

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Three, Number Five (June, 2022)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Happy summer, friends. I am just back from a delightful few days in Northern Michigan, attending a conference on Mackinac Island. The conference brought together higher ed leaders with representatives of various industries to explore how we might collaborate in creating a more robust pipeline of talent for our economy. Apart from wonderful weather and the opportunity once again to be in person with colleagues, the conference was an inspiring opportunity to imagine how we might “reset” coming out of the pandemic – reimagining how we work together, how we live together, how we move forward together. Perhaps that is the spirit of these times: How will each of us and our organizations use this moment to reset, reimagine, reinvent? That question is very much on my radar for my reflective practice this summer and beyond.

Oh – and I had Covid as well, after getting four shots and avoiding it for two and a half years. I spent a few extra days in Washington DC as a result, but have fully recovered (which I know is a blessing!) and am grateful for good science and medicine.

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

>>From you no secrets are hid<<

I had the privilege of offering the commencement address at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) in May. Augsburg is in partnership with LSTC on several initiatives and President Jim Nieman asked if I would lift up our common work in sending the seminary graduates into the world. You will recognize the various threads of my previous work tied together in the address. I welcome your thoughts.

FROM YOU NO SECRETS ARE HID: THE CALL TO PUBLIC DISCIPLESHIP

The Commencement Address
Lutheran School of Theology Chicago

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 355)

It is my great privilege to be with you on this remarkable day in which we celebrate your many accomplishments in this seminary and send you forth to care for God's people, God's church, and all of God's creation. Congratulations and God's blessings on your callings to be the feet, hands, and heart of our God in the world.

I also bring you greetings from the Augsburg University community with gratitude for the emerging ways in which LSTC and Augsburg are partnering to equip leaders for this church, especially leaders who embrace the call to serve in urban settings

It is reported – perhaps apocryphally, though certainly plausibly – that the late, great icon of this institution, Joseph Sittler, once suggested that the whole of the Christian faith can be summed up in this liturgical phrase, “from you no secrets are hid.” The “you” of course is the God in whom we profess faith – and with that remarkable claim, we live with the gift of faith that frees us for lives of discipleship. No secrets are hid, indeed!

In this liturgical season of Easter – this sacred time of renewal and resurrection, in which God is making all things new – I believe that the remarkable claim that no secrets are hid from our awesome and loving God is the foundation for discerning and embracing our calls to public discipleship. Because all of our secrets are known, because our God came into the world and redeemed our secrets, we are freed – freed to lean into the promise that God has for all of creation.

Theologically, our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther said it this way in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, “From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. In other words, for Luther, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing.

So, now freed, with no secrets hid, what does the call to public discipleship mean for you as you commence your vocational journeys for leadership and service in this church and in the world? Allow me to suggest and illustrate three claims that might propel our public discipleship: why place matters; radical hospitality; and practicing abundance.

Why place matters

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1: 14, NRSV)

The intrepid Norwegian-American immigrants who founded Augsburg Theological Seminary (now Augsburg University) more than 150 years ago chose as the institution's founding motto a simple claim from the Gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh” (John 1:14, NRSV). And that has made all the difference for Augsburg's abiding commitment to place at the center of its academic mission and public purposes.

Allow me to explain why. First is the theological claim in that simple passage. The Gospel writer points to an incarnational proclamation: God came into human history, lived among us and loved the world. In theological terms, this incarnation is the ultimate act of love and fulfills a covenant promise first made in the Hebrew scriptures. In other words, in this passage from John, we proclaim that God is with us, in our midst, in the places we inhabit.

There follows from this theological claim a very real practical guide to life in the world for God's people. If God has been faithful to us, the only fitting response is for us to be faithful wherever we are found. In this way, John 1:14 stands the test of time as a guide to Augsburg's deep commitment to place as a source of its mission and identity. Place matters for God's people as we live out our calls to public discipleship. Here is the intersection between our vocations and our locations! Enough theology.

