

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Five, Number One (October, 2023)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."
(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

Welcome to the beginning of our 25th year of these Notes. I trust and pray that you all are well in these fraught times in the world. Stay strong and keep reflecting on your 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.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>God has us where God wants us<<

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

⁷⁻¹⁰ Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing. [Ephesians 2: 7-10 (The Message)]

How good it is to be back together on campus and in this holy place. Our daily chapel services during the academic year are sabbath moments for each of us and for our community – moments for prayer, music, reflection, and celebration of all that binds our community together. It is always a great joy for me as these chapel services resume each fall. Thanks be the God!

I love this opening line from Eugene Peterson's translation of Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "Now God has us where God wants us."

Initially, my human brain goes to the adversarial nature of this claim. God has us dead to rights. We are in God's crosshairs. You get the picture. And such an interpretation makes sense in the context of the human games we play.

Since we have the football team with us today, let me use a couple of football examples of this human interpretation.

Here's Cade, our fine Augsburg quarterback, and he's back to pass. Down the field our wide receiver is step by step covered by the opposing cornerback. All of sudden, our receiver feigns a move outside. The cornerback takes the bait and our receiver cuts back to middle, wide open for a big gain. That cornerback's misstep meant that Cade had him just where he wanted him, out of position.

Or maybe it's Marcus, a linebacker on defense, who has his eye on the opposing running back. Suddenly, one of our defensive linemen puts a great block on the opponent's tight end who was tasked with blocking for the running back. Marcus is salivating right now because he has that running back right where he wants him, unprotected and about to go down.

The human games we play count on our abilities to get our opponents just where we want them. And we're very good at those games...

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a football fan like many of you and I would cheer loudly if Cade or Marcus found themselves in the situations I've described! For the Apostle Paul, though, this was not about human games. Instead, God having us where God wants us is not some sort of adversarial targeting, but both a theological and a practical claim about the game God is playing – what we might call a game of love and grace.

First, the theological claim. "Now God has us where God wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all God's idea, and all God's work." In other words, where God wants us is as God's

saved and redeemed people. We can't do that on our own, Paul proclaims – only God does both the making and the saving.

And then the practical claim. God has us where God wants us so that we can join in the work God does, the good work we have been created and saved to do, the work we are called to do.

Let's bring this back to this moment in the Augsburg University community. At the beginning of this, our 154th academic year, we believe that this is the very place where God wants us to be. Each of us belongs here. God has us exactly where God wants us to be, not as targets or adversaries, but as those beloved and named and claimed as God's own, created and saved and called. You are here because God loves you and calls you here – just where God wants you!

And now there is work we had better be doing, as Paul tells us...and that is work that must seek to overcome our human tendencies to see our lives as transactional and adversarial – a sort of zero-sum game where we only win if others lose. Instead, we are called to create a beloved community where each of us follows our call, contributes our various gifts, and lives as those who have been showered with grace and kindness.

And that is hard work in an academic community, which has been shaped by our human inclinations to get ahead, to climb the ladder of success, to outdo our opponents.

I'm a fan of the Indigo Girls, whose anthem "Closer to Fine" includes this telling verse:

*And I went to see the doctor of philosophy
With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee
He never did marry or see a B-Grade movie
He graded my performance, he said he could see through me
I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind
Got my paper and I was free*

Pretty cynical, right? But perhaps truer than those of us who have spent our lives in higher education might like to admit. Students as targets, empty vessels to be filled up by credentialed experts, victims just doing their time so that they can get their paper and be free. That's the human game playing itself out on a college campus.

But surely that is not where God wants us and that is not what this beloved community aims to be and do. Here at Augsburg, led by grace and kindness, we are called to be a university that is:

- Grounded in the belief that genuine education is relational, that it is co-created between participants in communities of teaching and learning, and where classrooms and campuses and neighborhoods are marked by on-going engagement, seeking the wisdom of all participants in response to the issue or topic or challenge – the mutuality of learning – blurring the boundaries between student and teacher, between teacher and citizen, between classroom and neighborhood.
- Believes in democratic excellences, an argument against the meritocracy of the academy and on behalf of the remarkable gifts and experiences and “excellences” students bring to the work of teaching and learning. We admit that our privileged understanding of excellence – crafted in primarily Western and white contexts – has much to learn from other experiences, traditions, ways of knowing. We have the humility to admit that we do not know everything and can continue to learn throughout our lives – learning new ways to recognize and celebrate all forms of excellence.
- Buoyed by the faith-based claim of *semper reformanda*, the theological concept that only God is permanent and everything human must be open to constant reform. We follow the call to think differently about how we put the pieces together in our organizations, institutions, communities, etc. What are the new social arrangements to achieve our aims – collaboration, anchor institutions, blurring boundaries of disciplines, departments, organizations – think about the new Schwartz School of the Arts, bringing together our music, theater, and art & design departments to do new great things.

