

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-One, Number Three (February 2020)

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

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Winter greetings from Minnesota, where the first signs of Spring are lulling us to believe that there will be no more cold or snow (fooled again!). I trust that you are well in 2020 and not too dazed by political infighting or Covid-19.

I had a kind note from long-time reader Stewart Herman after the last issue of Notes. He writes: "First, Matthew's sheep and goats story strikes me, as I have been working on the ELCA social message on government, as a remarkably strong presentation of empathy as a political virtue (for dealing with strangers).

Second, with regard to your "Place Matters" course. If you are asking students to imagine neighborhoods transformed in the direction of sustainability, might you be interested in a field trip for them to tour our net-zero house? We'd be happy to share it, as it were. And in support, I had an article a few years ago about what it is like to build a net-zero house.

http://www.thecresset.org/2017/Michaelmas/Herman_M17.html"

Thanks, Stewart – and by the way, friends, the house Stewart and Linda have renovated is remarkable and worth a visit if you are in the Twin Cities!

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

>>Come and see<<

I preached this homily during the Epiphany season in the Augsburg Chapel.

John 1:29-39 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Lamb of God

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²And

John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him."³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."^u

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon...what is that about? Why does the gospel author think it is important to include such mundane details in this story? I want to suggest that it is important to see such details not as extraneous to the story but as an illustration that this epiphany – this revealing of Jesus to the world – does not occur in some sort of mystical, super ordinary way, but in the mundane moments of time and space. And further, that the abiding revealing of Jesus to the world in our own moments of time and space is found in the ordinary, even mundane, aspects of our lives together. In other words, there are John the Baptists all around, pointing the way ahead, calling us as did Dr. King – surely a John the Baptist in our time - to stick with love.

It is about 10:45 in the morning...

I have my own story of an experience while I was an undergraduate at Luther College that I often share with Augsburg students when talking about how we may discern our callings in unusual ways. I was about halfway through my time at Luther College – and I was on a track to become a Lutheran pastor – such was the path ordained for the eldest child of a Lutheran pastor in those days. But I was having doubts. I went to a religion professor from whom I was taking a class and I told him about my doubts, telling him that I wasn't sure I was cut out to live my Dad's life, that I doubted if I had the skills to be a good pastor. And his response in that moment changed my life. He said that he understood my concerns but that he also knew that I loved the questions that arose out of the faith tradition and community. He said there were these places called divinity schools where you went to study religion, not necessarily prepare to become a pastor. Here was my John the Baptist, pointing the way. And the rest is history. A five-minute conversation in the hallway. Let's say it was 11:15 in the morning.

What I love about John's gospel account of Jesus's early ministry is the way in which we see the hand-off from John to Jesus in the daily discourse of their lives together. First, we see John retelling the story of how he baptized Jesus in the waters of the River Jordan and how, not recognizing that this was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he was amazed by the Spirit descending on Jesus, proclaiming that it is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Here was John, living out his calling to point to the One who was to come, not knowing exactly if or when he might find success – and then this happens.

What I want to focus on, though, is not that John is somehow successful in his mission, but that he had the faith and courage and resolve to continue to pursue that calling, not knowing where it might lead. He is forming a community of disciples with the promise that "a man who ranks ahead of me" will come to take away the sins of the world. John is sticking with love even when there is little evidence that his mission is on course.

And then there is the moment when Jesus walks by John and two of his disciples, and John points to the light, to Jesus, the Lamb of God – and here the hand-off occurs as the two disciples turn to

follow Jesus. John has formed his disciples for this moment. He has prepared them to follow. He has equipped them to become disciples of the One who has come to take away the sin of the world.

The next exchange between Jesus and the two disciples strikes me as a bit humorous – showing how much the disciples still have to learn. Jesus turns and sees these two straggler disciples, trailing behind, and asks them this profound question, “What are you looking for?” to which they offer this rather naïve response, “Where are you staying?” as if this was all about accommodations and sleeping arrangements. But Jesus does not shame or indict them – he knows they have much to learn as he invites them to “Come and see.” Jesus is sticking with love. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

And in the days ahead these first disciples will learn the lessons of their lives – lessons about healing and feeding multitudes, lessons about betrayal and forgiveness, lessons about crucifixion and empty tombs – lessons about being public people of faith, sticking with love in the daily, ordinary moments of their lives.

