

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

Greetings, friends. We've had the most mild winter in Minnesota history, which has added to the sometimes surreal nature of the times in which we live. Though we embrace the opportunity to live "in interesting times," I'm not sure any of us could have predicted the state of the socio-political dynamics in our world right now. May this be a time for a renewed commitment to our reflective practice, which offers us the patience and the tools to navigate toward a longer horizon.

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

>>By another way...<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg University Chapel during the first week in the spring semester.

Matthew 2: 11-12 (KJV)

From "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver
*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

—Mary Oliver

I love the fantastical story of the Wise Ones, who travel from afar to find the Christ Child. Found only in Matthew's gospel, the story is mysterious, cryptic, magical – and probably not true. But who cares, because it is a story – like all good fiction – that draws us to a larger truth. And I think that this larger truth is found in the two verses we heard from the story this morning: they find the child and his mother; they bow down in reverence; and then, directed by the Divine, set off by “another way.”

I am struck during this Epiphany season, this time after Christmas when we mark the ways in which the gospel is proclaimed to the entire world, what it means for all of God's faithful people to set off “by another way” now that we too have seen the Christ Child and been changed forever.

This Epiphany season is a fitting time for us to answer poet Mary Oliver's piercing question, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” But I want to back up a few lines in her poem to explore why the question itself is important. As she writes, “I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields...Tell me, what else should I have done?” There is the question that haunts me this Epiphany. What else should I have done? What else shall I do now that God has entered human history in the person of a child, now that the Word has become flesh and dwelled among us, now that we have been changed forever by God's loving and gracious act? What else?

What else should I have done? What does it mean for God's faithful people to travel – at God's invitation and direction – by another way?

First, we confess – several years ago, our annual Advent Vespers services began with this powerful prayer, crafted by Keith Watkins:

“Prayer of Confession” by Keith Watkins

God, we confess that ours is still a world in which Herod seems to rule:

The powerful are revered, the visions of the wise are ignored, the poor are afflicted, and the innocents are killed.

You show that salvation comes in the vulnerability of a child, yet we hunger for the “security” of walls.

You teach us that freedom comes in loving service, yet we trample on others in our efforts to be “free.”

Forgive us, God, when we look to the palace instead of the stable, when we heed politicians more than prophets.

Renew us with the spirit of Bethlehem, that we may be better prepared for your coming.

Amen.

Ours is a world that reveres power, that ignores wisdom, that afflicts the poor, that kills the innocents. We are people who seek salvation in walling ourselves off from each other. We are a people who seek to get ahead by climbing over the vulnerable in our midst. We long for palaces and other signs of wealth instead of the humble and ordinary ways in which God's will is done. We put our faith in human promises when prophets proclaim another way. We ignore the question that the Christ Child puts to each of us – what else should I do to live as God intends?

And then confident of God's faithful promise of forgiveness and reconciliation, we move forward by another way. Perhaps we listen to the call of prophets like African-American theologian Howard Thurman, who wrote this call to action:

"Now the Work of Christmas Begins"

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Or perhaps our way forward – what we will do with our one wild and precious life – is to see the world with new eyes this Epiphany.

- To say Yes when the world says No – did you know that research shows that it takes five affirming comments to overcome one critical word? How will you say yes to your friends and neighbors, to those you disagree with, to the strangers in our midst, to the most vulnerable in our community, so that your affirming words might lift their hearts and bodies and spirits?
- To seek abundance in a world marked by the cynicism of scarcity – do we understand that abundance is much more about how we overcome the fear and anxiety of having to share what we have than it is about having more? There is plenty to go around – thanks be to God - so how will we marshal the courage and imagination and resolve to share it wisely with all God's creation?
- To be beacons of hope and joy in a world filled with fear and darkness – recall that wonderful line from Leonard Cohen's "Anthem": "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Epiphany calls us to be the light of the world – to recognize that in all of its brokenness, all of its cracks, the world so needs the light of hope and joy that shines through us.

How about instead of New Year's resolutions, our task as God's faithful people this Epiphany season is to renew our baptismal promises – to explore what else shall I do, to seek another way home, to know that God in Christ Jesus has come into our midst so that all of the world might be redeemed by God's loving grace and our faithful service. May it be so.

