

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Six, Number Four (April, 2025)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Greetings, friends. I pray you are well in these hectic and chaotic times. It is that time of year on a college campus when we celebrate the accomplishments of our students, a reminder of why we come to work every morning! As one faculty member noted, it is both exhilarating and exhausting.

I am preparing to mark an incredible honor in my professional life. Earlier this year, I was named the 2025 Alumnus of the Year for the University of Chicago Divinity School, and tomorrow evening I will give an address to the Div School community entitled "Wrestling with angels: Higher education leadership in a moral key." Working on the address has given me the opportunity to reflect on my calling as a university president, and to consider what my leadership has meant to the students and institutions I have had the privilege to serve. It also has provided the space to outline how a next book project might unfold. All in all, a humbling experience and honor. More on all of this in my next Notes.

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

>>What is truth?<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel during Holy Week.

Hebrews 10: 16-25

John 18: 33-38

Given that we will not gather on Friday because of the sacred holiday, allow me to share some reflections this morning on the centrality of Good Friday for our lives of faith.

The late John Buchanan, long-time pastor of 4th Presbyterian Church in Chicago and publisher of the *Christian Century*, once wrote of his childhood and early adult recollections of Good Friday services that stretched out over three hours as minister after minister ascended the pulpit steps to preach on one of the seven last words of Jesus. I, too, recall those Good Friday services, though as a young preacher's kid I'm not sure I ever made it through an entire service without a nap in the back pew – but maybe I'm not so unique in that experience!

The point is that Good Friday offers us a liturgical moment to consider the wide-ranging meaning and consequences of the crucifixion of our Lord – and whether we do that by reflecting on the seven last words of Jesus, by walking the stations of the cross, or by pausing in this Holy Week to mark once again the grim reality of the cross and the dark, fallen side of human existence, surely as God's people we cannot pass this moment without recognizing the centrality of Good Friday for our lives of faithful discipleship. Good Friday represents the nexus of life, death and life to come – Christ lived, Christ died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

I am always moved by the full narrative of Jesus' passion as recorded in the 18th and 19th chapters of John's gospel, but for this morning I want to focus on just one scene from that story – the moment when Jesus has come before Pilate at the behest of the Jewish authorities who want Jesus to be condemned for his treasonous ministry. What a remarkable moment it is as Jesus and Pilate engage in this charged dialogue...

And then, finally, it is Pilate who asks the question that is at the heart of the world's response to a loving God – what is truth? Indeed, what is truth? And because Pilate and the world do not know the truth or how to find it, there is nothing to be done but to wash their hands of it all, to avoid the controversy, to send an innocent man to death...

This, then, is perhaps the central message of Good Friday – I have come to bear witness to the truth, Jesus proclaims, and yet the world doesn't believe, rejects truth out of hand, crucifies those who speak the truth.

Allow me to reflect briefly on the truth that Jesus brought into the world, the truth we mark today in the face of a world that still rejects the light.

The truth of Jesus' life and ministry – important to recall that what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem on Good Friday is in direct response to the ministry and message he has lived and preached – throughout the liturgical year, we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry and yet I wonder how many times we stop and think that this is what will turn the world against him – this is the truth that will be rejected on Good Friday. Do we understand the radical claim that the truth of Jesus' life and ministry make on us, his faithful disciples? I've been re-reading Wendell Berry's powerful essay on "the burden of the gospels." His two questions: If you had been living in Jesus' time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers? Can you be sure that you would keep His commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so? – think, for example, about the radical message of tomorrow's Maundy Thursday scripture

and liturgy: gather, remember, wash each others' feet, love one another. This is the truth that the world did not know – this is the gift that is ours to follow.

The truth of Jesus' death – the reality that the world cannot accept God's love, the cross becomes the cruel sign of that rejection – for the world, it is the folly of the cross, the scandal of the cross; but we have seen the truth on the tree on Golgotha. Our spiritual father Martin Luther made the cross the center of all theology - it is the central moment of God's sacrifice for the faithful, the ultimate act of redemption for the fallen world. We can find the cross in all of Luther's writings (sermons, commentaries, essays – some 57 volumes). But perhaps we find the theology of the cross most profoundly proclaimed in his prayers: "Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled...I am weak in the faith...I am cold in love...I am poor...I am a sinner...Therefore, I will remain with thee of whom I can receive, but to whom I cannot give." For those of us who are called to carry the weight of the cross, those who stand at the foot of the cross and grieve, we are there with Luther who understood that the truth of the cross demands our humility, our confession, our repentance, so that we might receive even though we cannot give. God has shown us truth on the cross. And it was the centurion who proclaims the truth as Jesus breathes his last – surely this was the son of God. The truth has been revealed in the cross.