Where were you when someone asked you what you were looking for? What time was it when you went looking for something, perhaps not knowing at all what path lay ahead, and yet someone invited you to “Come and see”? As Kristina Fruge challenged us in yesterday’s chapel, “Are we paying attention, minding the gaps, confessing our sin, being brave and humble?” Are we sticking with love?

I think this story of John and Jesus points to important aspects of the work we do together in this university, especially as an institution guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran Christian church. At Augsburg, we believe that it is our calling to form, educate and equip our students so that they can follow the light wherever it leads them. At Augsburg, we expect that our students will continue to ask questions – sometimes naïve questions, often profound questions – as they grow in their understanding of the journey they have embarked upon. At Augsburg, we know there comes a moment when we let our students go, release them to follow other teachers and guides and dreams. At Augsburg, we stick with love, because love is at the core of the education and experience we aspire to offer each other. As a member of our Board of Regents recently commented, “At Augsburg we love our students (and each other) so that they might learn to love themselves.” And that love happens each and every day, in spaces and places across the campus and beyond, in ordinary and mundane moments and exchanges.

Wild Geese

Mary Oliver

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,*

*the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

We are called to love what we love, to find our place in the family of things. And we are surrounded by “John the Baptists,” those committed to pointing to the light, those passionate about sticking with love, those who would form, equip, challenge, inspire and release us to find what we are looking for. Are you watching, listening, open to what is to come? Are you imagining that you too are called to be a John the Baptist to others, because the darkness around us is deep and we so need to help each other see and follow the light? Come and see, Jesus said to his new disciples. Come and see, he calls to us in every moment and in every place – come and see what it means to stick with love, to follow, to live in the light that is the light of the world. It is 10:57 in the morning. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Separated<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg Chapel on Ash Wednesday.

Scripture: Isaiah 58: 11-12, Psalm 51: 8-17

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

When I served a small Lutheran church in Indiana, I was always moved by the ritual of parishioners coming to the altar to kneel and have the ashes imposed on their foreheads in the sign of the cross, as I said to them, “Remember, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And shortly thereafter gathering together for the Lord’s Supper, and hearing the remarkable promise: “This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you.” This morning, my thoughts are with one of their company, whose illness became a metaphor for my reflections on Ash Wednesday. Allow me to tell you about my friend, Marie.

Marie was a lifelong member of First Lutheran Church (a cradle to grave Lutheran), baptized, confirmed, married, buried a husband, a faithful participant in worship and hospitality, the one entrusted with church collections and record-keeping, a wise, cheerful presence for almost 90 years of life.

Late one summer, Marie – who often reminded me as less senior members of the congregation were taken ill and, in a couple instances, died, that she had never been sick a day in her life – did something to her back that just wouldn’t go away. She struggled with it for a while, made a few trips to a chiropractor, but finally could not stand the pain any longer, and started on a track of medical treatment that was not out of the ordinary (especially for someone her age) but which had a huge impact on her life and outlook – suffice to say, she did not take it very well – drugs, walkers, lots of x-rays and cat scans, finally surgery – the end result was that Marie had been separated from the people and things and values that were her bearings in life.

Separated from her body – it had failed her, walker is a nuisance, blames herself for a life where she did not pay attention to her body.

Separated from her history – lives in a wonderful house that she and her late husband built from scratch on the Wabash River – but now she thinks about how all the lifting she did back then probably contributed to her illness.

Separated from her community – can't get to church, can't drive herself anywhere, which isn't so bad, except that her euchar partners relied on her to get them to senior center, now they can't go – a poignant part of life.

Separated from her calling – even late in her life, Marie was a partner in various relationships, she kept the church books and she has given that up.

“You shall be called the repairer of the breach...”

I remember a promo for a new television show about a young mother who becomes a social activist that proclaimed, “The world is not perfect, so fix it!” which of course is what many of us faced with the Maries of our own lives seek to do – fix the separation, say the words, prescribe the solution, read the scripture...

But of course, I can't fix it (as Lutherans, we all know that somewhere deep inside), so Marie and I would sit at her kitchen table and share the Eucharist, the bread and wine, body and blood – right next to the cookies she always wanted to give me – and as I looked into her eyes while sharing the sacrament, I knew that nothing can separate us, nothing can keep us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus.

