

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Three, Number Four (April, 2022)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

We have concluded our 152nd academic year here at Augsburg and it has been a difficult year. The continuing pandemic challenges, some budget difficulties, three student deaths, a couple of random shootings on and near campus – as I said at multiple semester-end gatherings, it is a year whose end cannot come soon enough. And yet, despite all of these challenges, it has been a deep joy over these past several weeks to celebrate the accomplishments of our students and faculty, and to experience once again the honor of serving in the midst of a community so fully committed to its mission. One faculty member, speaking at the final faculty meeting of the year, described her own experience of feeling like she was in a flood, frightened that she would drown, but finding the courage and resolve with her colleagues to find a way through and forward. That gives me hope for our future, even as I will enjoy a few months of renewal before we return in the fall for our 153rd academic year, committed as always to each other, to our students, and to our neighbors.

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

>>Lenten reflections<<

The Christian liturgical season of Lent – the time before Easter – was the occasion for two homilies I preached in the Augsburg Chapel – one for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, and the other for Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday.

A PARABLE OF ASHES

Psalm 51

It was shortly after lunch when our plane landed in Ho Chi Minh City – what we once knew as Saigon, Vietnam – it was a clear and not too terribly warm day...and as our plane taxied to the terminal, we had our first glimpse of the ashes...along the runway were rusted gunnery positions and burned-out hangars, remnants of a time we might wish to forget...the ashes of nationalistic pride and war and violence and suffering.

As we pushed our way out of the airport, and climbed into vans to begin our trip into the city, the teeming masses of people crowding the sidewalks and streets were a blur of activity, but there was another glimpse of ashes...the soot and dust hung in the air, those who cared and knew better wore masks, others were oblivious to the palpable signs of human progress and of their own disease...fossil fuel, spewed into the air, obscured our views...the ashes of greed and progress and pollution and sickness.

That evening as we walked from dinner near our hotel, we had our first encounters with the poor who looked to us for hand-outs, crisp dollar bills were the ticket – for some, nearly a month's wage – but their pleas did not hide their circumstances, open fires on the city sidewalks, preparing the little food they could gather, the smells and sights of making do, getting by, surviving if they could...the ashes of poverty and injustice and hunger...

The next morning we were up very early, on our way out of the city by 3 am, and the fires blazed on street corners and alongside the road as we drove south toward the Mekong River...open fires to battle the darkness, to offer security, to mark a place – a country awake while we dozed in our comfortable vans, a country fighting to keep the lights shining, to hold off the darkness...the ashes of the night and the frightening and the unexpected...

And six hours later as we pulled into the hidden driveway and parked near the public entrance to the orphanage, we were face to face with the children who had been left behind, children of all ages whose parents were too poor or too sick or too tired to care for them properly – this was our destination – and after a few minutes of governmental formalities, five screaming children appeared from behind a closed door...the ashes of love that did not survive the realities of life, the ashes of our souls...

And then we saw his face – the face we had seen before only in a few sketchy photographs – and he screamed for all of his life as he clung to his new mother's neck – and we cried and laughed and kissed him and comforted him...and told him how much we loved him...and a few days later when he awoke in our bed, back in the city, and laughed at my funny face and let me hold him tight, I knew that the ashes would never overcome the love we know in the embrace of a child...the ashes are the inevitable and messy stuff of our lives, they are always there with their smells and stains and reminders of darkness and sin, but they will never win as long as we believe that God loves us and sends us children to share our lives...

And then we were home and some of the wonder of those days in Vietnam had faded, but once in a while even then, I was in the basement room where we stored several souvenirs from our visit to Vietnam and the smell of the ashes from the baskets and nets still brought me up short, got under my skin, reminded me of who I am, who I truly am...and then I would walk into Thomas's room to find him playing and smiling. Hi Dad, he said, and I know the love that God intends for God's people.

God had a son whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension from the ashes promises us that we shall never be separated from the love of God – a Son whose name and sacrifice we recall today as we are marked with the cross of ashes, the ashes of our own mortality – from dust you have come and to dust you shall return – marked so that we might celebrate the wondrous joy of God's deep and abiding love, God's Easter love.

This is my parable of ashes for this Ash Wednesday, a personal story that reminds me of the ashes that mark our existence on this earth, our ashes of pride and war, of greed and progress, of poverty and injustice, of the darkness and unexpected, of the loves that did not survive (made especially poignant this week as we mourn the loves we lost in Kailey and Claudia) – this is who we are, whether we live in Vietnam or Minneapolis. But who we are has been transformed by the love of God, the love we know in our communities of faith, in our bonds of love, in the embrace of our children...the love we know in the cross of our Savior, who creates in us a clean heart, a new and right spirit. Thanks be to God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us from our ashes. Amen.