Indeed, God has us exactly where God wants us – right here in this remarkable university community, led by grace and kindness, where we all belong, doing the work God calls us to do. May it always be so. Amen.

>>Full of grace and truth<<

I preached this homily in our chapel as we commenced the celebration of the 507th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

John 1: 1-5, 14

A wise pastor I greatly admire often begins his preaching by proclaiming (and praying): “We don’t need another sermon, Lord – dear God, not another one – but we are deeply in need of a word, the Word. Send the Word into our midst.” And so we might pray

today and every day in our fraught, noisy, full-of-distractions, too much talking lives. Dear God, please send your Word!

We live in perhaps the quintessential world of words – a university campus – where people like to talk and talk and talk. This is my 48th straight year on a college campus, so you have to wonder how many words I've spoken and listened to – and you might also ask how many I remember. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, to ask what we are doing in our university to listen to the Word, to be the Word, in the midst of so many other words. I think this is a most pressing question when our words – my words – seem so inadequate for this moment when violence and hatred and oppression dominate our lives and our world.

I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad's sermon so that we could have a discussion at Sunday dinner. "Punitive" comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual – "of course I listen to what you're saying, Dad!" But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to "pay attention," to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to pay attention to love breaking into our lives as God's faithful people. It is the lesson first taught by Martin Luther, whose Protestant Reformation we mark next week on its 506th anniversary revolved around faithfulness to the Word.

The late cultural critic, Neil Postman, has been one of my most influential guides to learning how to pay attention. In 1995, he wrote, "Like the sorcerer's apprentice, we are awash in information without even a broom to help us get rid of it. Information comes indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume, at high speeds, severed from import and meaning. And there is no loom to weave it all into fabric...No stories to tell us what we need to know, and what we do not need to know..." What to do, then? "[W]e will need to consult our poets, playwrights, artists, humorists, theologians, and philosophers, who alone are capable of creating or restoring those metaphors and stories that give point to our labors, give meaning to our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future."

This morning's scripture readings offer God's faithful people such a story – a Word that can give point to our labors, meaning to our history and direction to our future – let's listen once again.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides a still (and perhaps never more urgently) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word must be proclaimed by the community of

believers. I think we can assume that the Corinthians were having their own issues in hearing and living the Word in the midst of the noisy and frightening early days after Jesus had left them. So Paul offers this remarkable hymn of love as a pattern for their lives – Paul offers the Word of Love to help the Corinthians (and us) make sense of our lives. If all I have are the words of mortals (or even angels), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If all I have are human power and knowledge, I am nothing. Even if I give away all I have and give up my body, I gain nothing. Unless I have the Word, unless I have Love, I will not find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Wow – this concrete word to a very real community of the faithful – just like this one – is the call to live as the beloved, to live in the midst of the world as the Living Word, the body of Christ. It is the call to pay attention.

And so the story continues – as it has now more almost 2000 years – here at Augsburg, as we seek to live as the beloved community, to be the living Word in a world that more than ever needs to know the Word.

And it continues especially in our reading from John's gospel, which contains the original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary, written in Norwegian, of course, but (in translation!) continues to offer us a way to consider how to hear Jesus' call and to follow Paul's map to faithful lives. From the 1st chapter of John's gospel, the 14th verse, "And the Word became flesh." And so it does – each and every day – on our campuses (in Minneapolis, Rochester, Mexico, Latin America and Namibia) as we seek to educate students for lives of faithful service in the world. Here is both a theological and practical claim on our lives together.

So how do we honor the call to be the Word made flesh in the city? Here are three simple, yet profound, ways that John's gospel guides us as we seek to educate our students for vocations of service in the world and thereby live as the Word made flesh in the city.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. I have the privilege every day to witness how faculty, staff, students and community members linked to Augsburg are embodying the Word in their work on and off campus. In a neighborhood full of immigrant diversity, we are working to be the Word by being neighbor.

The Word came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. Nobody said this would be easy and that is a central message in our vocational work. Certainly John's gospel is a stark reminder that the Word is not easy for the world to hear. We kill our prophets because we are people who cannot imagine the year of the Lord's favor or

love that is kind and patient. As we seek to be the Word made flesh and to listen for our calls, we also must know that faithful work, God's work, will not necessarily make us popular or comfortable. There is room in our world for the courageous company of witnesses to the Word and the way of love, and we are called to be among them.

