

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-One, Number One (October 2019)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

It has been a whirlwind few weeks as we launched our Sesquicentennial celebrations at Augsburg. We hosted 1,000 guests at an opening gala, where we cheered the past 150 years even as we looked forward to the next era in our lives together. We also raised more than \$1.4 million in 20 minutes of a Fund-A-Need auction – that was energizing.

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

>>Why Vocation?<<

I commenced my chapel homilies this fall with the intention of offering three reflections on the theological concept of vocation, which is central to our Lutheran faith tradition and to the education we offer students at Augsburg. I have preached two of the three thus far, and here they are:

Why...Vocation?: Losing Your Alias and Your Alibi!

Psalm 139:1-6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Inescapable God

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

So...Why Vocation? Or – as known in these halls – the “V” word.

Perhaps you’re like me and sometimes feeling a bit lost and stressed as the new academic year begins. For new students, it may be that first time away from home and family, and wondering whether you belong here. For returning students, perhaps it’s that anxiety of finding the right major or career path. For faculty members, it’s the anticipation of a classroom full of new faces and new questions to be addressed. For staff members, you may wonder if your work adds value or whether this is the right job for you. For all of us, there is this thing called the “imposter syndrome” – do we measure up, are we true to ourselves?

And what do we sometimes do in the face of our stress and anxiety but to find ways to hide or avoid the fear? I know I’ve done so many times. Maybe we take on an alias – put on an identity or behave as if we were someone else. Or maybe we seek an alibi – an excuse for why we are feeling the ways we do. Aliases and alibis – too often our way of coping with the fear and anxiety of living in the world.

And why shouldn’t we be afraid – the world can be a frightening place where we are judged or ignored or labeled or indicted for reasons we can’t fathom. Aliases and alibis seem like reasonable responses to an unpredictable and untrustworthy world.

I want to suggest this morning that the Psalmist speaks directly to the heart of our fears with words that remind us of God’s abiding promise for God’s people – for us. And they are words that are at the heart of Augsburg’s mission – words that call us to trust in a God who searches and knows us. Words that are about our vocations, our callings. Words that define why we care so deeply about vocation.

Now I could go all theology-nerd on you here and recite the scriptural and theological bases for our belief in vocation, but I’ll spare you all the Lutheran-speak for a moment. Instead I want to suggest that the reason we embrace vocation in this university is because when you are called and when you follow your call, you lose your aliases and your alibis and become just who God intends for you to be. And that is a word of comfort and love and hope in the midst of our real lives.

So how does this happen – this losing your alias and alibi? I recently heard a remarkable story about Brother Roger, founder of the Taizé community in France. Brother Roger would travel to some of the most difficult parts of the world with a ministry of peace and hope – despite the on the ground evidence of violence and poverty and natural disasters. He would urge victims to pray for enemies even when that seemed impossible. He proclaimed the power of trust – not as some naïve sense that all would magically be right in the world – but as a gift from a God who searches and knows us from the beginning of time so that we might be God’s people for others.

When asked by a fellow member of the community what he meant by trust, Brother Roger replied “Trust takes away your alibi.” Trust takes away your alias and your alibi – the many ways in which you hide or make excuses to be someone else or leave the problems for someone else to solve. Trust is the openness to hearing the call to be yourself and to get to work as God’s faithful servant in the world.

And so, maybe a little bit of Lutheran-speak.

This is the remarkable word of grace and reconciliation that is at the heart of our faith. I'm drawn again and again to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler's thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, "Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid." This is a prayer of confession that reminds us, challenges us and comforts us with the good news that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, once we accept the power of trust, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. We are called by our God in Jesus Christ to follow, not because we are righteous, but because we are sinners all, sinners who are forgiven and reconciled so that God's good work in the world might be accomplished in and through us.

There is sin in it, no doubt about it, but that sin does not define God's people, redeemed, called and equipped for the work of hope and reconciliation. In fact, our Lutheran faith demands that we face the reality of a sinful world with clear-eyed focus. We recognize the messiness, the complexity, the self-interest and greed, the violence and deception. We ask tough questions about the ways of the world. We confess our aliases and alibis. And then we get to work with a sense of hope and promise, believing that we are called to live as those reconciled and redeemed, offering that same wellspring of hope and reconciliation to all.