My teacher, Martin E. Marty, taught me that colleges are communities shaped by their places, by which he meant not only geography (though that is certainly important) but also the networks of relationships and commitments that comprise our life together. I believe we could make the same claim about the congregations we serve. They are present as the Word made flesh in particular environments, and with a particular set of values and practices that define our communities. And that means something for the way they live their lives, it means something for the ways in which they understand what it means to be faithful with their place and values and presence.

For Augsburg, our place is a neighborhood called Cedar-Riverside in the heart of Minneapolis, Minnesota – that has been its home for 150 years. It is a neighborhood of Native peoples and immigrants – currently, primarily Somalis and Ethiopians, but over the years Scandinavians (our founders), Vietnamese, Korean and others. And, of course, before these settlers, the Dakota and Ashinabe peoples whose land was stolen – which becomes an important theme in our own care for our place – we are stewards of a place that is not our own. With our relationships with these native and immigrant neighbors we share in what I call the saga of our life as an urban settlement.

The novelist Wallace Stegner once wrote that the American psyche is in tension between what he calls “the boomers,” those who go into a place, use it up and then leave – and “the stickers,” those who settle in a place and work to renew it and make it better.

How shall we live out this commitment to “sticking” in and with our places?

We begin with the wise words of poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, in his prose poem, “Damage”:

“No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use” (Berry, 1990, 5).

I sometimes think about this quote when talking with all the experts who are happy to offer their advice (for free and for a fee!) about running a university. Our responsibility as “stickers” is to have knowledge of our whereabouts, otherwise all the experts in the world will be of little use. If we don't know our place, our mission, our history, our neighbors, how can we expect to enlist others in pursuit of our mutual aspirations? We know and care about our whereabouts so that we can be

faithful to the call of our awesome God – a call that transforms our lives together in the ways of the discipleship.

This is about paying attention to our place in ever more sophisticated and effective ways, recognizing that our ability to scale these sorts of place-based initiatives means that our underlying commitment to our place can be extended and made even more central to our work as congregations. As Rutgers University-Newark Chancellor Nancy Cantor pointedly challenges us: we must be “citizens of a place, not on the side lines studying it.” I would contend that this call to be citizens of place, to be the Word made flesh in the world now, becomes even more important in these times when pandemics and cyber-communication and social polarization call into question the possibility of community. The call to public discipleship demands of us the courage and imagination and resolve to discern God’s presence and promise even in the midst of shifting understandings of place.

I’ll end with another brief quote from Wendell Berry, who, a few years after writing “Damage” – when he clearly was skeptical of our abilities to care adequately for our places in the world – wrote “Healing” to point to a more promising way:

“The teachings of unsuspecting teachers belong to the task and are its hope. The love and work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health. Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace. Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night. Order is the only possibility of rest” (1990, 13).

"The Word became flesh" thus is both a theological and a practical claim for our public discipleship. In response to the many gifts we have been given, we ask how we can be even more faithful in our whereabouts and place. We accompany and settle alongside our neighbors, even when we come from very different cultures and religions and experiences. And together we create and sustain safer, healthier, more vibrant places where God’s loving promise is proclaimed.

Radical hospitality

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

(Matthew 10: 40, 42, NRSV)

My sense is that what we hear in this gospel passage is one of the central – and most radical – of all of Jesus’ teachings. And it focuses on this simple practice of giving “even a cup of cold water.” Let’s think about what that might mean for us. I don’t know about you, but I don’t carry cold water with me everywhere I go. Even if I happen to have a biker’s water bottle with me, it likely has been sitting in the sun and is not going to offer chilled refreshment. And if someone needs a cup of cold water, it’s not going to be easy for me, I’m going to have to go out of my way to get it for her. And herein lies the gospel claim that Jesus makes on all of his disciples – whether 2000 years ago or today. A cup of cold water. Canadian theological educator, Laurel Dykstra, suggests that this passage challenges us with the claim of radical hospitality. She writes, “Prophets have no subtlety, no appreciation for the daily compromises required for getting along. And while truly good people don’t trash the place, they can make you really look at your own life and upset your routine. Disciples and little ones are perhaps the worst of all. You know who they are: no money, no bag, no

coat, bad-smelling, and talking about mercy. To get a cup of cold water, they have to come right into the kitchen.” Right into your kitchen, right into your life. Now that is radical.