>>Learning to love stubborn people<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg University Chapel during the Lenten season.

Deuteronomy 9: 13-21

Furthermore the LORD said to me, "I have seen that this people is indeed a stubborn people. Let me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and more numerous than they."

So I turned and went down from the mountain, while the mountain was ablaze; the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the LORD your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the LORD had commanded you. So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes. Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight. For I was afraid that the anger that the LORD bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you. But the LORD listened to me that time also. The LORD was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time. Then I took the sinful thing you had made, the calf, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly, until it was reduced to dust; and I threw the dust of it into the stream that runs down the mountain.

Hebrews 3:12-19

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest,

if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

I remember the first time I heard the phrase from my youngest, Maya. It was one night when I was trying diligently to get her to go to bed. She looked up at me after one of my exhortations about bedtime and yelled "Never." Which became her ready response. Never, never, never. She was a stubborn child, and I love her so much.

So, how do we do this, learn to love stubborn people?

We have a remarkable guide to this question in our reading from Deuteronomy. We're talking about a whole new level of stubbornness here. These are the stubborn chosen people. These are the Israelites, ransomed out of exile in Egypt, on their extended journey to the promised land. But they're not happy with this wilderness sojourn, they want to reach their destination, they want what they believe is theirs. And their stubbornness has led them to worship false gods, to build their idols, to question Jehovah's fidelity, to anger the Lord so much that their very existence is threatened.

And in this familiar scene from cinematic history, here comes their leader, Moses, down from the mountaintop, carrying the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, coming upon the chosen people worshipping a golden calf, sinning against their God. In response, Moses throws the tablets to the ground, smashing the commandments, and then there follows this astonishing example of servant leadership as Moses prostrates himself before the Lord for 40 days and nights, denying himself even the basics of human need, assuaging God's anger against God's people, destroying the idol and casting its dust into the river so that it might be gone from their presence.

And we, of course, know the rest of the story. The journey in the wilderness continues some forty years; the Israelite's stubbornness and wickedness continues; Moses delivers the law of the commandments, a sign of God's renewed covenant with God's people; and ultimately these stubborn people reach the promised land – though their leader does not cross over with them, the price he must pay for the stubborn people he loved.

There are important lessons here for all of us learning to love stubborn people, to love each other.

First, it is clear that we need intercessors. We need our Moses. We need prayers of intercession surely, but we also need people who are willing to prostrate themselves before the Lord on our behalf, to bear the anger intended for us and to make the sacrifice required. We are all stubborn people, set in our ways, sure that we are right all the time, entitled to our due, chasing after false gods who we hope might bring us a quicker, easier way to success and fortune. Who will stand for us, loving us despite our stubbornness? Who will speak truth to our stubbornness? Who will bring us the promises that will sustain and guide us in our own wildernesses?

Second, we need forgiveness. We need to know that, despite our stubbornness, there is the possibility of redemption. We need to know that the smashed tablets will be renewed. We need

to learn to forgive each other, perhaps the moral skill we most need in our contemporary lives, knowing that our stubbornness likely will abide as we traverse the wilderness of our lives, but also knowing that we will survive to keep on our journey. We all know that forgiveness is easier to offer when someone admits his or her sin. But the truth is, stubborn people aren't very good at repenting – are we?

Finally, we must learn to see the arc of God's grace. Forty years seems like a long time to wander in the wilderness. We feel for the Israelites; surely this was cruel and unusual punishment – it was a promise, wasn't it? And as stubborn people, we too want our due as soon as possible. But God's time is not ours – thank heavens for that – and our impatience clearly exacerbates our stubbornness, leading us to turn away again and again from the love of a gracious God. Yet God keeps God's promises – the arc of God's goodness and grace is sure. Are we willing to wait to see how much God loves God's stubborn people?

There are parent lessons here. Maya's brother was a good intercessor for his little sister, explaining, standing in for her, urging me to understand. My suggestions that Maya say she is sorry are met with a resounding "never" and yet how can I not forgive her – and try again to get her into bed? And surely the arc of grace is a reminder that sooner or later she did grow up and on to more mature forms of stubbornness. My stubborn child whom I love so much.