And now back to you all and this moment at the beginning of a new academic year – especially this year, when we celebrate 150 years of being guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church. In chapel this week and next, we are asking "why?" Why worship, Why Jesus, Why serve, Why vocation – and in our rich and meaningful responses to these questions – and despite the abiding temptations we face – all of us – to hide behind our alibis and aliases, please know this...

We believe in Jesus, through whom we know God's plans for us. We embrace worship, in which we practice the sacred work of community. And we believe we are called to be neighbor, following the call of our God who searches and knows and names and claims us. We have the gift of trust in a God who knows us. We are a community of trust in which each of you – student, faculty, staff member – is called to be who God intends for you to be. No aliases required, no alibis allowed. It won't necessarily be easy – and there will be times when we doubt and fear and want to retreat – but know that God loves you, we love you – God has your back and so does this remarkable community. You are called, Auggies! Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>No one said it would be easy<<

No one said it would be easy...

Matthew 19:16-22 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Rich Young Man

"¹⁶Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;¹⁹ Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²⁰ The young man said to him, "I have kept all these;^[a] what do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money^[b] to the poor, and you will have treasure

in heaven; then come, follow me.”²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

I'm still on this vocation theme journey and I have to say that this morning's gospel reading problematizes things quite a bit. Give it all up – are you kidding me? That is not going to be a winning argument in our efforts to lift up vocational discernment as the heart of our work in this university.

But then I am reminded of a conversation I had a few years ago with a senior Augsburg student. I had been describing my understanding of vocation – it is often found in the mundane details of life; it has history and a narrative quality; it is both individual and social; and finally, it may require sacrifice to the unexpected. When he stopped me after class, he said that he had not heard in his four years at Augsburg the possibility that his calling may be sacrificial. He then described how his own journey had been in response to the expectations others had of him – to be successful, to make money, to climb the ladder – while his own aspirations were more about working with disadvantaged communities and being a good neighbor. His true calling, he believed, would take him to unexpected places and he wondered how to make sense of that surprising possibility.

Now, as many of you know, I am an ethicist by way of academic training and ethicists have a thing for rules. And our gospel reading starts with reference to one of the most iconic sets of rules ever articulated – the Ten Commandments, no less. Here is Jesus in conversation with the so-called rich young man; a young man seeking guidance on his own vocational journey all the way to eternal life – now that is a high calling! And Jesus shares what any good rabbi would prescribe – keep the commandments. I like that.

But it gets tricky when the young man proclaims that he has met that standard, so he asks what is it that I lack? And Jesus then sets the bar at its highest when he replies – give up all of your earthly possessions and follow me. To which the young man cannot agree and he goes away, grieving, the gospel writer tells us. Grieving because discipleship, following our true calling, demanded all of him – as it does for all of us. It is unexpected, surprising, jarring, sacrificial even – and we too often walk away grieving when we believe we cannot follow.

For those of us who claim the Christian faith, here is the central tension in our lives. How do we reconcile the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ with the ways of the world all around us? How do we live faithfully even as we pursue success and recognition? Too often, we're just like the rich young man – proud of ourselves for following the rules, surely that makes us good and deserving Christians – but give it all up to journey on this unexpected path, we're not so sure?

The German Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famously named this tension as a battle between what he called “cheap grace” – doing what we think is enough to earn God's favor – and “costly grace” – giving it all up and following Jesus. Bonhoeffer himself made the ultimate sacrifice with his life in following his call to resist the tyranny of Adolf Hitler. That sacrifice – as we know from Bonhoeffer's many writings and sermons – was grounded in his belief that discipleship means that we have no choice but to follow Jesus wherever he leads. It was, for Bonhoeffer, about Jesus Christ as the center of his life.

And here, I believe, Bonhoeffer offers us a way to understand our gospel as a roadmap to our lives of faith. As people of faith, we must read this gospel account backwards. It is Jesus's ultimate claim on the rich young man – to give it all up and follow him – that is the leap of faith we are called to make. Jesus asks us to make him the center of our lives. Christ as our center now arrays everything

else we do – every aspect of our calls we follow – as what it means to be disciples. So, following the Ten Commandments, for example, is not the means to eternal life, it is the life we lead because we are disciples of the Christ, because Christ is our center.

So what does this “centered life” look like? Here we have the wise guidance of our colleague, Jack Fortin, who serves in the Christensen Center for Vocation, and who has written powerfully about the centered life.