DO THIS

I Corinthians 11: 23-26

John 13: 31b-35

I was about to enter my first Lenten season as pastor of First Lutheran Church, and as was my custom, I called my experienced pastor dad to get some tips. He didn't have much to say except for these two suggestions: on Ash Wednesday, make sure that you keep a damp cloth nearby when imposing the ashes, because they are a real mess; and on Maundy Thursday be sure to recruit at least one volunteer for the foot-washing, otherwise you might be standing there for a long time with no feet to wash!

At the moment, those good (and very helpful) tips seemed pretty mundane, but in retrospect I wonder if dad wasn't offering me a pretty profound summary of the meaning of Lent – and indeed, of the life of faith...

On Ash Wednesday, we are marked with the ashes as a sign of our mortality, our brokenness – we remember that we have come from dust and to dust we shall return – we acknowledge the messiness of our lives (messiness that a damp cloth cannot begin to undo)

And today, on this day we call Maundy Thursday, the first of the three days of Easter, we are offered glimpses of how God's promise to us has been fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus, who prepares to leave us by offering us an example, by asking us to remember him, by giving us a commandment for living once he is gone – and we don't quite know what to do with all that – we sometimes have trouble remembering – we certainly won't volunteer to have our feet washed!

Our task together this morning – gathered as God's people – is to remember and to hear the commandment again. This odd word "Maundy," from the Latin *mandatum*, translated as mandate or commandment. And this beautiful, elegant phrase we hear in our communion liturgy each week: "Do this in remembrance of me." This is how we commence the three days of Easter: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Do this – live as I have lived – in remembrance of me. Listen to the voice of Jesus –welcoming us at table, teaching us to love, perhaps even pleading with us to remember. The pleading of our Lord who is about to die a horrible death. Do this, my siblings in faith.

Do this. Gather together around the table to enjoy the fellowship, to receive forgiveness, to know your Lord in the breaking of bread and supping of drink. This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you. Be joyful. I still watch with wonder as children come to the Lord's table. I see their

gleeful expressions as they receive the sacrament. Oh that we could remember and rekindle such joy. Whenever you come together at this table, for this supper, I will be with you, Jesus tells his disciples and us. Be happy – enjoy each other’s company – celebrate, perhaps even dance a bit. Here is the bread and the cup, broken for you, shed for you – for your salvation. Do this in remembrance of me.

Do this. Wash the dust from each other’s feet. Be servants to each other. Enter into the intimacy and grace of relationship with each other. Other than my three or four years of washing feet with my flock in Indiana, I hadn’t much heard anyone talk about foot washing until a few years ago when one of our Presidential scholar prospective students, in response to a question about meaningful leadership experiences, recounted a retreat where adult counselors had washed the feet of the youth participants. She said when they were finished, she and a young friend proceeded to return the favor to the counselors, which made the entire ritual incredibly moving and grace-filled. That is how it works. Do this. Serve each other in the most concrete ways – return the favor. Live this way. Do this.

Do this. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Remember me as you love one another, Jesus tells his disciples. This is how you must live as I depart from you. Do not forget. I witness such love in our college community each and every day, as we teach and serve and care for each other – as we do the Lord’s work in our neighborhood and world – as we are sent forth to be God’s faithful people in our various callings.

I’ve taught you how, Jesus reminds us. Gather at table, wash each other’s feet, love one another. And when the meal is finished, go from here with these words in your hearts and minds, to be my disciples in all you say and do. This is how the world will know you as mine. Do this.

These, then, are God’s gifts to God’s faithful people. A commandment, to love one another. A table, at which to gather and remember. A covenant, to forgive and redeem.

Do this – gather, serve and love – in remembrance of me.

God keep you in these three days. Amen.

>>A prayer for a new university<<

Over the past couple of years, I have participated in a small group of Lutheran leaders who were engaged with the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria and its Archbishop, Musa Filibus, to help support planning for a new Lutheran university in Nigeria. In addition to advising on curricular and administrative plans, we also helped to raise almost \$700,000 to provide the necessary financing to launch the university. Recently, I was asked to offer a prayer in celebration of the Lutheran University Nigeria – and it was a splendid celebration of our ties in faith around the globe.

PRAYER FOR THE LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY NIGERIA

The Lord be with you – And also with you. Please pray with me.

O loving and awesome God, we, your Easter people, come before you with hearts full of gratitude and joy. In this holy season of renewal and resurrection – in this sacred time in which you make all things new – we bring our prayers before you with humble and open hearts.

