

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Four, Number Two (December, 2022)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Happy New Year, friends!

It has been a busy fall here with a return to some normalcy in the rhythms of our lives. I made my first international trip – to Norway – in three years, the highlight of which was conferring an honorary degree from Augsburg on His Majesty, King Harald V. The King and Queen Sonja are ardent supporters of the Norwegian-American colleges in the US (there are six of us), and we originally meant to award this degree during our 150th anniversary year (2019-20), but alas, the pandemic intervened. It was a joyful occasion when I went to the palace in Oslo in early December, met with the King and Queen, and made the degree official. Here is a photo of King Harald and me, courtesy of Queen Sonja, the photographer!



Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>The stories of our lives<<

I preached this sermon at St. Olaf Lutheran Church in Minneapolis on the occasion of the congregation's designation on the National Register of Historic Places

Psalm 98, Romans 15: 4-6, John 1: 1-5, 14

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. Amen.

It is a special honor to be with you today for this celebration of your designation on the National Register of Historic Places. As you know, Augsburg University and St. Olaf Lutheran share a common heritage with our ancestors who came to this community to seek a better life, to build institutions of learning and healing and service, and to form congregations where God is worshipped and praised. At the same time, Augsburg and St. Olaf Lutheran share a present and future that is devoted to watching carefully for how God calls us to lean into the work of creation care, of service to our diverse neighbors, and of building healthy, just communities. I rejoice in our common calling.

Occasions like this can often be moments for nostalgia – recounting past stories of our lives together with a sense of longing for something lost – or they can be moments to interrogate what the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called our historical heritage as a Christian community – to see those stories of our past as a source of wisdom – both in our successes and our failures – so as to discern what it is that God calls us to be and do in the world now. Coincidentally, this work of interrogating our historical heritage is something we have been pursuing over the past couple of years at Augsburg. When we have been tempted to reminisce fondly of a distant past, we are reminded by our historical heritage of the moments in our past that call for truth-telling and reconciliation. Let us put nostalgia aside and explore together God's plans for this remarkable faith community.

I find it helpful as we discern God's plans for us to return to God's Word and the stories of the faithful we find in scripture. We are, of course, people of the book and there are meaningful and important guideposts for our work together to be found in the stories of our lives. Allow me to explore with you four of those scriptural stories...

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2: 15)

We are a Creation People

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 same could be said of St. Olaf Lutheran Church, planted in this North Minneapolis neighborhood for more than 150 years, walking alongside your diverse neighbors to help create more just and healthy lives for all.

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. We are called to be stickers, to till and keep the places God has called us to.

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 effective place-based initiatives means that our underlying commitment to our place – to God’s creation - must be extended and made even more central to our work as congregations. Creation care – the work of tilling and keeping – is about our stewardship of both relationships and land. Food insecurity, climate change, missing tree canopies, redlining – the list could go on with all of these challenges to God’s good creation, The call to till and keep demands of us the courage and imagination and resolve to discern God’s presence and promise even in the midst of these pressing challenges.

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).

We are called as faithful people to till and keep God’s remarkable creation, to settle and stick and steward that which is not our own.

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29: 7)

We are Prophetic People

What is it about cities that we must understand as we seek to be God’s faithful people in this place? Jeremiah’s prophetic call to seek the welfare of the city is as true today here in North Minneapolis as it was for the ancient Israelites in exile.

The first thing we must do is embrace our responsibility, our common calling to care for the city, to love the city and seek its welfare. It can be difficult to love North Minneapolis when it betrays and crucifies, when it is a fearful and dangerous place – but love the city we must, Jeremiah reminds us, if we are to do God’s work and find our own welfare. We are called to love the city with all of its tensions and messiness – and therein we will find our own redemption.

We also must be open to their remarkable otherness – the diversity of friends and strangers alike – if we are to do God’s work here. On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross alongside common criminals – who, like all of us – have strayed from the path of righteousness and yet Jesus included them in his final prayers. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in Jerusalem, giving them the wisdom and skills to engage with strangers of many languages and cultures, to pray together in new and strange vocabularies. Today, we live alongside diverse neighbors who share our fears and our aspirations. In our diversity, God is at work and we are called to love these friends and strangers with whom we live in the city.