Jack points out that one of the great myths the world seeks to impose on us in our lives is the sense that we must learn to “balance” all of the competing claims we will face. The balanced life demands keeping work and family, private and public, personal and common in some sort of eternal symmetry. It might even mean following the rules, even as we skirt the higher demands of our faith. We long to find the balance in our lives that makes all right with the world. But this is a futile longing, as we all know and experience.

Instead, we must seek the centered life. Finding our center holds us in a different orbit, one where our core beliefs and values are a hub around which all of our various roles and commitments are arrayed.

With Christ as our center, our callings are all about discipleship – no matter where they take us. With Christ as our center, our priorities are rearranged. We are equipped to love our neighbors, to free the captives, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to console the grieving...

As Bonhoeffer himself discovered in his final days in prison before being executed, with Christ as our center, the question of who am I becomes whose am I? [Excerpts from poem, reprinted below]

I think about what this understanding of the centered life might mean for my Augsburg student, struggling with attempting to balance the expectations of others – parents, teachers, the world – with his own discernment of what might be seen as unexpected or sacrificial. He was on his way to medical school, as I recall, thinking that this was a path to a good living and status in the eyes of the world. What if, instead, his center was to follow Jesus? He still goes on to medical school, but he now sees the ways in which his calling to a particular profession is in service to a higher calling – a calling to use your gifts and knowledge and experience to meet the needs of those who suffer in mind, body and spirit – a calling that may seem sacrificial in the eyes of the world, but that in fact is just what God expects of God’s faithful people.

So, what is your center? Who are you? Whose are you? Here is the question Jesus poses for the rich young man. The answer we give makes all the difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Land acknowledgement<<

The Augsburg community is very aware that the land where it has been located for almost 150 years is land originally inhabited by the Dakota people. We have begun a meaningful practice of acknowledging the land at the opening of all public events on campus. Here is the language we use:

“Augsburg’s spirit is propelled by a heartbeat that started long before us.

That heartbeat was present even before our founding 150 years ago – it was present when the land where Augsburg today stands was stewarded by the Dakota people.

The Dakota are the original inhabitants of this area, and they are still here today.

We honor their wisdom about this place, their recognition that we are all part of the same creation. We share their sense of obligation to the larger community, including to future generations.”

Whose land do you and your organization now inhabit? Land acknowledgement strikes me as a first step toward recognizing how stewardship of the land requires admitting that it has not always been ours.

>>Donor intent<<

I wrote the following brief piece as part of the Association of Fundraising Professionals celebration of Ethics Month in October. Several of us were asked to reflect on one of the standards that comprise the AFP Code of Ethics. I chose Standard 14 on honoring donor intent.

“Members shall:

14. ensure that contributions are used in accordance with donors’ intentions.

Such a simple phrase and yet perhaps the center of our work as philanthropic fundraisers. We talk about donor intent all the time – is the gift for unrestricted purposes or for endowment, maybe a special project or a facilities initiative? What lies behind this simple phrase is the integrity of our relationships with donors. When we develop relationships with those who choose to support our organizational missions and causes, we are creating covenants – promise-relationships – in which we vow to keep our promises to each other. As organizational advocates, we come asking for support for our highest priorities and promise that such support will be used to advance our mission. As potential donors, our friends come to us offering of themselves – their time, talent and treasures – and expect that their interests and intentions will be honored. At the intersections of these relationships are promises to be kept by each party. Are we keeping our promises to each other? Are we – members of AFP – ensuring that contributions are used in accordance with donor intent?”

You can find all of the reflections on the AFP standards at afpnet.org.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I’m reading Eric Klinenberg’s *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (Broadway Reprint, 2019). Klinenberg, a sociologist who previously wrote *Heat Wave* about the impact of the mid-90s heat wave in Chicago that killed hundreds of people, borrows a phrase from Andrew Carnegie (used to describe the libraries he helped to found) to make the case for the role of infrastructure and place in promoting a more equitable and robust common life.

I’m a fan of whatever Barbara Brown Taylor writes, but especially so of her recent *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (HarperOne, 2019), a beautiful recounting of how her students have taught her to see her about interfaith living and learning.

>>Who am I?<<

“Who am I?”

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer (March 4, 1945)

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
trembling in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who am I?” in *Letters & Papers From Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1953/1997), 347-8.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Sesquicentennials and thinking institutionally
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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