

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Seven, Number Two (December, 2025)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Happy holidays, friends! It has been a crazy and distressing December here on our campus and in our neighborhood. After denigrating Somali-Americans, the Trump administration unleashed ICE activity in the Twin Cities, purportedly aimed at Somalis in the country illegally. In the midst of this surge, ICE agents came onto the Augsburg campus and detained one of our students. The aftermath has been chaotic as ICE raids continued in our neighborhood and cities. I am grateful for those of you who reached out with prayers and support. You can read and listen to interviews I did after the raid on campus here:

MPR: [Augsburg University president: ICE 'illegally' detained student, didn't show warrant](#)

Star Tribune: [Augsburg president decries 'illegal' ICE detention of a student on private campus](#)

My statement in support of our neighbors is posted below. These are distressing times for all of us. I am so glad that I am part of a community that has each others' backs!

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

>>Surprised<<

A homily for Advent

Luke 1: 30-31

³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

Over the years, I've offered interested students the opportunity to spend part of the day serving as president. We set up a schedule and the student sits through a typical day in the life of a university president. Fascinating, right? Not so much, I'm afraid. The response after the day usually includes something to the effect of, "I didn't realize how many boring meetings you sit through!"

Now, I don't deny the many privileges I have as a college leader, but here's the thing. I'm not much surprised by anything anymore – maybe I've been at it too long, nothing much can surprise me...and I miss it, the element of surprise in the midst of the routine and relentless day to day passage of time. Maybe, just maybe, you know what I mean. Our lives are often defined by the schedules we keep, the time that passes, the assignments we must complete, the routines we must follow...by the chronology of our lives.

And still, a couple of weeks ago, I was in New Orleans with our Augsburg students who have been on the Mississippi River this entire semester, and I experienced a time that allowed me to step out of my routine, a time that seemed magical and meaningful as the students reflected on the ways in which their experiences on the river had changed their lives, had transformed their education, had offered them moral and spiritual inspiration.

Here, then, is our human dilemma – we live in Chronos, the chronological time that marches on relentlessly in our daily lives – and we also have the gift of Kairos, God's time that calls us out of ourselves and surprises us with the promise of joy and grace.

To be surprised by Kairos is the gift of Advent... In this Advent season, we recall the remarkable ways in which God has broken into our history – and how our lives will never be the same. And as the writer Madeleine L'Engle asks: "Are we willing and able to be surprised? If we are to be aware of life while we are living it, we must have the courage to relinquish our hard-earned control of ourselves." We must have the courage and patience to live aware that the kingdom of God is *close at hand* in the Kairos moments that surprise us.

This human dilemma between Chronos and Kairos causes me to pause again this Advent to watch and listen for those Kairos moments that are a gift from God:

- There is the surprise of accompaniment with our neighbors – I watch with wonder as we come alongside our Somali-American students and neighbors to stand in solidarity at this fraught moment. I listen to our students who work with the Campus Kitchen, who tell me that delivering meals to neighbors is not enough, they want to sit with them, to learn from them, to know their stories, to build community. Or similarly with the faculty and students who work in our Health Commons, who describe the humility that comes when they don't seek to "fix" those experiencing homelessness or struggling as immigrants, but rather to be their neighbor, sharing in the common humanity of relationships rather than transactions. Surprise!
- And there is the surprise of genuine teaching and learning – in our Lutheran tradition, we are taught to inquire about all of God's creation, being open to answers that may

surprise us. I had a recent Kairos moment when an Augsburg alum who had taken my course focused on why place matters shared a picture on social media of an architectural feature on a downtown Minneapolis building and wrote that she watched for such details because of the course. Surprise!

- And then there is the surprise of the promise of peace that we celebrated in last weekend's Advent Vespers services. I was especially struck by this powerful reading from Denise Levertov, who writes:

Peace as a positive condition of society, not merely as an interim between wars, is something so unknown that it casts no images on the mind's screen...if a poetry is ever to be written, there must first be this stage we are just entering—the poetry of preparation for peace, a poetry of protest, of lament, of praise for the living earth; a poetry that demands justice, renounces violence, reveres mystery.

In our war-torn world, surely this is the surprise we are called to pursue and embrace, the gift of Kairos that reveres mystery. Surprise!

