

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Seven, Number One (October, 2025)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Greetings, friends, on this All-Hallow's Eve. It has been a busy and meaningful fall here in Minnesota. We had great enrollment results, engaged student groups, lots of fun events, and lovely autumn weather. As we head toward the traditional holidays, we give thanks for friends and colleagues far and wide whose daily efforts give us hope and inspiration.

I continue to send you power and courage for the days ahead!

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

>>The Bible tells me so<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel early in our fall semester.

The Bible tells me so...

Luke 14: 25-27 and 33, John 3: 13-17

*Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.*

Good afternoon (still odd to say!) and welcome/welcome back to this sacred chapel time - the time we take each weekday during the school year to come together to worship, to celebrate, to bless, to grieve, to be God's people in this place. How I miss this time when students are away

in the summer and how joyful it is to return to this daily, holy rhythm of our lives together at Augsburg. Welcome home.

One of my favorite memories in my 19+ years at Augsburg is when beloved music faculty member, the late Gabe Gabrielson, would sit at the piano and share with us his ten variations on “Jesus loves me.” It was at once intimate and whimsical and inspiring and comforting, even jazzy a bit, and it always brought a holy silence to the room.

For some of us, we will resonate deeply with the simple faith message of “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and that is all we need to hear in order to be firm in our faith journey. I recall coming to college 50 years ago with that understanding of my simple faith. Growing up in the church with my Dad as my pastor, I had no reason to question, no reason to doubt, no reason to believe there was another way.

It was not long into my college days, though, in some sort of introductory Bible class, that religion faculty members (some might say, gleefully) raised serious questions about my Biblical claims. You know there are four gospel accounts, and the stories vary from book to book, what do you make of a sermon on the plain vs. the sermon on the mount, and what about that crazy John, what’s with the Word being there in the beginning and then becoming flesh - really? And so on and so on - enough to make you wonder, perhaps even to doubt what you’d been taught, to begin to grow in your faith, perhaps, but maybe to back away from all these conflicting stories and claims.

In our Lutheran Christian tradition, we follow what is called the lectionary in setting the scripture readings for each day and Sunday. This morning, we read excerpts from both last Sunday’s gospel from Luke and from this coming Sunday’s gospel from John. On one hand, it is “give up all your possessions and take up the cross to follow me, Jesus proclaims”, and on the other, it is “For God so loved the world, God sent God’s only Son...” Pastor Babette suggested I might do a “mash-up” of these seemingly disparate passages. Instead, I want to hold them in creative tension as they illustrate the ways in which the Bible shows us different ways of understanding the call to faith in the world.

Now, when we look at these two particular passages, they really are not so much in conflict with the message they convey as they reflect the completely different worldviews of their authors. For Luke, this is Jesus on the ground teaching his followers how to live. Some of the language is harsh - it calls for hating your family and giving up all your possessions - tough love, we might say. On the other hand, the writer of John, influenced by Greek philosophy, is much more focused on what is up above and what it takes to ascend to eternal life. So, what is it? Do we worry about earthly or heavenly things?

The remarkable Lutheran preacher and theologian, Joseph Sittler, once wrote of these differing stories and images of what it means to live as faithful disciples of Jesus: “The only access we have to Jesus is through the reported word about him, and that word is not consistent. A single parable may be given this way in Mark and quite another way in Luke or Matthew. That

means...we have to build up the composite of differences, and then try to ask what the (early) church...meant when it said "Jesus is Lord."

And this composite of differences can be quite mind-bending. The spiritual guide and writer, Debie Thomas, suggests that the way to understand these differences is to see Christianity as a "religion of paradoxes. (O)f dissonant and seemingly contradictory truths that reveal the roominess of God." I love that phrase, the roominess of God for which paradox is the key. Thomas has her working list of these dissonant scriptural and theological claims. Here are a few: Jesus is God and Jesus is human; Creation is good and creation is broken; I'm a sinner and I'm a saint; Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is servant. We could go on with our own lists of the dissonance we often find in reading the Bible and reflecting on our faith.

Thomas then offers this reassuring word as we experience these conflicting claims: "Again and again, the way of Jesus invites us to hold opposing truths together, in pairings that seem impossible. This is not to confound us but to show how wide and spacious the realm of God really is."

This is hard and difficult stuff for those of us who live in this either-or, binary world. Living with paradox is not easy and requires patience and courage and resilience in the face of the demands of living our faith in the world.

Dr. Kit Kleinhans, who taught at Wartburg College and served as dean of Trinity Theological Seminary before her retirement, reminds us that our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther spoke of the faithful as simultaneously "saint and sinner," the Latin "simul justus et peccator." Now that's a paradox for you. As Kleinhans describes this paradox: "When I look at myself in the mirror, I always see the reflection of a sinner. But when God looks at me, he sees me through Jesus. My sin is covered with Christ's own righteousness." Think about that: God sees us through Jesus! For God so loved the world, God sent God's only Son...

And therein lies the remarkable grace-filled message that inspires my living with the paradoxes of the scriptures, that helps me navigate through the dissonances that inevitably emerge in reading the Bible - even as I hope you will be among those students of the faith who are called to struggle with those dissonances. But in the midst of all these paradoxes, here is the Biblical message that guides our faithful lives in the world - it's really quite simple: Jesus loves me, Jesus loves you, for the Bible tells us so! Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Faith<<

In addition to this being Halloween, it also is Reformation Day in my faith tradition (celebrating the day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Castle Church Door in Wittenberg, Germany), and I shared some thoughts earlier this week about the role of faith in our lives with a local Lutheran congregation. Here is an excerpt...