I often wonder about this claim of radical hospitality upon our congregations, which aspire to be welcoming communities, but too often out of fear and insularity and ignorance, turn away from those we are called to serve – especially those on the margins, those most vulnerable, those who are oppressed, those who are traumatized.

Claimed by the gospel call to radical hospitality, I wonder what this means for you and me as we seek to live faithful lives in the world.

It begins with our openness to the stranger in our midst. The world is filled with such fear and most of that fear is grounded in our anxiety about what we don’t know or understand. Jesus knew that. Those who taught you in this place know that. You know that. And I believe that it is because we know how fear paralyzes and distracts and fragments that we come together in this community to seek education, to learn about new and strange things, to broaden our perspectives on the issues and people and systems that define our world, to seek even to figure out what it all means. Genuine education, as educator Parker Palmer reminds us, is about overcoming the fear that so pervades our personal and social lives. Radical hospitality begins with the openness that authentic engagement with the other provides to take pleasure, to find joy, to be intrigued by what we don’t know, what we might be able to learn, who we might come to respect and love. I think about the student who was with me as part of a service project in the neighborhood, who noticed a Somali woman in traditional garb, with a suitcase, attempting to hail a cab on Cedar Avenue. After several cabs passed her by, the student crossed the street, asked the woman where she was headed, hailed a cab for her and made sure the driver knew where to take his passenger. That morning, our student learned a life lesson about otherness and privilege – about the fact that he, unlike some of our neighbors, did not have to worry whether or not a cab would stop – but that student could just as easily not chosen to cross the street to be of assistance. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Are we open to the strangers in our midst, who might teach us important lessons?

Hospitality is more than random acts of kindness, it is a way of life. I think that one of the great temptations of the way in which we read scripture – passage by passage, often out of context – is that we lose sight of the radical claim it puts on us to live as people of the book, of the gospel. This really isn’t just about inviting someone into our kitchen for a cup of cold water, an act that might push our comfort zone for a while but that will not fundamentally alter our way of seeing and being in the world. This is about a life of hospitality, a life reshaped by the claim of the gospel to live as the people of God, a life in community that is often messy, even sacrificial, but that ultimately is about faithful and grace-filled lives that proclaim God’s reign. You don’t meet many people who have fully grasped the radical claim of hospitality that Jesus calls us to live out – and there’s probably a good reason why. This hospitable way of living is tough – just ask the disciples, who floundered and denied and betrayed their teacher! In their book, *Radical Hospitality*, Father Daniel Homans (a Benedictine monk) and Lonni Collins Pratt, describe what it was like for the monks of St. Benedict Monastery to open their worship lives to the public, when they had long saw themselves only as “professional pray-ers,” watching the world from afar.. “It is easy to pray for ‘the world’ and ‘God’s people’ when you don’t have to look into their tear-reddened eyes, or fetch more toilet paper after mass on Sunday. Something sacred and unexpected has happened since we opened our doors and our hearts...we have become a part of each other’s lives.” The call of radical hospitality is to the messiness of daily, mundane life together, sharing the good, the bad and the ugly, the pain and the

joy, the boredom and the richness, because that is what it is like to be human, and that is what Jesus calls us to understand. A cup of cold water. Right into the kitchen. Not just once, but every day, all the time. Are we ready for lives of radical hospitality, really radical...? I hope so, because...