As someone who longs to be surprised, all I can say is thank you to each of you for the way you surprise me, and thanks be to God for the ultimate surprise, a baby in a manger, God-with-us, sent to redeem this world God loves so much. Surprise, indeed!

Let us pray. Gracious and loving and surprising God. We praise you for the many blessings we know in our lives. The gifts of community and music and art and poetry – the gift of faith seeking understanding. Be with us as we share your surprise – of light in the darkness, love in our daily lives, peace in the world – with your people who long to know you. May your Holy Spirit be in our midst as we prepare for your coming again – your kingdom on earth as in heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>A Word We Need<<

I preached this homily for an Augsburg Daily Chapel Service in November.

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 everyday in our noisy, full-of-distractions, too much talking lives. Dear God, please send your Word - a Word we need!

We live in perhaps the quintessential world of words – a college campus – where people like to talk and talk and talk. This is my 50th 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 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.

This morning's scripture readings teach us how to pay attention as they offer a Word that can give point to our labors, meaning to our history, and direction to our future – a Word, I might suggest, that we need - let's listen once again.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is especially meaningful as it provides a still (and perhaps never more urgently) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word will 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 – a 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 here gathered – 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. It is a Word we need!

And so the story continues – as it has now for 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 of love.

And it continues especially in our reading from John's gospel, which contains the original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary, which was 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, Mexico, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Bethlehem, Norway, Italy, 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 everyday 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. Our Campus Kitchen has, for more than two decades, been a source of food for our neighbors, as well as the occasion for fellowship and community. And our community garden brings together neighbors and campus folks to grow nutritious produce in the heart of our urban neighborhood.

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 with each other. 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 support each other to discern our calls, we also must remind ourselves that faithful work, God's work, will not necessarily make us popular or comfortable. I am struck by how critical it is that we lift up for our students witnesses to the faith and to the Word - witnesses in our community and beyond - who have faced with courage and resolve and imagination the fact that the world rejects the way of love. We need the company of witnesses to the Word and the way of love.

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 everyday at Augsburg as we engage with local faith communities through the Riverside Innovation Hub, which equips people of faith to better serve their neighbors. 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 not regularly intersect with ours. We see glimpses of grace as we work around our usual institutional rules to meet the needs of our Somali neighbors, and when our students spend time in one of the mosques in our neighborhood, learning about the various ways in which God's covenant is present in our world – in our neighborhood.

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," 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. 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!

This is the story of God's faithful people. This is the Word we need - that the world needs. Pay attention, for in a world so full of words, we have the Word to live, to share, and to shout from the mountaintops. I'm proud to be part of a university community, grounded in the rich faith of the Lutheran church, alive in the vibrant city, allied with God's faithful people around the globe, that is paying attention to its call to be the Word made flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen

>>Peace<<

Greetings from the Augsburg University community during these sacred Advent days. This Advent at Augsburg, we are reflecting on the theme of God's promise to “Guide Our Feet in the Way of Peace.”

Hear these familiar words from the prophet Isaiah:

The LORD shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah, 2: 4)

The Prophet's claim that “nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” prompts me to ponder: Where is it that we learn war in the first place, and how will we cease to learn it in the future?

Here we have the gift of our Lutheran Christian faith that acknowledges our paradoxical existence as those sinful and yet also saved.

We learn war every day in our lives in the world, full of violence and polarization and injustice...even as we know peace in the promise of our awesome and loving God.

And we wait patiently for that remarkable moment when the Advent of our Lord - the promise fulfilled - will shine peace in all the world.

One of our guides to peacemaking in the world is the poet, Wendell Berry, who writes these lovely lines in “The Peace of Wild Things” as a prayer for peace in our time:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

From *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Counterpoint, 1999),
Used here with the author's permission.

Blessings to you and yours in these Advent days and may you rest in the grace of the world.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Solidarity with our neighbors<<

Here is the message I sent to our community as we dealt with the threats to our neighbors.

Dear faculty and staff,

I shared the message below with all students a short while ago. I hope you'll read it carefully as it contains important information about supporting our community in this fraught time for our Somali students, colleagues, alumni, friends, and neighbors.