And there we are, all of us, in this awkward, painful tension between the separations we all know: from each other, ourselves, our communities of memory and meaning and faith, from the things and people that matter – and the separation that is not possible for those who believe - nothing can separate us, nothing, I believe

What a mess – T.S. Eliot sums it up pretty well in his 1930 poem, “Ash Wednesday”

*“This is the time of tension between dying and birth,
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks...
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the mountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood,
Teach us to care and not to care,
Teach us to sit still Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in His will And even among these rocks,
Sister, mother, and spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated.*

And let my cry come unto thee.”

Let my cry come unto Thee – I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.

Ashes are a mess, just like life in the meantime – what better reminder could we want as we enter Lent – there are so many illnesses and diseases and pathologies and injustices that separate us from all that we care about and love, but we believe that the separations of our lives have been redeemed by our God who loves us so much that God sent God’s only Son to save us, to conquer our illnesses, to shower us with abundant and steadfast grace.

So here, as we are marked with the ashes, may we find the strength and wisdom to debark on our Lenten journeys, to live with our separations, believing in the joyous Easter promise of an eternal Eucharist – nothing can separate us from that love - and perhaps Marie will be there, reconciled and healed, offering us some of her cookies!

“Do not cast me away from your presence...Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Let my cry come unto Thee. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Culture change<<

Our chief strategy officer, Leif Anderson, and I have been working on articulating a logic statement about the workplace culture at Augsburg and on the organizational values and behaviors that might help guide a shift in culture. Here follows both the logic and then the organizational values we are promoting.

Augsburg’s workplace culture

While many universities and non-profits might refer to their organizational cultures as deeply embedded in mission and purpose, at Augsburg it is a pervasive and striking strength—one that is recognized by almost anyone getting to know us. Augsburg’s student-centered mission—a “calling” which has theological roots in our 19th century founding as a Lutheran seminary—imbues the work of staff and faculty every day. In our biennial workplace survey, Augsburg’s highest score is consistently “I understand how my work contributes to the mission” (91% in 2018). In this workplace culture, mission & purpose rule supreme.

So how does Augsburg work as an organization--through organizational structure and systems--to meet its promises to students? This is where things get especially challenging. Augsburg’s culture (not unlike the 19th century Lutheran Free Church from which it was founded) assumes a level of direct engagement and agency. There is a resistance to hierarchy, and "best practices" are viewed with suspicion. Direct engagement and deep caring means policies can drift quickly; exceptions are made, often in the service of those in a unique situation. But the implications are typically not fully understood, the process not well defined. There are many mistakes. Organizational structure and systems are not prioritized in Augsburg’s existing work culture.

In the end, Augsburg’s juxtaposition of purpose-driven employees, empowered through inclusive leadership and yet unencumbered by bureaucratic structure and systems typical in higher education, can be extraordinary. (Examples: Innovations of StepUP program for students recovering from addiction, CLASS program for students with physical and learning challenges, and recently

Augsburg's new PsyD degree program). But there is a significant shadow side of the same workplace norms: The innovators who get worn out by the lack of structural or systems support to design, pilot or sustain a fragile new program; pockets of Augsburg operating on outdated interpretations of mission and purpose; areas where our reliance on purpose-driven employees fails, resulting in unacceptable performance gaps that could have been prevented by more rigid process and accountability, and refined systems.

The *Augsburg150* plan, standing on our distinctive strength during a time of significant headwinds in higher education, calls us to address this “shadow side” of Augsburg’s very special workplace culture. We must celebrate the foundational strength of Augsburg’s purpose-driven culture, but also articulate clearer expectations for workplace behaviors that translate Augsburg’s mission commitments into consistent and relevant results for the student experience. This has been our work over the past months.

Organizational values

We believe a culture of caring and purpose drives a culture of learning and results.

Augsburg faculty and staff stand for students. We are:

Innovative, leading the change in practices, programs and organization to be of highest value to students;

Accountable, embracing our responsibility to keep Augsburg strong and learning-centered;

Collaborative, working across boundaries to strengthen the student experience; and

Committed to equity, honoring the capacity of all students to fully realize their unique gifts.

And so the journey begins now to make this culture shift real! I welcome your thoughts.-3

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Three books on my desk this month...

Daniel Coyle’s *Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (Bantam Books, 2018), a helpful guide for our ongoing work on culture change.

The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019) from the late Toni Morrison, a remarkable collection of wise and provocative words from a Nobel Prize winner.

Yuval Noah Harari’s *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Harper Collins, 2017), provoking thinking of the unimaginable.

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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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