

## NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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

## NOTES FROM READERS

Welcome to the beginning of our 24<sup>th</sup> year together with these Notes!

It is a beautiful Autumn day and I'm here in Dearborn, Michigan, celebrating with the El-Hibri Foundation their annual Peace Prize ceremonies. The fall semester has gone by quickly with what seems like a fairly normal rhythm. It is good to be together again in ways that have been difficult during the pandemic, and yet there hangs over us the clouds of disruption and fear – economic challenges, climate catastrophes, abiding wars, political polarization. How shall we hope in these anxious times? That is the question we all must address in our reflective practice. As a wise pastor recently commented, though the Apostle Paul tells us that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love, it may be that we need hope now more than anything else – hope that we can live into a future that is borne of our better angels. May it be so!

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](http://www.jgacounsel.com). I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

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## REFLECT ON THIS

>>Called to be signs of God's solutions<<

**I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel at the beginning of our 153<sup>rd</sup> academic year.**

Scripture: Matthew 5: 13-16

### ***Salt and Light***

<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Good morning. It is a joy to be gathered here again, in this sacred place, where we come together every day during the academic year, to worship, to pray, to celebrate, to mourn, to be God's people. May God bless our time together in this university and in the world.

We come together again in a time fraught with daunting challenges: political polarization, racial reckoning, climate disasters, economic disruption – and we so long to do something, to find a way forward, to craft solutions. And yet we also find ourselves frustrated, stymied, not sure how we can be salt and light when the world seems so broken.

Here, I find a helpful guide in the work of the L'Arche community, which has long made a distinction between being a sign and being a solution. When the challenges before us are so daunting, we are called, not to fix all of the world's problems, not to solve all that befalls us, but to be signs of God's grace, and mercy, and love. To be salt and light. So, how is that possible?

It is reported – perhaps apocryphally, though certainly plausibly – that the late, great theologian and pastor, 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!

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 be signs of God's solutions. 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.

Hear these further words from Matthew's gospel that offer us clear direction for our lives of faith in the world – to live as those freed to be neighbor – to be signs of God's solutions:

*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. Here is the call to be signs of God's love for the world.

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 Dyskstra, 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 each of us in our university, which aspires to be a welcoming community, but too often out of fear and insularity and ignorance, turns away from those we are called to serve – especially those on the margins, those most vulnerable, those who are oppressed, those who are traumatized.

*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 teach 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. I think about the student who was with me as part of a service project in our 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.

*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.

We're in good and gracious company – called by our gracious God, from whom no secrets are hid, 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, so that we might be signs of reconciliation and love in a world so in need of reconciliation and love.

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 be God's signs in the world, to forget that we are called to be salt and light – to doubt that no secrets are hid from our awesome God – it is, of course, impossible to do! Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Loving Reform<<

**I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel as part of a series marking the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.**

Scripture: John 2: 1-11 (Jesus's “first miracle” at the Wedding at Cana)

On this next Monday, those of us in the Lutheran Christian faith tradition will mark the 505<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day when our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, is purported to have nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, launching what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

I will spare you a history lesson today, but suffice to say that the Lutheran tradition, launched more than five centuries ago, is deeply relevant to the sort of education we seek to offer here at Augsburg. Theological concepts like vocation, faith alone, *simul justus et peccator*, service to neighbor, and so many others, are the moorings for our mission and work as a university. Today I want to reflect on another of these theological ideas, the concept of *semper reformanda*, the contention of that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

This idea of always reforming seems especially relevant for this moment in Augsburg's history, in this time when all of higher education is being challenged with how to “reset” itself in light of the various pandemics we are experiencing – the COVID virus, economic disruptions, climate catastrophes, abiding wars, racial reckoning - and on and on I could go in naming the challenges that provoke fear and anxiety and uncertainty for all of us..