As you know, we have a taskforce of faculty, staff, and administration who have been meeting regularly for the past year to address changing policies and actions from the federal government. That task force met again this morning and will be communicating reminders for how we have prepared for various scenarios that could occur in our neighborhood related to ICE activity and potential related protests. More updates will be forthcoming as new details emerge. In the meantime, please be sure you are familiar with the [guidelines in our Know Your Rights](#) document.

At this time, our top priorities are campus safety and care for our students heading into finals. For some students, this will require an extra measure of grace and flexibility as they balance final projects with personal or family safety

considerations. The Provost's Office is working with academic leadership to provide faculty with guidelines for support and flexibility for students.

Email to all students from President Paul Pribbenow:

Dear Augsburg students,

Many of you will have seen news of the cruel, dehumanizing remarks about Somali immigrants made by President Trump on social media last week and during a Cabinet meeting in Washington, D.C. yesterday. In addition, news media are reporting that a federal immigration enforcement action targeting Somali Minnesotans is planned for the coming days or weeks.

These events are personal for many in our community. I want to state unequivocally that Augsburg stands in solidarity with our Somali students and colleagues, their families, and our neighbors in Cedar-Riverside in this frightening time. As a university founded by immigrants, we condemn the hateful anti-immigrant rhetoric that has been weaponized against Minnesota's Somali diaspora in recent days. Our Somali students are an essential, valued part of the fabric of Augsburg. You will always be welcome here.

Resources for Support

These events may add significant stress to an already busy time of the semester. Please take advantage of support resources and opportunities to gather with community throughout the coming days.

- In addition to regular appointments, students can drop in at the Center for Wellness and Counseling on the first floor of Anderson Hall between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Teletherapy options are also available through Bettermynd and urgent phone counseling is available 24/7 by calling 844-287-6963.
- Multicultural Life will host a "Decompress December" event in East Commons from 4:30–6:30 p.m. on Thursday, December 4. All students are welcome.
- Monday's Daily Chapel is Mindfulness, December 8 from noon to 12:20 p.m. in Hoversten Chapel. In addition, any member of the community is welcome to stop by the Campus Ministry office for confidential spiritual counseling and support. Their offices are located on the main floor of the Foss Center, next to the chapel entrance. You can call 612-330-1732 or email dames@augsborg.edu.

- A [Know Your Rights session](#) for students (Augsburg login required) will be hosted via Zoom on Monday, December 8, during community time from 12:20–1 p.m. (see A-mail to register).
- [Virtual Support Space for Students](#) (Augsburg login required) will be held Monday, December 8, from 5–6 p.m.
- Academic and faculty leadership are sharing guidelines with all faculty regarding flexibility and support for students during this time. If you need support for specific individual circumstances, including coordinating with faculty, please contact the Dean of Students Office at deanofstudents@augsborg.edu, call 612-330-1160, or drop by Memorial Hall 118.
- Remember that Augsburg's Alert notification system is the primary mechanism for timely campuswide alerts, when needed. You can manage your notification settings by [logging into the alert system](#).

Important Reminders: Law Enforcement on Campus

Please note that because Augsburg is a private institution, outside law enforcement agencies cannot legally enter non-public areas of campus, including classrooms, residence halls, and areas that require fob access, without a valid warrant signed by a judge. Individual staff or faculty members are expected to contact Augsburg administration and the Department of Public Safety if they encounter law enforcement officials on campus. These representatives are trained to ensure the university responds appropriately with regard to legal requirements. You can help keep the distinction between public and non-public areas of campus clear by using your own fob and not holding doors open for individuals you don't know.

We will share additional updates with the campus community as needed in the coming days. In the meantime, please take care of yourselves, and make an extra effort to take care of each other.

Faithfully yours,

Paul

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

A couple of books have come my way with strong recommendations lately.

Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges, by Richard Kahlenberg (PublicAffairs, 2025), recommended by Bobby Hackett, president of the Bonner Foundation.

And here's something a bit more whimsical, as recommended by novelist and bookstore owner, Ann Patchett: *If We Were Dogs*, by Sophia Blackall (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2025)

>>Blessed are the Peacemakers<<

As I mentioned above, our Advent Vespers theme for this year was "Guide our feet into the way of peace" from Luke's gospel (1:79). Among the inspiring readings in the service was this familiar passage from Matthew's gospel, so fitting for this season and this moment...

When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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