The world so needs our lives of radical hospitality. This is serious business, my friends. Our church was founded upon the greatest act of hospitality we could ever imagine, the act of a gracious and loving God who entered into our world so that we might know God's radical welcome. And what did we do – what did the world do – but reject God's hospitality? There you have it. Out of fear, ignorance, injustice and hate, we turn our backs on God's hospitality, God's abundant and eternal welcome. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him," the gospel proclaims. But God knows how much the world needs radical hospitality, and so God abides (perhaps the loveliest word in all of scripture), God persists, God fulfills God's promise for God's people. For God loved the world so much, God sent God's only Son... We are called to be prophets of peace, to work for justice and fairness, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to be the word made flesh in the world. A cup of cold water, Jesus teaches us – strangers right into our kitchens – lives of radical hospitality, no matter the cost, no account for the joy.

Practicing abundance

And all ate and were filled;⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.⁴⁴ Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand.. (Mark 6: 42-44, NRSV)

We all know the familiar Biblical story of the feeding of the 5,000, and once we look past the disciple's excuses – send them away to find their own food and let's spend the money we have to buy them food to eat – Jesus steps in to offer us a true miracle, It's the miracle found in the wisdom that when we gather in companies of 50 and 100 as Mark's gospel recounts, all that has been tucked away, hidden from each other, is brought forth from satchels and pockets to share with these folks I know – and all ate and were filled. Here is the miracle – trust and personal attention means that people are willing to share what they heretofore were hiding for themselves.

This is the promise of abundance in a world of scarcity – this is the promise into which we are called as God's people in this place – this is the promise of grace and hope and peace that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is what it means to practice abundance.

Think about what this promise means to our lives of faith and discipleship as we come together as God's people in this place:

- The abundance of God's people – We must face our own fears, our own anxieties that come when we look at the world as a scarce existence. How will you form the companies of 50 or 100, or 5 or 6, to build trust, to find the complementarity of gifts and calls that show the way to abundance? What are we hiding because it is hard to trust and believe? What will our miracle of abundance look like when we open ourselves to the many gifts our diverse neighbors bring to our lives? What does it mean to practice abundance in a world where scarcity is often the consequence of inequity and injustice?
- The abundance of our place – By our firm resolve to settle in our neighborhoods, to affirm that place matters, we extend the reach of abundance beyond the walls of our congregations and organizations to embrace mutual hospitality and generosity with

our neighbors and our neighborhoods. We find, as has been the case at Augsburg, that the rituals and practices of our Native neighbors and students teach us to be more faithful stewards of our place and our land. We find that redlining practices in our city demand of us to participate fully in repairing systemic racism and oppression. We find in the lives of our Somali immigrant neighbors lessons that challenge our sense of entitlement and our privilege.

- The abundance of the promise – what does it mean to be a community of abundance in a world of scarcity? We are called as people of abundance to collaboration, to doing things differently, to working together to meet the needs of all God’s creation. Where others say there is not enough, we say there is more than plenty if we believe and bring resolve and courage and imagination to our efforts to educate, to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, meet the needs of strangers.... Right where we land, in communities that can’t get beyond the world’s default to scarcity – communities that need a miracle.

Are we willing to let this miracle happen? Are we ready to accept God’s promise for ourselves, for our community, for the world? God calls us. And our answer must be: Here I am, Lord – I return to you what has been so graciously given to me – and thereby I live with the sure and confident faith in life abundant. What a miracle.

You are about to be sent forth from this sanctuary to do God’s work in the world – to embrace place, to offer radical hospitality, and to practice abundance – and it can seem daunting when the world seems such a mess. The reality of our congregations and organizations is also their complexity, their conundrums, making every place richly difficult, where your leadership and discipleship matters!

