

## 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

So here we are in this in-between time – heavy snow here in Minnesota last week reminded us that winter is not over, while at the same time the sun rises earlier and falls later to lengthen our days, an early sign of spring. Maybe you, like me, find these in-between times reflected in the changing seasons difficult to navigate – perhaps there are parallels to all the seasons of our lives. All of us long for clarity, answers, even certainty, while the world often feeds us confusion, more questions, uncertainty. So we live, as Brené Brown has taught us, in the messy middle – the place where reflective practice is our most compelling attitude and skill. Stay strong, my friends!

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

>>Paths of mercy<<

I offered this homily in the Augsburg Chapel earlier this year.

#### **Paths of mercy**

*"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy..."* (Matthew 5:7)

A few years ago, I had the remarkable opportunity to be in Israel, exploring partnerships with Israeli and Palestinian organizations. While there, one of my most memorable experiences was the trip to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where the intersections of the Biblical narrative with that historic place are visible and deeply moving. One such place was the amphitheater-like hillside overlooking the Sea where it is believed that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. This morning, I am transported back to that hillside to consider how Jesus instructed all of us about what it means to be blessed.

As a theological ethicist, I have long found great inspiration in the Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the American novelist Mary Gordon has written in reflection on the Beatitudes: "To say yes: for this I will try and change my life. And more: without this I would not know who I am."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Beatitudes offer not simply rules for a good life; they are a way of

describing who I am, who I am called to be. And, as Gordon further suggests, who I am and who I am called to be by the Beatitudes is very much tied to the sort of world Jesus intends for his followers to create – “a world that is safer and more generous.”<sup>iii</sup>

I am especially struck by the passage from Matthew 5: 7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” I was intrigued to find that of the nine Beatitudes in Matthew, verse seven is the only one where you receive the same as you give. Being merciful begets mercy. If you’re poor in spirit, you get the kingdom. If you mourn, you are comforted. If you’re meek, you inherit the earth. But if you’re merciful, it’s right back at you. I suppose we could be a bit disappointed by that equation – it doesn’t seem quite fair given some of the other returns. Instead of being disappointed, though, I want to suggest that this is actually the beatitude that best defines what it means to live as faithful people in the world. The mutual dynamic of giving and receiving mercy are at the heart of the called life that we enjoy as people of God, the body of Christ, here and now in the midst of this neighborhood, city and world. To give and receive mercy are what it means to live our vocations in God’s world.

There is precedent for this claim about giving and receiving mercy. My teacher, religious historian Martin Marty was once asked what the distinctive mark of the Lutheran church is, to which he replied, simply, “Acts of mercy.”<sup>iii</sup> Martin Luther himself used the word “neighbor” more than many other important Lutheran words (like faith and grace and scripture) in his voluminous writings and made giving and receiving mercy a hallmark of his ethics.<sup>iv</sup> There is clear evidence that this commitment to giving and receiving mercy is a hallmark of Lutheran Christians – witness our legacies of educational, health care and social service institutions, not to mention the abiding hospitality and service offered by Lutheran individuals and congregations around the world.<sup>v</sup>

We might have reason to pause here, however, for those who know anything about what Lutherans claim about being justified by faith alone through faith, you might think that our Lutheran Martins are missing something. Why this talk about mercy and neighbor when the central theological claim of our tradition is that we can’t earn our salvation – good works don’t merit redemption? But the fact is that it is precisely because we can’t earn it that we have been freed to live as merciful people in the world, knowing that mercy begets mercy. That is the foundation of healthy and just and faithful lives together in the world. God is in charge, God has a plan, and God’s plan is that faithful people will care for the earth and for each other with mutual mercy. God calls us to serve God’s world.

Theologically, Luther said it this way in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (as translated by our own Emeritus Professor Mark Tranvik): “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.”<sup>vi</sup> 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. We give and receive mercy.

I am of the opinion that this simple verse from Matthew could be Augsburg’s motto because we do most certainly know what it means to give and receive mercy – to seek out what I call “paths of mercy” – to live our vocations in and for God’s world.