The truth of the resurrection – imagine yourself as one of those blessed few who experienced the remarkable surprise of the empty tomb – do not be afraid!, the angel said – this was scary and threatening stuff. Those who experienced the risen Christ in those days after Jesus' crucifixion were the gifted ones for they knew that the truth revealed on the cross would live forever in the community of the faithful, in the work of the spirit, in God's continuing love for God's world – but this didn't make their lives any easier. This is the paradoxical truth that lives on in the body of Christ, that continues to proclaim that as we bear witness to Jesus Christ, we bear witness to the truth. And that remains the truth unknown to modern Pilates and their world. This is the continuing threat of resurrection. The Guatemalan poet, Julia Esquivel, tells this story in her poem, "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection" as she writes:

No brother,
It is not the noise of the streets
Which does not let us sleep.

Accompany us then on this vigil
And you will know what it is to dream!
You then will know
How marvelous it is
To live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake, To keep watch asleep,

To live while dying
And to already know oneself

Resurrected!

This is the truth of resurrection, the glimpse of life abundant, truth that does prevail, light that overcomes the darkness.

This is the covenant that I have made with you, proclaims the letter to the Hebrews – a covenant, a promise made yours in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – a covenant that is grounded in the truth – a covenant that calls you to a life of faithful discipleship in a world that so needs to know the truth, but still asks Pilate’s wrenching question, “What is truth?”

I have a poignant childhood memory of Good Friday – more than fifty years ago my grandfather died on Good Friday and all I knew, in the midst of the sadness and confusion, was that all would be well. And so it is. That is the truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>A moment such as this<<

I offered these remarks at the national Campus Compact conference - remarks that pretty much sum up my perspective on what the work is ahead for all of us. You will hear echoes of my abiding commitments to democratic engagement, now more urgent than ever!

I have been reflecting on what it means for all of us gathered here at Compact25 to be “called for a moment such as this.” Perhaps you, too, have asked yourself the same question.

Let me parse that question in reverse order:

- “Such as this” - what do I mean by “this”? We’re all keenly aware that this is a moment of significant disruption and chaos, aimed at the institutions and values we cherish. Often characterized as woke, elitist, out of touch, and unaccountable, our colleges and universities have been targeted by a new federal administration in ways we may never have imagined. “Insanity” is how one presidential colleague labeled it. Insanity, indeed.
- But I also believe this is a “moment”, a blip on the long arc of higher education’s role in our democracy. It is a tough moment, to be sure, but we must look to horizons past, present, and future, to ground ourselves and to understand what we must do now in this moment to protect and preserve the missions and values we seek to advance.
- And that means we must embrace our calls in this moment - the idea of a calling or vocation that comes from our faith and ethical traditions and that equips us to embrace the many roles we live out in the world as professionals surely, but also as parents and children and siblings and citizens and neighbors and activists, roles that often intersect and demand thoughtful balancing of all that we are called to be and do.

For me, the response to the question of what it means to be called to a moment such as this must be a moral framework that guides our thoughtful and reflective practice as individuals and

as communities of meaning and practice. I have found important inspiration for my leadership and the moral imperative for this moment in the mission and work of Campus Compact.

“Campus Compact supports, engages, and challenges higher education to realize its public purpose. Mobilizing students, staff, faculty, and administrators, Campus Compact empowers colleges and universities to advance their academic and civic missions by partnering with communities to address complex social issues and further equity, justice, and prosperity for all.”

I had the privilege to lead the Board task force that led to Compact’s 2025-2030 strategic plan, a plan that boldly positions Campus Compact for its commitment to the public purposes of higher education and the distinctive role we can plan in strengthening campus-community partnerships, supporting our remarkable students in their vocational journeys, and sharing our stories of the impact our colleges and universities have in the communities they serve.

In that context, let me say a few words about that moral imperative for this moment, what I call a democratic social ethic, and how Campus Compact’s strategic work supports all of us in our efforts to sustain a just, equitable, and prosperous democracy.

Each fall, I give an opening convocation address to our incoming students with the title “What is required of you?” After referencing the Hebrew scriptural injunction from the prophet Micah, “to act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” - a faith claim that I must leave to our students to work out - I then suggest that there are three things we do require of them, and those three requirements summarize for me a democratic social ethic that may be more relevant than ever for a moment such as this.

Show up

The first requirement is to show up, a claim that is central to Campus Compact’s mission to support the work we do on our campuses and in the communities we serve.

But, as we all know, it can be tough to show up when we are distracted and exhausted and depressed by the scope and scale of the challenges we face. But show up, we must.

