NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty, Number One (October 2018)

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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<<

This issue of my Notes marks the beginning of our 20th year together and of my abiding efforts to share with a growing number of friends and colleagues some of the ideas, readings, musings, and words that inspire me, give me hope, and help me be a reflective practitioner. I am grateful to all of you who take the time to read these occasional newsletters. I know by your responses that some read the Notes as soon as they arrive, while others put them into that pile for weekend catch-up time or airplane trips. You are a diverse group in so many ways, but what you share is a commitment to thinking about what you do and why. I often receive substantive comments on topics raised in my Notes, which I appreciate greatly—I am always happy to share your comments with other readers. But sometimes I also get other sorts of responses—responses that tell me important things about our shared commitments and concerns. Sometimes you tell me:

- "You made me think", which may be the greatest compliment I could receive;
- "You inspired me to go back and read something I read long ago (or wanted to read but never did)—something that has great meaning for me"; or,
- "I passed your Notes along to my supervisor or board chair or colleague—and we had a good conversation about them."

However you engage these Notes, I am grateful for your companionship on the road of reflective practice!

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.

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REFLECT ON THIS

>>To see things whole and heal the world<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel on the occasion of our Fall Board of Regents meeting.

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.

All time is made up of healing of the world.

Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.

Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

Here we are in this sacred space, where we gather each weekday to worship and sing and pray for each other, for our community and for the world. Here is where we find grace - our foundation, our grounding, our purpose as we live out our mission.

And here we are at the beginning of our fall Board of Regents meeting, blessed to be governed by these remarkable individuals with us today who care deeply for this university and who are called to guide and advance its mission in times of great uncertainty and volatility for colleges and universities – times of great division and brokenness.

And here we are with the gift of the gospel for this morning that calls us to account with the great shepherd – to an account that, whether we are sheep or goats, reveals the fact that we have missed the point – to an account that shows us the way forward as God's people in the world.

The parable of the sheep and the goats illustrates the tension that the author of Matthew's gospel was addressing in the life of the early faithful. The Romans had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Second Coming had not yet happened. What were these good and faithful people to do? Matthew writes in the familiar language of his time to describe a heavenly scene when the Son of Man would come in judgment, separating the sheep from the goats, just as shepherds would do as dusk came to their fields. The important theological distinction here – the distinction that helps the early faithful to make sense of their lives in the world – is that Christ already has accomplished their redemption and now they are called to live not as those awaiting an imminent return but as those who are called to recognize God in the neighbor, in the world, in their continuing lives together.

So, what to do? Here, the clear messages of this day are particularly meaningful for understanding our work together – as students, teachers, administrators and board members. Here is a glimpse of our callings.

First, we confess that all has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ, and thereby we affirm that we live in the meantime, both saved and sinner (as Luther teaches us), our ways of seeing the world incomplete and fragmented. Only God sees things whole. Ours is an ongoing vocational journey to do God's work, accepting that we cannot, on our own, know enough about what God intends. We are called to humility. We are called to live as those who need each other, who need a multitude of voices and perspectives, who need to accept that we will never be finished with our explorations and questioning of what God wills for God's people. We will make mistakes. We will ask new questions. We will use the gifts God has given us to seek to do God's will. We see through a glass darkly, the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, but then we shall see face to face. What a day that will be!

[Here at Augsburg, we are blessed to have a set of principles and a planning tool appropriately called "Seeing Things Whole" that has shaped our work over the past decade. Originally developed as a

way of holding an institution "in trust" and very much influenced by the work of Robert Greenleaf, who has defined what it means to be a "servant leader", "Seeing Things Whole" makes the same theological claim we find in our gospel – that is, only God sees things whole, but we are called to constantly seek an ever more faithful understanding of our lives together in organizations and communities. We are called to ask questions at the intersections of our identity and core values, our purpose and the mission we embrace, and our stewardship of the remarkable resources we have been given. There is much more to this important tool – lessons we are now including in our planning deliberations and in our classrooms – but the point is that we are called to the work of *semper reformanda*, always seeking to live more faithfully as stewards of God's good gifts.]

For now, we do well to listen to perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) these words that summarize how we might live in this paradoxical time – how hope can be found and pursued, how faith creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator, how we can seek to see things whole even when we know we will never be finished: "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."

The second lesson for the day is made abundantly clear in the words of the king in Matthew's gospel: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me." Those who have been redeemed, those who believe that all has been accomplished through Christ, those who live in the meantime, are called to be vigilant to where Christ is in our midst and to what Christ requires of us. We are called to heal the world. We are called to be what Luther called "little Christs" as we serve our neighbors no matter what…

Here, we have a helpful teacher in the German Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: "…it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith…By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; …that is how one becomes a human and a Christian."