We pray that you will bless this assembly and its work on behalf of your church and your creation. On this day, we especially lift up the many ways in which the members of this assembly and their siblings in Christ have affirmed and supported the vision of Archbishop Filibus and his colleagues to create the Lutheran University of Nigeria.

We give thanks for Archbishop Filibus and the remarkable colleagues he gathered in Nigeria and around the world to develop plans, acquire land, create a curriculum, work through the many bureaucratic challenges, solicit financial support, and ultimately to formally launch the Lutheran University of Nigeria. In this university, we know that generations of Nigerian students will be equipped with what our ancestor Martin Luther called “an education fit for everything” – indeed, an education that will enable students to follow their vocational journeys as your faithful servants in the world.

And we give thanks to Bishop Ann, Bishop Mark, and the several colleagues who gathered here regularly in Minneapolis to serve as advisors and to support the planning for the Lutheran University of Nigeria, and ultimately to find generous donors who together gave almost \$700,000 to ensure that the university was launched on a firm foundation.

And finally, we give thanks for the individuals, families, congregations, organizations, and philanthropic foundations that recognized the promise of the Lutheran University of Nigeria to lift the economic, spiritual, and civic well-being for all Nigerians, and whose remarkable generosity made this vision a reality.

As we are sent out from this holy time and place, we ask that your Holy Spirit continue to guide and strengthen us in our common callings to be your people and do your will in the world, to be as the great mystic Teresa of Avila so powerfully stated “the only body of Christ now on earth.” In that spirit, we lift our prayers of thanksgiving for the gift of resurrection in which you are always about to do a new thing! And God’s people say together, Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Sharing the gift of vocation<<

I wrote the following summary of a panel conversation I participated in earlier this spring at the Network of Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) conference. I think it is self-explanatory but I wonder how each of you might think about the gifts of your organizations and work that might be shared more broadly. This piece will be published in *Intersections*, the journal of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU).

“There is no doubt that Lilly Endowment launched a robust movement when in the early 2000s it funded 88 colleges and universities across the country to explore how the theological concept of vocation could be infused into the curriculum and co-curriculum of undergraduate education. And then, recognizing how effective this vocation movement had become, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) approached Lilly to help create and fund the Network of Vocation in Undergraduate

Education (NetVUE), which now includes almost 300 colleges and universities of diverse traditions and missions.

Augsburg University, where I have served as President for 16 years, was one of the 88 institutions that received the original Lilly grants and was a founding member of NetVUE. I have watched with great joy how this community of learning and practice has become a great resource for inspiration and innovation in our common commitment to integrating the concept of vocation into all aspects of our undergraduate programs. At the same time, I have begun to explore how what we have learned about exploring vocation with our undergraduate students has taught us important lessons that can be shared with wider audiences. In that way, I believe that those of us in NetVUE have the opportunity to share the gift of vocation far and wide.

In that spirit, I was pleased to serve on a panel at the 2022 NetVUE Conference that was organized to share ideas and practices about how we might take our lessons about vocation to other important constituencies. Joined by Professor Emerita Dorothy Bass from Valparaiso University, co-editor with Mark Schwehn of the important compendium, *Leading Lives That Matter* (Eerdmans, 2nd edition, 2020), and Jodi Porter, who oversees the Lilly-funded Youth Theology Institute program at the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), we shared our own experiences with how the concept of vocation can be extended beyond our undergraduate campuses.

There were three main themes in our conversation.

Beyond undergraduates on our campuses

Many of our institutions have graduate programs, especially in professional disciplines like nursing, education, and social work, where the concept of vocation can play an important role in shaping a professional career and life. I shared our work at Augsburg in creating an online vocation portfolio (a so-called V-Portfolio) that allows students to share artifacts from their personal academic and professional journeys that help them tell a story about their vocational pursuits. We have used the V-Portfolio with both undergraduates and graduate students, and have found it to be a helpful tool for students as they share a public narrative of the many facets of a vocational journey. In addition to academic work, students share their experiences as parents, as citizens, as neighbors, and as professionals – creating that many-layered story of a life.

We also agreed that the gift of vocation we share with our students is an important aspect of our work with faculty and staff. Many of our institutions have embedded vocation into orientation programs for new faculty and staff, and in designing professional development opportunities that promote vocational growth and discernment. We also have used the V-Portfolio with faculty and staff who, like our students, want to share a more robust story of their lives – both on and off campus.

