perspective on organizational life that could be relevant to any type of institution – secular or religious. The results are engaging and practical, tangibly grounded in organizational life and clearly informed by theological perspective. Here is the background...

There are five theological premises for those who would hold organizations in trust:

- (1) Institutions are part of God's order
- (2) God loves institutions
- (3) Institutions are living systems
- (4) Institutions are called and gifted, they are fallen, and they are capable of being redeemed
- (5) Faithfulness in institutional life is predicated upon the recognition and management of multiple bottom lines

Within this theological framework, there are three dimensions of organizational life that are interdependent:

- (1) The identity dimension, primarily concerned with healing, wholeness and the well being of the gathered life of the organization. This dimension primarily involves those who work for an organization. This dimension is preoccupied with how the organization structures the character and quality of its gathered life, how it creates an environment that reflects its core

values, and how it draws members of its workforce toward their fullest potential. If this dimension is healthy, the organization will be values-based; populated with workers who resonate with its values; illustrating organizational values through its private and public lives; and self-reflective about the links between values and work.

- (2) The purpose dimension, primarily focused outward with a compelling vision and the corollary critique that recognizes dissonance between the “is” and the “ought.” This dimension primarily involves those who interface with an organization from its external environment – customers, clients, suppliers, competitors, and the natural and human communities in some way affected by the organization. This dimension is preoccupied with the clarity of mission and vision, the processes by which goods and services are produced or offered, marketing, and service to the individuals and communities it engages. If this dimension is healthy and faithful, the organization will have a mission that serves real needs in the world; accountability to the world for advancing its mission; and a commitment to service that empowers others and makes them less dependent on the organization.

- (3) The stewardship dimension, primarily focused on leadership that serves, empowers, facilitates and persuades. This dimension primarily involves management, owners and trustees. This dimension is preoccupied with how the organization secures and uses its various resources (people, funds, etc.) in order to sustain its viability while balancing the needs of its stakeholders and the wider community. If this dimension is healthy, the organization will make decisions and take action with confidence in the long-term sustainable future of all stakeholders; its governance will be inclusive; and structures and systems will evolve to sustain the capacity of the organization to use its unique gifts in service to the world.

Within and between these dimensions of organizational life, STW allows institutions to understand and practice their work with a perspective of wholeness and interrelatedness. Organizational dilemmas, then, become opportunities for stakeholders of the organization to hold its needs in trust. There are additional lenses within each of the dimensions (see the website for more information) that help organizations gain a deeper understanding of their critical issues and potential ways to respond.

Here at Augsburg, we have used the STW framework to think about the transition between the first year of my presidency full of promise and energy and the continuing work that we must do to sustain the mission-grounded energy and momentum even as we address pressing and sometimes contentious issues. The gathered life of Augsburg, then, is held in trust as we focus on this transition. Through the STW process, we focused attention through a specific lens – governance. Our leading question was “How to hold our organization in trust, balancing contending interests that grow from mission, vision and core commitments?” Our responses to that question ranged from provocative claims about power to assumptions about contending interests to issues of distrust and mistrust to strategies related to communication and participation. We walked away from our

conversation with a clearer understanding of our central issue and some concrete ways of responding. Reflective practice, at its best!”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Our commencement speaker, Dr. Paul Batalden (mentioned above), recommended *The Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God* by Samuel Wells, vicar at St. Martin of the Fields Anglican Church in London (Wiley, 2015). I've ordered my copy and look forward to Wells' take on Immanuel (God with us) as central to Christian discipleship.

>>Our Children<<

Our 14-year old Maya was confirmed this past weekend, a significant rite of passage in our Lutheran Christian tradition, the time when you claim your baptismal promise (made for you as an infant) as your own. It was another moment for Abigail and me how much parenting our children is more and more about letting go. I return to this beautiful poem by Kahlil Gibran to understand how and why.

On Children

Kahlil Gibran

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might
that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Culture change
- Big ideas!

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