But of course, even with the emotions that come with these pandemics and challenges, there also is fear and anxiety about what it means to respond, to reset ourselves, in part because at the heart of imagining a new future we must face the difficult, complex and challenging questions that portend change – change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change – within our academic community and in the wider society – we here at Augsburg have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world – a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work as a university..

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My title for this homily, “Loving Reform,” might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy president and perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that – we must love change for change’s sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg University is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God’s faithful people. And the passage from John’s gospel, may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar – sometimes referred to as Jesus’ first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus’ mother says to him, “They have no wine,” to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come.” Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future – Jesus can’t be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn’t allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more important things on his mind. She reminds us that we too are called – as she was – to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, “Do whatever he tells you.”

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. “Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief stewards,” he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle – the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity – but the fact is that they

participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God's abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God's way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God's loving intentions for all of creation. "Do whatever he tells you," Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Loving reform – *semper reformanda* – is the challenge to live at the intersections of God's call and God's plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts – gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith – to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.

## PRACTICE THIS

>>What is reflective practice?<<

**I recently realized that I take for granted that folks know what reflective practice is. To ground us in our community of reflective practitioners, I share this piece from the first issue of my Notes in October 1999. This is what we are about...**

The concept of reflective practice is most fully-developed in the work of Donald Schön, who taught at MIT and wrote many books about the topic, including "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action" (Basic Books, 1983) and "Educating the Reflective Practitioner" (Jossey-Bass, 1987).

For Schön, there has arisen in our society a gap between a conception of professional knowledge (as developed by professional schools and the professions themselves) and the actual competencies required of practitioners in their work. In response to this gap, Schön proposes reflective practice as a way of understanding what he calls knowing-in-action (how theories are developed), reflecting-in-action (the on-going dialogue between reflection and practice in our lives), and professional practice (how professional-client relationships are developed).

In this way, reflective practice is a way of being professional that looks much more like artistry than science. He commends the reflective practice model as a form of professional education (like apprenticeships and internships rather than sitting in classrooms and soaking up professional knowledge!). He also shows how reflective practice has implications for the relationships between professionals and their various publics—it demystifies professional expertise. We might say that in this view, professionals are neither the heroes sent with their technical expertise to save society nor the villains who would use their special knowledge to keep control over us, but rather, they are participants in a common, public conversation about the important work they help us do.

I recommend Schön's work to you—it is rich and fascinating reading. For our purposes, we shall set the horizons of reflective practice in this way.

Reflective practice is a way of living that:

- \* values the mutual and abiding dialogue between what we think, what we believe in, and what we do;
- \* points to the common and historical nature of human experience, leading us to see living as common work rather than simply my personal project;
- \* accepts the tensions and dynamics of our existence as a source of imagination and hope rather than a sign that we just haven't got things under control yet;
- \* is grounded in the profession of faith—faith in something larger and wiser than our own powers (we might say that this is what it means to be a professional!)

>>Reflective politics<<

I once heard Scott Simon, the Saturday morning host on National Public Radio, recount a story about Adlai Stevenson, the Illinois Democrat who served as governor before running as the Democratic nominee for president in 1952 and 1956. At a campaign stop during the 1952 campaign, someone in the crowd yelled, "You've got the votes of all thinking people, Adlai," to which Stevenson is purported to have responded, "That won't be enough, I need a majority."

As we endure the political season some seventy years later, perhaps we might hope that our politics could at least aspire to some reflection, some connection to the things we care about, some conversations of substance instead of sound bites. But, alas, thinking remains a minority activity. May the voices of our minority be heard above the din of politics as usual.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Just one recommendation. Our friend, the visionary Eboo Patel, has penned his most recent book, *We Need To Build: Field Notes for Diverse Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2022), an inspiring call to all of us who care about the institutions that make democracy possible and that are under serious attack in these fraught times.

>>What we need is here<<

Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes.

Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, holds  
them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here.

And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye,  
clear.

What we need is here.

[Wendell Berry]

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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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