Mercy is the way that the Augsburg community offers the gift of belonging to its neighbors, strangers, students and each other. I am struck every day by the number of different ways members

of the Augsburg community offer the gift of belonging. From the diverse students, faculty and staff who find a home at Augsburg, to the move-in ritual we have for first year students coming to campus to live in the residence halls, to the diverse neighbors who are welcomed on our campus to engage in important conversations for our neighborhood and world, to the remarkable ways in which Augsburg graduates are practicing hospitality in their own lives, and I could go on and on. It's certainly in the specifics of how we practice hospitality, but it's also in the attitude and spirit we bring to what it means to be a welcoming community. And genuine belonging offers mercy so that it might know the mercy that comes from engagement with others. If it was just about welcoming folks well, then we might as well be a hotel. But if it's belonging so that I might get to know you, to learn from you, to work with you to make the world more hospitable, then it's about mutuality, about giving and receiving mercy. It's a path of mercy that defines our lives in this community.

Mercy also is the sort of educational experience we aspire to offer our students. I hear from so many of our students about the relationships they gain here with fellow students, with faculty members and with those in the neighborhood and city who share their educational journeys. It is a hallmark of this place, I believe, to see education itself as a relationship that is marked by its giving and receiving. Parker Palmer has written of the central role of love – in both teaching and learning.<sup>vii</sup> A teacher loves his/her students – offers mercy – and the students return that love in engagement, questioning, growing in understanding and going out to share what they have learned with others. The poet William Wordsworth has written these words, which are my own creed as an educator, “What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.”<sup>viii</sup> That is a description of what happens on this campus each and every day as we engage each other as fellow teachers and learners, hungry for knowledge and skills and perspectives so that we might share what we learn with others. It's about giving and receiving and serving God's world. Teaching and learning in this community place us on paths of mercy.

And mercy is faith in action, the passion to do good not for any recognition or reward but because God calls us to love the world. Our institutional calling, which we articulate this way: *We believe we are called to be neighbor*, makes the claim that faith, learning and service can never be separated because God intends that what we believe (the gift of faith), calls us to be educated (the privilege of an education), so that we might be of service (the obligation of making the world better for all God's people). I have the privilege to learn about and witness the work of our students, faculty and staff who are practicing mercy – both the giving and receiving of mercy – in the chapel, in the residence halls, in the classrooms, on playing fields, in the neighborhood and around the world. I love to brag about our Campus Kitchen program, led by our students, which prepares and shares food in the neighborhood and grows food in our community garden, and makes food available to our students at the Campus Cupboard. It's all good work – it's merciful work – but it's not simply one-way service. Beth Florence, who graduated several years ago, once told me that preparing and delivering meals was OK but not good enough for her, she needed and wanted to sit with the recipients of the meals, break bread together, and get to know each other's stories. She wanted food to be the occasion for giving and receiving mercy. Faith in action through learning and service for our neighbor and God's world. Paths of mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. What abundant gifts we have been given from our gracious God – gifts of hospitality, education and faith active in love. Paths of mercy that mark our lives together in community. For these many gifts – in this, our 153<sup>rd</sup> academic year at Augsburg – and for all the ways in which this beloved community witnesses to those gifts each and every day - we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God! Amen.

>>We Rise<<

I offered these brief remarks at Augsburg's annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Convocation

“Good afternoon. It is a privilege to add my welcome to this 34<sup>th</sup> annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Convocation at Augsburg. It is always meaningful to gather with our Augsburg community, as well as neighbors and friends, to lift up the life and legacy of Dr. King, and to reflect on our abiding work for racial justice in our country. It is work that requires humility from those of us with immense privilege. It is work that requires grace and forgiveness from all of us. It is work that, as Dr. King so powerfully reminded us, requires that we truly love each other as fellow members of the beloved community.