All of us will agree, I assume, that our own times offer myriad examples of stubbornness – in our own community, in our economic lives, in the world. We are stubborn people who need intercessors and forgiveness and a longer view of God's goodness. We want our university to keep its promises. We want our financial systems to work for our benefits. We want our politics to be aimed at our needs and interests. And when it doesn't happen as we would like, we turn away – to our fears, to false gods, to the easy fix, to tearing down those who would guide us to a better place.

This morning, I call us back as God's faithful people, stubborn still but redeemed as well, to the good news that, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews says, we are partners with Christ, disciples of the one who intercedes for us, who has died to forgive our sins, and who has offered us a horizon of abundant love and grace that is ours from our gracious God.

I've always liked the essayist Annie Lamott's line, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind." Funny for sure, but perhaps more true than we would like to admit, the stubborn people we are. And yet there is but one way to be faithful, to follow our God who loves us so much – despite our stubbornness – and that is the way of discipleship. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are stubborn people, my friends, and our God loves us so much; so much that God sent God's only Son into the world to save us from our stubbornness. Thanks be to God. Amen, amen, amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>You belong here<<

Here is my column for the recent Augsburg Now magazine. I think its message is fitting not just for college students, but for all of us who want to create communities in which folks can be their full selves.

“You belong here. These three simple words are heard time and again on campus as we greet new students and welcome those returning. And with these words, Augsburg offers the gift of belonging to all of its students, no matter their diverse backgrounds and lived experiences.

So, what does it mean to give the gift of belonging? It means that we see you, we meet you where you are in your life, and we surround you with community. It means that we offer you an educational experience like no other. Over my 18 years at Augsburg, I have witnessed again and again how this university community meets our students where they are – with their remarkable life experiences and gifts – and then offers them, each of them, what they need to be successful. We walk alongside students with amazing faculty and staff members whose sole purpose is to offer them the support, the challenges, the love (I might say) that they need to be successful.

And in return, our students bring their whole selves to our community – they bring their gifts and skills as a scholar, as a leader, as an artist, as an advocate for justice and peace, as a family and community member. All of these skills and more help to make Augsburg stronger. We are a small community and we need these many gifts to help us live out our mission. We join together with our students on their life’s journeys – journeys that have already been underway with family, in schools and faith communities, in neighborhoods. And now we have the privilege to have students join us for these next several years so that their journeys to a career, to their own families, to their communities is shaped by what they learn here, by the lifelong friendships they make with fellow students, faculty, and staff, and by the experiences we offer here to help them find their path forward.

You belong here. This is what it means to be student-centered; to believe, as Augsburg has throughout its 154 years, that we are called to educate and equip our students for lives of meaning and purpose in the world. Throughout this issue of Augsburg Now, you will find stories of what it looks like when our commitment to belonging and to our students shows up in the world. A faculty member donating a kidney to a student; a legacy of community engagement serving our neighbors; a young alum taking on some of the world’s most pressing climate challenges; and an institutional policy that takes away barriers to students who deserve an Augsburg education. Read all of these inspiring stories with pride for the work of this remarkable university, for...

You, too, belong here!”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Two new books about higher education leadership - both by former presidential colleagues - are worth your attention.

Brian Rosenberg, former president of Macalester College in Saint Paul, has penned *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education* (Harvard Education Press, 2023), his clarion call for innovation and change in our efforts to better serve our students.

Mary Hinton, former president of the College of St. Benedict (in Minnesota) and now president of Hollins College in Virginia, has published *Leading from the Margins: College Leadership from Unexpected Places* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), her wise and inspiring story of her journey and lessons learned about leading our complex institutions in this moment.

>>Healer of our every ill<<

I recently visited a good friend and Augsburg board member who was near the end of his life, and I was privileged to share with him this beautiful hymn by Marty Haugen with its words of peace and comfort.

Healer of Our Every Ill

Refrain

Healer of our ev'ry ill,
light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear,
and hope beyond our sorrow.

1 You who know our fears and sadness,
grace us with your peace and gladness;
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*

2 In the pain and joy beholding
how your grace is still unfolding,
give us all your vision, God of love. *Refrain*

3 Give us strength to love each other,
ev'ry sister, ev'ry brother;
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide. *Refrain*

4 You who know each thought and feeling,
teach us all your way of healing;

Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. *Refrain*

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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