We are called to see things whole and to heal the world. All has been accomplished and now we are here, in the world, the only body of Christ on earth now (as Teresa of Avila wrote). "Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken." What a remarkable gift, what an awesome obligation. May God grant us the wisdom and strength to be God's faithful people in the world. Amen.

>>Who is the greatest?<<

Here is my homily for the opening of our academic year, addressing the theme of "Welcoming the Stranger."

Scripture: Mark 9: 33-41

Perhaps you are like me and you find yourself occasionally asking questions like these: "Why does that homeless guy stand in the middle of the road and beg for money? Why doesn't he take advantage of the many services our community offers to meet his needs?" Or, in another moment: "How can that Democrat/Republican/Independent (you fill in the blank) believe such rubbish? Doesn't she see what is going on and what is needed?" Or, even this: "I respect all religions, but why are Muslims often associated with terrorism around the world? Is there something about their faith that leans toward violence?"

We could go on, I imagine. Silly questions, you might say – especially for good, educated, faithful folks like us. But admit it, nary a day goes by when you and I don't ask such questions – maybe not out loud, but surely in our inner thoughts.

The unnamed disciples in our gospel for this morning – those talking out loud among themselves about who was the greatest – are icons of our human proclivity to prideful claiming of the superiority of our own experience, intellect, political position, religious persuasion and so on. And it is Jesus's equally iconic response – "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" – that turns our world upside down. So what do we do?

There is a remarkable tension in both our liberal arts academic tradition and our Lutheran Christian tradition. At their best and most faithful, both traditions claim that genuine learning and faith, grounded as they are in humility and openness, must embrace the experience of difference and otherness. In fact, they both argue that we are most learned and faithful when we give up attempting to control our world, when we recognize that the gifts and ideas and experiences of others are at the heart of a community that is healthy and just and compassionate, when we celebrate the ways in which our learning and lives are enhanced by the strangers in our midst.

That said, we are not always at our best in either our academic or faith communities. How easy it is once we have been educated and formed in the faith to believe that we have learned enough, that we have found the right way to God, that our ways of seeing the world and acting in it give us a leg up on those who do not share our superior learning and faith. And when we do engage with those we count as less learned and faithful, our behavior often leans toward finding ways to help "correct" their deficiencies at best or marginalizing and ignoring them at worst.

So here comes Jesus back at us again. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then to make his point, he takes a child in his arms. Now, this strikes me as a Hallmark moment of sorts, not really the hard-edged rebuke we might expect. It's pretty hard to argue about welcoming in a child. But he goes on. The disciple John pushes the point, believing that surely Jesus does not believe that outsiders are capable of helping the cause. But Jesus does not fall into the trap. His response -- "Whoever is not against us is for us" -- points to truly radical hospitality. Here is the claim that discipleship does not give you the right to turn your back on those whose lives and experiences and beliefs might serve God's cause in the world. Because that is the point – this is about God's intentions for God's people and creation; this is not about our human machinations to claim superiority and power for ourselves.

Professor Tim Pippert from the sociology department and I co-teach the Senior Honors Seminar on the broad topic of income inequality in America. The course offers a multi-disciplinary perspective on the realities of income disparity by focusing on two extremes: the homeless and the wealthy.

Through a variety of readings and experiences (including volunteering at two shelters and tours of private clubs and museums), we are all challenged as educated people to struggle with our own perceptions of those who are different than we are. And those perceptions often begin with the stigma we attach to those at both ends of the wealth spectrum. We do wonder why the homeless live the way they do. We jump to conclusions about their level of education, about their drug and alcohol abuse, about their mental competency, about the decisions they made in their lives. At the same time, we also wonder about the greedy 1%, those who occupy private clubs, those who control wealth and corporate power, those who are not accountable for their riches.

For me, the inspiring thing that happens in our course is witnessing students admit these stigmas and then seek to listen to the experiences of others – homeless or wealthy. So, for example, a student volunteering at Peace House – a drop-in center for those experiencing homelessness – sits next to a long-time homeless man at lunch and learns his story, recognizing the common needs and aspirations they share. Or, on another night, students hear from a thoughtful member of the 1% who worries about her children and how they will live responsibly in a world marked by injustice and scarcity. Come to find out, we can learn from those different from us about how we live as God's people in the world. We can welcome the stranger – even when that stranger scares us or makes us angry – and therein find our way together to serve God's cause in the world.

So, here we are, living in this tension between the claims of our education and faith to welcome the stranger in genuine ways and our own human pride that distracts us from learning and faithfulness that serves God's intentions for the world. As we enter these first weeks of our academic year, each of us faces the fact that we may be challenged by a world in which those who are different from us – the strangers we will encounter – make a claim upon us that is perhaps more real and intense than it has ever been. Whether that difference is ethnic or cultural, religious, intellectual, ability-based, socioeconomic or political, we will not escape the claim of otherness in our lives in the world. So how will we respond to those who do not share our beliefs or privilege or education? How will we engage the person we don't understand, perhaps the person we don't really like? How will we live as thoughtful and faithful people called to do God's work in the world?