And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. I love the juxtaposition of grace and truth in this passage. The Word surely is grace. It is nimble and forgiving and imaginative and surprising. It is practical and resourceful. It creates miracles of abundance where the world sees only scarcity. We see glimpses of grace every day at Augsburg as we engage with community partners in programs like Faith in the City, a consortium of Lutheran organizations in the Twin Cities that are working together to seek the welfare of the city. We see glimpses of grace in our international work through the Center for Global Education and Experience, transforming the lives of students by teaching them about privilege and introducing them to global neighbors whose lives do intersect with ours. We see glimpses of grace as we work around our usual institutional rules to meet the needs of our East African neighbors. We see glimpses of grace in our classrooms where we explore together the great questions that animate our lives in the world.

And the Word also is truth, a word that speaks to a way and a life that we are called to follow. It is a call to discipleship, to love beyond human understanding, to God's intention for us and all of creation. It is the word of a God who has known us forever. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," the prophet Jeremiah reminds us. To be known and named is the promise of the Word, the truth of life abundant and eternal. This is the Love that hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. The glimpses of truth are also visible at Augsburg – in the classroom, in this daily chapel, in all of the ways we faithfully serve in the world, to equipping each other for lives of meaning and value. This search for the Word of truth is always incomplete, of course, for "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." But what a wondrous gift it is to pay attention as God shows us the way!

Here is the Word. Pay attention, for in a world so full of words, we have the Word to live, to share, and to shout from the mountaintops. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Why oral histories are important<<

The following is an interview I did for our university magazine concerning an oral history project that documented our institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was an instructive opportunity to capture reflections on our practice.

“Why are oral histories important? Why is the COVID-19 oral history project of particular importance?”

One of the things I’ve noticed in my exploration of Augsburg’s remarkable history is the difference it makes whose voice is prioritized in telling our stories. The power of oral histories is the opportunity for the voices of those directly engaged in a particular moment or project to be heard.

The oral history of our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is especially important to capture because there has never been as disruptive event in our history – disruption that has fundamentally changed aspects of our work together. Capturing the perspectives of various members of our community – administrators, faculty, staff, and students – means that we will have a record of these past several years that will serve future generations with a holistic picture of what we lived through during the pandemic.

What do you hope students took away from participating in this project?

My sense is that the students who did the interviews for the project were getting a much broader understanding of the impact of the pandemic on Augsburg than might have been the case before the interviews. In particular, getting a picture of the complex institutional choices that were made gave the student interviewers a sense of the complexity of making decisions that had an impact on the entire community and that often were made with less than complete information.

What did you take away from the experience? Did you have any revelations during the oral history interview? Was it cathartic in any way? If so, please explain.

I found the interview to be a bit jarring as I realized how much of the pandemic was a bit of a blur for me. I sometimes had trouble remembering exactly when we made certain decisions as the years blended together in my memory. I hope that the combination of perspectives included in the oral history will ensure that there is an accurate picture of what we did and when.

I think the theme that kept coming back for me during the interview was just how much the pandemic had led to disengagement and disruption of our lives together. For me, Augsburg is all about community and the pandemic meant that we often could not come

together as community. The result of that disengagement and disruption is the on-going healing and repair that we must do together.

What do you hope listeners gain from what you shared during the interview?

I hope that listeners get a sense of the complexity of the leadership challenges we faced and of our genuine efforts to do the best we could with limited information in an unprecedented moment.

Some people equate history with dry, lifeless textbooks. This class/the history department at Augsburg is a leader in making history more engaging and relevant to the public. Please speak to the department's innovative approach and its meaningful impact on the region. How does the department's work elevate Augsburg's reach and reputation?

I am so proud of the work of our history department in modeling the power of public histories. In addition to projects like the COVID-19 oral history that focus on our Augsburg community, faculty and students are engaged with communities across the Twin Cities and beyond, helping to give voice to stories that are grounded in diverse experiences and places. Through their efforts, Augsburg is seen as a university that is connected to – and concerned about – its neighbors.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>When giving is all we have <<

A lovely poem from Albert Rios to mark this time of thanksgiving even and especially when there is so much more to do...

When Giving Is All We Have

*One river gives
Its journey to the next.*

We give because someone gave to us.

We give because nobody gave to us.

We give because giving has changed us.

We give because giving could have changed us.

We have been better for it,
We have been wounded by it—
Giving has many faces: It is loud and quiet,
Big, though small, diamond in wood-nails.

Its story is old, the plot worn and the pages too,
But we read this book, anyway, over and again:

Giving is, first and every time, hand to hand,
Mine to yours, yours to mine.

You gave me blue and I gave you yellow.
Together we are simple green. You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you
What I had to give—together, we made
Something greater from the difference.

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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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