This thing called faith is so central to our lives, our tradition, and our role in the world, and yet too often we find it extremely difficult to engage each other in conversations about what we believe and why. I believe deeply that our need to talk about faith and its role in our private and public lives is perhaps more relevant than ever before because the world needs people of faith. The evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other, at war within and without – surely we all know the reality of what the Apostle Paul called “creation’s groaning.” And we could leave it just there – as many do – with no evidence for optimism, no sense of what it all means, no horizon that inspires us to go on. Yet we are called to faith and hope. Acknowledging creation’s groaning while also believing that the Divine is active in our midst, we find hope in the *glimpses* of God’s reign in our history, in our daily lives. Faith is what helps us live in the paradox that Martin Luther called *simul justus et peccator* – people living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of creation’s groaning and the mysterious and redemptive work of God in our lives.

Perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) these words that summarize how we might live in these tensions – how hope can be found and pursued, how faith creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator: “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.”

In the context of this elegant tension, I’ve been thinking about faith a good bit over the past few months as we try to navigate the fraught times we live in, times that lead us to question where is God in the midst of the suffering and violence and polarization and injustice that we experience everyday – I’d like to offer a brief glimpse of some of my thinking and see if it makes sense to you as we all seek to grasp what it means to be faithful people in the world. How are we called to wrestle with angels in our lives of faith in the world?

Story of Thomas’ adoption: Imagine this situation – five families gathered in an orphanage conference room in Soc Trang, Vietnam, brief speeches, food is served, and all of a sudden five children are carried out from the back room. There ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking – and then we are off, loaded into vans and on our way back to our lives, changed forever by what happened in that orphanage.

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us when faith breaks into our lives: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever – it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive.

It is this story that helps me to understand that faith truly is a gift – not to be coveted or expected, but to be received – we are chosen by God to be God’s child, to become a part of

God's family. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever – and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people.

Story of Betsy, an Augsburg student: Betsy is like many of our students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes – and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant in our Campus Kitchens program. Betsy begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns in relationship with neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals – she wants fellowship and community.

Surely Betsy shows us what it means to think about faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a gifted person of faith.

My teacher, Martin Marty, says that the distinctive mark of faithful people is “acts of mercy” – Luther uses the word “neighbor” more often than any other word in his voluminous works.

Faith as call teaches us that there is not necessarily one destination point – one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith – faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy – faith is an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected.

Story of my mother, Elsie, died 15 years ago this past summer and during her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for several years, and, now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment alternatives, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family—I am the oldest of six children, all married with children of their own—made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together and with her.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we “keep vigil” with and for mom. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here, then, is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our

control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God's embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called "just one last surprise," God's promise of abundant and eternal life.

Faith as gift, call and promise – faith as a life unfolding. We join together to proclaim "Lord, I believe" – I believe in your gift, your call, your promise – even as we admit, "help my unbelief" – my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. Continue in my word, Jesus tells us, and you will know the truth that makes you free. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace!

PRACTICE THIS

>>Semper Reformanda: The Call to Loving Reform<<

Another important concept in our Lutheran Christian tradition is *Semper Reformanda*, the idea that we are called to always be open to new ways of being faithful in the world because only God is permanent. I think this may be the most meaningful gift of my tradition for those of us called to leadership. I was asked to share thoughts about this important concept with a group of pastors and other leaders from the Lutheran community in the Twin Cities. I urged them to follow the call to loving reform!

This morning I point to one of the central charisms of our Lutheran faith tradition - the concept of *semper reformanda*, the underlying contention that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

Many of us in the university world are having conversations about how the concept of *semper reformanda* calls us to reimagine the ways in which we live out our calls and missions in the world. These are fraught times – times marked by injustice, violence, polarization, income inequality, and so forth – times that test those of us called to lead..

There is always some combination of genuine enthusiasm and deep anxiety about these conversations, in part because at the heart of planning for the future we must face the difficult, complex and challenging questions that portend change – change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change – within our academic community, within our congregations, and in the wider society – we have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world – a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work.

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My sub-title for this morning, “The Call to Loving Reform,” might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy leader and perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that – we must love change for change’s sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg University is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform. Each of you have your own contexts that shape and guide your efforts at loving reform

Martin Luther wrote in perhaps his most well-known treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520, M. Tranvik, trans.) these famous lines:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything...

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all

Here is the creative tension at the heart of Luther’s vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to be of service, to follow our calls to be God’s co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God’s people and do God’s work. Luther’s vision of reform was pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God’s faithful people. And the passage from John’s gospel may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar – sometimes referred to as Jesus’ first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus’ mother says to him, “They have no wine,” to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come.” Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future – Jesus can’t be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn't allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more important things on his mind. She reminds us that we too are called – as she was – to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, "Do whatever he tells you."

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. "Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief stewards," he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle – the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity – but the fact is that they participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God's abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God's way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God's loving intentions for all of creation. "Do whatever he tells you," Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Loving reform – *semper reformanda* – is the challenge to live at the intersections of God's call and God's plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts – gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith – to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Global education<<

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

We hosted a book launch here on campus for Lori Sturdevant's important new book, *Martin Sabo: The Making of the Modern Legislature* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2025). Lori is a retired Minneapolis journalist and a keen observer of our political landscape. Martin Sabo was an Augsburg alum, who served in both the State and Federal House, and whose commitment to good political governance is a salve to our current dysfunction.

>>What we need is here<<

This lovely poem from Wendell Berry has provided the guiding theme for our chapel services here at Augsburg over the past year...

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augsborg.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

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2025