But, of course, this is not simply about showing up with our physical presence. Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now. It is about being in relationship with each other and our neighbors. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social. It is about knowing our whereabouts and our neighbors. The famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, said that genuine education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. And if you believe that – as we do here at Campus Compact – then showing up, being present now, is the key factor in whether or not we are able to create the sort of world we value.

Show up, please.

Pay attention

The second requirement is pay attention. Simple yes, but the equally simple fact is that we live in a world full of distractions and paying attention doesn't come easy. This may be the most important ethical requirement in these times when chaos and confusion reign.

Like you, I'm on social media.. I have an I-Phone and an iPad and a laptop. I read two newspapers each morning and probably have 20 magazine subscriptions. I do my best to lead a wonderful and complex university. I have two children, a wonderful spouse, and a life full of things I "must" pay attention to – and it's hard work. And I'm old. I always say to our students: You are young and you have grown up in a time when multitasking is not an option, it's an expectation. I really can't imagine how you keep it all together. I admire you, but I also worry about you.

So here I stand asking you to pay attention, find ways to put away the distractions you can control.

But it is more than that, of course, because even when we have put away all those sources of distraction, it remains our responsibility to figure out what is most important and how we can make what is important the center of our life. The sociologist, Robert Bellah and his associates, have written that "Democracy means paying attention," (from *The Good Society*) by which they mean that the psychic energy we use to pay attention is the key to the sort of person we hope to be – as individuals and as a society. If we continue to be distracted, our attention and the energy that it requires of us will also be distracted, and the values and people and ideas and causes we should care about and attend to will not get our energy. And we will not become the people we want to be.

Pay attention, please.

Do the work

And finally, do the work, a final requirement follows logically from the first two. If you show up and learn to truly pay attention, you will find that there is work that must be done.

Some days, the work will be assigned to you. We all have jobs and duties that mean there is work we must do.

But more and more, on many days the work must be ours to discern and pursue. There will be no one there to tell us what to do. You will need to seize the work that needs to be done. I believe deeply that the institutions that are part of the Campus Compact community reflect the profound truth at the heart of our academic missions that the work we learn to do on our campuses – in the classroom, on campus, in our neighborhoods and around the world – is the basis for pursuing the important work to be done in the world – and we need to do it. There is utility to the education we offer, there is purpose and direction, there is work to be done by

educated folks. Work we are called to do. Work that might just have to do with what the prophet Micah claimed – the work of justice and compassion and humility.

Do the work, please.

And this is what this democratic social ethic looks like on our campus - as I'm positive it does for most of you. On the ground on campus, in our neighborhood, and wherever we live and work, I see a reality different from the claims by many who criticize higher education. I see students who see education as a gift that carries with it a responsibility to give back. I see faculty and staff committed to our vision that students receive a three-dimensional education – an education that equips them to make a living, make a life, and build community. And I see alumni and neighbors who care about each other and the world, and who are working each and every day to support a just and inclusive democracy.

So here is my shorthand version of a democratic social ethic - show up, pay attention, and do the work. And here is this remarkable community of practice we call Campus Compact that supports, challenges, and inspires us to do just that - to be called to a moment such as this.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

My spouse and I are reading *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity* by Debie Thomas (Broadleaf Books, 2024). It is a beautifully written exploration of an expansive faith life, based on her own personal story and the legacy of the Apostle Thomas in India.

>>The rewards of wisdom<<

I am inspired at this time of the year, as we celebrate our calling in higher education and mark the many accomplishments of our students, by these words from the Hebrew scriptures.

11

Wisdom teaches her children
and takes hold of those who seek her.

12

Whoever loves her loves life,
and those who seek her from early morning will be filled with joy.

13

Whoever holds her fast inherits glory,
and the Lord blesses the place she enters.

14

Those who serve her minister to the Holy One;
the Lord loves those who love her.

15

Whoever obeys her will judge the nations,

and whoever listens to her will live securely.

16

If they remain faithful, they will inherit her;
their descendants will also obtain her.

17

For at first she will walk with them in disguise;
she will bring fear and dread upon them
and will torment them by her discipline
until she trusts them,^[a]
and she will test them with her ordinances.

18

Then she will come straight back to them again and gladden them
and will reveal her secrets to them.

19

If they go astray, she will forsake them
and hand them over to their ruin.

Sirach 4: 11-19

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augzburg.edu, ask to be added to the list, and the listserv will confirm that you have been subscribed to the list. Please feel free to forward your email versions of Notes to others—they then can subscribe by contacting me. The current and archive issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com.

>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Wrestling with angels: Higher education leadership in a moral key

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2025