And I believe that those who are called to God’s work in the city must learn from the work of the late Jane Jacobs, the legendary urban theorist, whose *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (originally published in 1961) was a clarion call to arms for all those who loved the diversity and energy of cities that was being ravaged by trends in architecture and city planning. One of Jacobs’ main points was that the well-being of cities is defined primarily by common, ordinary things. Common things like sidewalks, parks, defined neighborhoods, and a diversity of architecture styles and buildings of different ages. These common, ordinary things, when thought about with the needs and aspirations of citizens in mind, will create healthy, sustainable and vital urban centers. It is about pageantry and ritual, about the small denials and acts of kindness, about meeting in upper rooms to wash each other’s feet and break bread together, about the tensions of daily life where the religious and secular intersect and sometimes conflict, about talking with each other even when we don’t agree, about being sent forth to do God’s work even when it is not clear where the work will lead us.

It is the work of seeking the welfare of the city – and thereby our own welfare.

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)

We are Christmas People

The intrepid Norwegian-American immigrants who founded Augsburg Theological Seminary (now Augsburg University) and St. Olaf Lutheran Church more than 150 years ago chose as their 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 our abiding faith that God came into human history in the person of the Christ Child so as to save us from ourselves and to free us to love and serve our neighbors.

It begins with 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 our deep commitments to our neighbors and our neighborhoods at the heart of our life together. Here is the intersection between our vocations and our locations!

The 15th century mystic, Teresa of Avila, captures this intersection powerfully:

*Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours*

We are called to be a Christmas people, the body of Christ on earth now, loving our neighbors and our neighborhoods with our hearts and hands and minds.

...Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ (Luke 24: 5-7)

We are Easter People

As God’s faithful people – as Easter people – we are called together and then called out.

Wendell Berry, in his whimsical poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”, offers us an insightful juxtaposition of the life of the world vs. the life called out, and herein points to the path forward :

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.*

*Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
[Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.*

Practice resurrection. Here is where called together and called out intersect. The resurrection, the reason we come together, is also the reason we are called out to be God's people in the world. This is what it means to live as those who have been called out – it is not easy, it is counter-cultural, it flies in the face of the world's power and authority, but it is the call we have received as God's people and God surrounds us with the Holy Spirit and the community of the faithful who join us in living as those who have witnessed the resurrection!

We are called to be Creation People, Prophetic People, Christmas People, and Easter People! May it ever be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>A Weary World<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel during the first week in Advent.

Romans 8:22-24 (NRSV)

***22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; **23** and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?*

John 1:14 (NRSV)

***14** 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.*

Grace and peace to you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – and blessings to you in this Advent season when love once again breaks into human history to enliven and empower us to live as God's faithful people in the world! Amen.

As we enter this Advent season, the haunting hymn (“Light dawns on a weary world,” text below) we have just sung rings especially true. For surely we all long for the light to break forth in the midst of our darkness, to offer us respite and peace and hope in the midst of a weary world marked by violence and fear and hate. How long, O God, must we wait; how long must we live in the darkness; how long must we despair of your reign breaking in?

How long, indeed?

We grieve over a weary world, a world that groans in labor pains – pains that each of us feels deeply and personally. A weary world where innocent people are killed in Colorado Springs and Uvalde; where war rages on in Ukraine; where our sacred earth is threatened by our own selfish and foolish behaviors; where communities around our country are torn apart by violence that disproportionately targets people of color; where, even in our own campus community, our fellow travelers experience bias and misunderstanding. How long must we wait for love and justice and mercy and compassion and hope to break into our groaning creation, our weary world?

Surely our gracious God hears our prayers. And yet, one of the temptations of Advent is our often impatient, even passive, waiting for the light to dawn. We grieve and we lament – surely important acts in themselves – and we wait for the light we know has come and will come again, but is that where it ends, is that all there is to do?

As we turn into this liturgical season, let us be reminded of this college’s founding scripture and perhaps the most apt way to sum up what Advent marks for God’s faithful people: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.” Consider this. God broke into human history. God came into the darkness. God chose to dwell in the weary world, alongside of us, and in so doing offers us all a path forward, an inspiration to move beyond waiting, the stuff of which hope is forged. And that is what we embrace this Advent.

When we are tempted to sit back and wait, we give up on the mystery and work that is all around us - a mystery we are called to embrace, work we are called to do. The poet Wendell Berry invites us to know the dark, for God is in the dark as well, blooming and singing of the promised redemption.

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,

and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,

and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

–Wendell Berry, “To Know the Dark” from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1999.

As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has written: “...here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.” So how shall we go without sight this Advent, how will we join with our awesome God, who walks alongside us on the way to Bethlehem and Jerusalem and Emmaus, to Kyiv and Colorado Springs and Minneapolis - holy cities all?