Across the vocational lifespan

Other important constituencies for our campuses include prospective students and alumni. Jodi Porter shared the mission of the Youth Theology Institutes (YTI) program, which were originally located on seminary campuses and then expanded to include colleges and universities. The opportunity for high school students to come to a campus in the summer and spend intense time as part of a learning community exploring through a theological lens a pressing issue in the world has

many important implications for our institutions. The students get the chance to experience life on a campus, to meet fellow travelers, and to learn the skills of theological exploration. These programs also offer current undergraduates the opportunity to serve as peer mentors, expanding their horizon about their own vocational paths. As Jodi pointed out, these institutes also serve as an admissions event! At Augsburg, we have consistently seen several of our YTI students matriculate as undergraduates and often end up serving as mentors themselves. Whether the students come to our campuses or not, we know that the YTI experience is an important step for these high school students in their vocational journeys.

Alumni are another important audience for our vocation lessons. At Augsburg, we have organized the Centered Life Series, led by Dr. Jack Fortin, whose book, *The Centered Life* (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), has inspired many of us in our own vocational work. Dr. Fortin curates a series of sessions each semester (in person before the pandemic, but even more well-attended online during the pandemic!) that address a particular vocational theme. For example, one series focused on the vocation of caregiving to a spouse with memory loss; another series shared the concept of interrogating our institutional saga, the work of appreciation and accountability for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called our historical legacy. We find that these sessions attract a diverse range of alumni (and other friends) and enable us to show how the concept of vocation is alive and well on our campus.

Dorothy Bass shared her work in creating reading circles around the readings found in her compendium. For alumni and others, these reading circles provide an opportunity for lifelong learning related to a common text, while also touching on important themes in vocational discernment that have been taught over the ages.

We were challenged by a relatively young member of the audience to consider how our campus communities can be helpful to recent alumni who are facing the economic disruption of recent years. He mentioned the rise of the so-called “gig economy,” which can make it difficult for young people to find sustainable employment – certainly an obstacle to healthy vocational discernment. The panel acknowledged the systemic and systematic challenges – racial, economic, and otherwise – that need to be addressed as we go beyond the boundaries of campus life.

Accompanying our faith communities

We then turned our attention to the ways in which our vocation lessons can be shared with faith communities – in some ways coming full circle to the traditions that have given us the gift of vocation, recognizing that many of those faith communities have lost their way in supporting the vocational journeys of their members.

I shared the work of the Riverside Innovation Hub (www.augsburg.edu/riversidehub/), an initiative of Augsburg’s Christensen Center for Vocation, that works alongside local congregations seeking to become Public Churches. A public church is committed to *place based vocational discernment in the public square for the common good*. In other words, the partner churches are pursuing God’s call for them to be in relationship with their local neighborhoods in ways that bring flourishing and life. Originally launched primarily focused on the work of faith communities with young adults (ages 22-30), the Riverside Innovation Hub (RIH) explores how the many resources of a college or university can be brought to bear in helping faith communities be more responsive to the vocational pursuits of its members. For example, RIH leaders found that many young people care deeply about

environmental issues and don't feel that their faith communities offer them resources to pursue those commitments. The RIH brings scientists and artists and writers and theologians from the Augsburg faculty into conversation with faith communities to help expand their understanding of how they might accompany those young people in their passions for God's creation.

I would contend that the work of the Christensen Center and its Riverside Innovation Hub is a compelling example of how our colleges and universities can more authentically be in partnership with congregations and other faith communities – and it is all about vocation!

There is much more to explore in these opportunities to share the gift of vocation and the lessons we have learned with our undergraduates with wider audiences. The goal of our panel was to open up a conversation and to do what NetVUE does so well, which is to share what works, what doesn't, and then to let the imagination and courage of those of us dedicated to spreading the good news of vocation take flight!"

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

For a talk I am giving next month (which I'll share in my June Notes), I have come back to the eloquent writings of Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was ahead of his time in professing a theology of care for the earth. Here are three collections of Sittler's sermons and essays: *The Care of the Earth and other University Sermons* (Fortress Press, 1964); *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Fortress Press, 1972); and *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* (Fortress Press, 1981).

I also have been continuing my cultural competency journey by diving into the remarkable essays in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, created by Nikole Hannah-Jones (One World, 2021).

>>Benediction<<

As we send our students out into the world each spring I have many occasions on which to describe our aspirations for them and to remind them of the privileges and obligations they now have as educated men and women. I've come back to this eloquent benediction, crafted originally for the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary community by one of its distinguished faculty members. I will use it this spring and urge you to do so as well.

“Because the world is poor and starving,
 Go with bread.
Because the world is filled with fear,
 Go with courage.
Because the world is in despair,
 Go with hope.
Because the world is living lies,
 Go with truth.
Because the world is sick with sorrow,
 Go with joy.
Because the world is weary of wars,

Go with peace.
Because the world is seldom fair,
Go with justice.
Because the world is under judgment,
Go with mercy.
Because the world will die without it,
Go with love.”

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!
- How the gifts of our faith helped us navigate the pandemic!

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