I return to the wisdom of Joseph Sittler, who in his sermon “Peace as Rest and as Movement” points to the fact that the peaceless world “is precisely the place for the working out of God’s will for truth, justice, purity, beauty.” Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaims: “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” We are called to lean into an arc already making its way in the world, a plan already unfolding, justice demanded, love breaking in, and there we find glimpses of salvation and grace in our midst as we pursue our calls to public discipleship.

I think of the sometimes daunting and frightening and awesome and remarkable calls you must follow as we prepare to send you out into the world – to do as God needs for you to do, to make peace in your lives, in your families, faith communities, neighborhoods and in the world, to be reconciled with our God and neighbors far and wide. And I have turned to these wonderful lines, first written by Polish Rabbi Nachman, which sum up for me what it means to lean into the arc of God’s reconciling love for faithful people who live in the real world, to follow the call to public discipleship:

*Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.
All time is made up of healing of the world.
Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.
Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.*

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

We're in good and gracious company – called by our gracious God, from whom no secrets are hid, who has rebuilt our ships, who has redeemed our lives so that we might heal the world, so that we might join in God's loving and reconciling and justice-filled work for the world.

One final story, this one about my daughter Maya's baptism – it seems relevant to this moment. Maya was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, "Maya, shake it off like a dog." And I say as much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to shake off the call to public discipleship – to doubt that no secrets are hid from our awesome God – it is, of course, impossible to do! Thanks be to God.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Language adequate to our times<<

Words matter for all of us – and words, of course, can be used for good or ill. Witness the flood of misinformation in our media; the vitriolic rhetoric of our politics; the often crude and dismissive language of our daily lives. But also, hear the inspiring words of poets like the young Amanda Gorman; the language of love between parent and child; the rhetoric of rituals that provide comfort and solace.

Two sources offer me hope in our pursuit of language that uplifts and bonds us together...

Canadian educator and politician Michael Ignatieff reminds us that we need, "as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in...We need words to keep us human...Our needs are made of words: they come to us in speech, and they can die for lack of expression. Without a public language to help us find our own words, our needs will dry up in silence." (*The Needs of Strangers*, p. 141-42).

And from the Irish poet Padraig O Tuama, writing as part of Krista Tippett's "On Being" project, who challenges us to find "a language that will not fail us...headlines that will hold public voices to accountability...(to find) tireless advocates for language to be large enough, to be good enough...a vision for public language to be motivated by what we know will save us: consideration...lovingkindness."

May it be so.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

There are a variety of books now appearing that address in one way or the other the impact of the pandemic on our lives. I have explored Harvard professor Danielle Allen's *Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), a call to prepare our democracy to better respond to future pandemics. Also, as noted above, Canadian educator, politician, and philosopher Michael Ignatieff has been an important influence in my work. His *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*

(Metropolitan Books, 2021) is a masterful overview of various historical moments in which solace has been sought (and often found). I read *Solace* straight through in one sitting!

At the conference I mentioned above, we heard from another Harvard professor, Arthur Brooks, who spoke of his research and teaching on happiness. His *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (Portfolio, 2022) offers his take on how the combination of our DNA, our circumstances, and our habits can combine to make us more happy. Another important message for our times.

>>I will bring you home<<

My family experienced a tragic loss earlier this spring when my brother-in-law, Dave Lau, passed away suddenly and too soon. Dave's spouse, my sister Dawn, asked our musical family to offer a song at Dave's funeral. We chose a piece we have often sung together, which spoke to the moment, but also speaks to a larger reality about our times and our aspirations to find a home where we will know peace and goodness.

Here are the lyrics for Michael Card's *I Will Bring You Home*.

Though you are homeless
Though you're alone
I will be your home
Whatever's the matter
Whatever's been done
I will be your home

I will be your home
I will be your home
In this fearful fallen place
I will be your home

When time reaches fullness
When I move My hand
I will bring you home
Home to your own place
In a beautiful land
I will bring you home

I will bring you home
I will bring you home
From this fearful fallen place
I will bring you home
I will bring you home

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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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