We will sing a hymn this morning written for the L'Arche Community, an international network of Christian communities where people with and without disabilities share life together in a spirit of mutual dependence. L'Arche was founded by Jean Vanier, a Catholic lay leader who speaks passionately about how his life was transformed by his decision more than forty years ago to live with people with disabilities. He needed to overcome his own fears and stereotypes of those with disabilities. He needed to deal with social myths about people with disabilities. He did this by finding within himself what he calls the "compassion for life" that came when he faced his fears and learned to be present with another human being who happened to be different than he was. Once he learned this compassion and felt its gentleness in his own life, he then devoted himself to building safe communities for others to be present with each other, to live day by day with each other, to seek justice for those who were often marginalized. Vanier's learning and faithfulness became a lifelong practice of learning to be compassionate, to accompany each other, and to seek justice where the world is not fair.

This challenge to make welcoming the stranger a lifelong practice was brought home to me a few years back when I spoke with a colleague and friend from here in the Twin Cities who had just begun a new job as the director of a facility for those with severe developmental disabilities. She is a good and passionate leader on behalf of the vulnerable in our community, having led a housing

services organization for many years. She spoke quietly of the challenge she has faced in accompanying the residents of her facility in their journeys. Clearly this has been more difficult than she imagined. And then she told of a wise colleague, who recognized her struggle, and told her how he had come to understand those they served as among God's greatest gifts to the world. Surely, he said, these good folks are God's most supreme angels, spiritually strong and mature and wise. Because they are the only ones God could trust to live in the world with their disabilities and the stigma attached so that all God's people could understand how much God loves all of us and how God intends for us to love each other.

I wonder whom else God has sent into our midst to show us how to love? We may never know if we spend our time arguing about the superiority of our education and faith. On the other hand, if we truly embrace the life of learning and discipleship that welcomes the stranger into our lives – no matter how difficult or messy – just imagine the riches of wisdom and faithfulness that God will send us. May it be so according to our gracious and loving God's will for all of us. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Improvisation in our life together<<

A graduate school colleague of mine once remarked that we live in a moment of great tension in the world. On the one hand, we marvel at the globalization of our lives, the breakdown of boundaries, the ease of communication and travel, the wonderful richness of life in various countries and cultures. On the other hand, he pointed out, this also is a time when we are fixated on our differences, the things that separate us from each other, the ways in which we are not alike. How ironic that as we are more and more able to participate in a global community, we also are more and more fragmented by our differences.

I have learned much about how I think about difference from the elegant writings of Mary Catherine Bateson, an anthropologist whose parents were Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. Mary Catherine Bateson's works include "Composing a Life" (Reissued in 1990, Plume Books) and "Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way" (1994, HarperCollins). In "Peripheral Visions," Professor Bateson explores how "the quality of improvisation characterizes more and more lives today, lived in uncertainty, full of the inklings of alternatives."

Dr. Bateson spent many years living and teaching in Iran. She talks about her initial visits to the Persian gardens of Iranian colleagues and how she learned to improvise in the gardens: "That day in the Persian garden has come to represent for me a changed awareness of learning pervading other activities. Meeting as strangers, we join in common occasions, making up our multiple roles as we go along—young and old, male and female, teacher and parent and lover—with all of science and history present in shadow form, partly illuminating and partly obscuring what is there to be learned…We are largely unaware of speaking, as we all do, sentences never spoken before, unaware of choreographing the acts of dressing and sitting and entering a room as depictions of self, of resculpting memory into an appropriate past…What I tried to do that day (in the Persian garden), stringing together elements of previous knowledge, attending to every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar, was to improvise responsibly and with love."

Improvising and learning—responsibly and with love—what a remarkable way of thinking about how we respond to diverse situations and people. Read the passage again and again, let it sink in—it describes a way of life that looks a lot like reflective practice.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Augsburg alum and friend, Dr. Paul Batalden, is always a source of important new books. Most recently, he pointed me to Paul G. Crowley, SJ's *The Unmoored God: Believing in a Time of Dislocation* (Orbis Books, 2017). Crowley reminds us that God moves in our midst and in our history, and that the lack of familiar props or sure signposts are not reasons for doubt but calls to be ever vigilant to what God intends for us in our own dislocations.

In a more secular vein, I have historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's new tome, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), her analysis of the leadership lessons from Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson – each of whom she has studied carefully over the last five decades.

On a more personal note, I am proud to let you know that my brother, Brad Pribbenow, who teaches and administers at the Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, has just published *Prayerbook of Christ: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms* (Lexington Books, 2018).

>>Gratitude<<

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e e cummings

(in 'complete poems 1904 - 1962')

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Culture change
- Big ideas!