Surely we must begin by proclaiming that “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us” is both a theological and a practical claim upon us. It is a proclamation that God so loved us that God came into the world, was made incarnate (as we claim in our Christian creeds), chose to live in the darkness, in a weary world, in a groaning creation. That is the theology of the gospel writer, but given John’s soaring philosophical, ethereal tendencies, we often forget that the theology demands faithful action; the theology calls us to do God’s work, to work alongside God in healing the world, to be the Word made flesh in our own lives of faith in the darkness, in the weary world. That is the practical claim.

And so we commit once again this Advent season, not to be tempted to wait for the light that is to come but to bear witness to the light already come – the Word made flesh – that calls us to action, to go without sight and travel in the darkness, to be of good courage and faith on the path that Jesus first trod for us, to know that God’s spirit is here in our midst, never leaving us comfortless or without a horizon of hope.

And into the darkness we go – as God’s faithful people – to:

- Stand with our neighbors, near and far, in our common aspirations for healthy communities, fair and just lives together, compassion for the vulnerable, a home for those experiencing homelessness, the beloved community in which dignity and respect for each other inspires our common purpose; to...
- Stand for abundance, when the world says there is never enough; to be beacons of hope in a world where there is too little evidence to hope; to feed hungry bodies and minds and spirits with the plentiful gifts of our good God; and to...
- Stand up and get to work, believing that the Word made flesh calls us to be the body of Christ on earth, in the darkness, in the weary world; to live as 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila charges us in this haunting poem:

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

My friends in Christ, stand with someone, stand for something, stand up – for light dawns, love grows, and hope blooms when and where we live as God’s faithful people. May we all know God’s

grace and truth on your Advent journeys in the weary world until all the world in wonder echoes *Shalom*. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Advent reflections<<

These are the words I shared in my annual Advent video greeting, reflecting the theme of our 43rd annual Advent Vespers services, “The story remembered.”

“Advent Greetings, my friends. I am Paul Pribbenow, the president of Augsburg University, and I bring you warm wishes from the entire Augsburg community for the holy days ahead.

At Augsburg this Advent season, we are reflecting on “The story remembered,” the stories of our faith tradition, the stories of our life and work as a university, and the stories of our neighbors and neighborhoods around the world.

We have found inspiration for these reflections in the words of the preacher, theologian, and poet, Dr. Howard Thurman, who writes:

“Again and again, it comes:
The Time of Recollection,
The Season of Remembrance.
Empty vessels of hope fill up again;
Forgotten treasures of dreams reclaim their place;
Long-lost memories come trooping back to me.
This is my season of remembrance,
My time of recollection.
Into the challenge of my anguish
I throw the strength of all my hope;
I match the darts of despair with the treasures of my dreams;
Upon the current of my heart
I float the burdens of the years;
I challenge the mind of death with my love of life.
Such to me is the Time of Recollection,
The Season of Remembrance.”

My this be your season of remembrance as we rededicate ourselves to the work of peace, justice, hope, and love. Blessings to you and yours!”

And this brief devotion is from an Advent devotional we publish each year with reflections from members of our community on the texts included in our Advent Vespers services

“Sunday, December 25: Luke 2:28-32

Simeon took [the baby Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying,

‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.

On this most holy of mornings, we stand with Simeon as those whose eyes have seen God’s salvation, and we, too, are dismissed in peace to live in what the poet W.H. Auden has called “the time being.” And how shall we live, but as those who proclaim hope in the face of anxiety, love in the face of hate, faith in the face of doubt, light in the face of darkness? May it be ever so.”

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PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

My spouse, Abigail, gave me two lovely gifts for Christmas that I commend to you as sources of hope for the new year. First, *Inciting Joy: Essays* by Indiana University professor Ross Gay (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022), which includes this powerful challenge:

“And though attending to what we hate is too often the rage (and it happens also to be very big business), noticing what we love in common, and studying *that*, might help us survive. It’s why I think of joy, which gets us to love, as being a practice of survival.”

And second, *Love Poems* from Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda (New Directions Paperback, 1973), which speak for itself!

>>Light dawns<<

Here are the lyrics for a lovely Advent hymn, based on Isaiah 55 – especially meaningful for our weary world.

Light dawns on a weary world

*Light dawns on a weary world
When eyes begin to see all people’s dignity.
Light dawns on a weary world:
The promised day to justice comes.*

*Love grows in a weary world
When hungry hearts find bread
And children’s dreams are fed.
Love grows in a weary world;
The promised feast of plenty comes.*

*The trees shall clap their hands;
The dry lands, gush with spring;
The hills and mountains
shall break forth with singing!
We shall go out with joy,
And be led forth in peace,
As all the world in wonder echoes shalom.*

Mary Louise Bringle, 2002

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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