This year's theme, “We Rise,” points to this moment when we are coming out of the pandemic, dealing with economic and political turmoil, and reckoning with our country's racist past and present – a moment when our students stand up and demand to be heard, to be seen, to be loved for who they are and aspire to be.

I want to share one way in which Augsburg is seeking to address its own racial history. For the past two years, a small group of faculty, staff, students, and alumni have worked with me on a project that has interrogated our institutional history and saga. Pastor Babette and Professor Kwame-Ross have both played important roles in the group's work. As part of the project, we have looked into troubling incidents in Augsburg's history, where we have not lived up to our highest values. Many of you will remember the 2020 MLK Convocation when we revisited the 1968 “One Day in May” teach-in, after Black students felt Augsburg needed to respond in substantive ways to Dr. King's assassination and what it said about racial relations in our community. The truth is, Augsburg did not immediately respond to the demands shared that day, and only 50 some years later – in 2021 – did we finally establish the Critical Race and Ethnic Studies program that had been demanded that day. I am proud that we finally responded, but dismayed that it took so long. Recall again Dr. King's challenge: “Justice delayed is justice denied.” And so it is.

But one positive story that has come out of our group's work is the discovery that Miss Anita Gay Hawthorne, the first director of the Pan-Afrikan Student Union and the founder of this annual MLK convocation, had organized remarkable photo albums of the experiences of Black students at Augsburg. These annual yearbooks – Miss Hawthorne's way of ensuring that Black students were seen when the “official” yearbook did not include many such photos – were found a few years back and sent to the university archives. There, Stewart Van Cleve, our university archivist, and several students from PASU, took all of the photos, digitized them, created key words for each photo, and then posted them on the archive's website. As Stewart now reports, Augsburg has the largest collection of photos of the Black collegiate experience in the country! A collection that will stand in perpetuity as Miss Hawthorne's legacy of ensuring that our Black students are seen and heard and loved.

We rise to say that this legacy lives on as we work tirelessly – even when we fail to live up to our highest aspirations – even so we work together to ensure that our students are heard, seen, and loved, and that this work is amplified as our graduates go out into the world to live out Augsburg's mission as informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders.”

## PRACTICE THIS

>>Leaning in<<

Here is my occasional column for our *Augsburg Now* magazine.

“One of the great misperceptions of American higher education is that colleges and universities are detached from the “real world,” ivory towers not concerned about the communities and neighborhoods that surround their campuses. I am not here to defend all of higher education - though there is plenty of evidence to rebut that perception - instead I want to declare that for Augsburg University, there has never been a question of our commitment to what we call “leaning in” to the pressing and complex issues of our neighborhood, our country, indeed the world.

It's a commitment articulated in our Augsburg150 strategic vision that states: “As a new kind of urban, student-centered university, we are educating Auggies as stewards of an inclusive democracy, engaged in their communities and uniquely equipped to navigate the complex issues of our time.” Leaning in so that our students are educated and equipped for the world that so needs their intellect, their passion, and their skills.

Surely this issue of *Augsburg Now* powerfully demonstrates an array of ways in which this commitment to “leaning in” is lived out by our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and allies. From Professor Katie Clark and alumna Emily Bastian, and their groundbreaking work serving those experiencing homelessness; to our new data science major with its strong focus on equity and social justice; to the contributions of our colleague, Minnesota First Lady Gwen Walz, helping us to prepare more teachers of color for our public schools; to the research of Kao Nou Moua, uncovering the experiences of Hmong entrepreneurs.

And the list could go on and on with the daily ways in which the Augsburg community – in its curriculum, community engagement, and public advocacy – is working to be good neighbors, to uncover and address systemic injustices, and to support a more robust democracy.

In 2019, as part of Augsburg’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, Auggie alumnus and poet extraordinaire Donte Collins, ’18, penned a powerful ode to their *alma mater*, entitled “We Are Auggies”, which concludes with these lines:

*“When shared, when sharpened. Guided. Here is a system of roots, Strong, Striving. A system of roots weaving a new world. Auggie, you are called into the world.*

*Into your wonder. Your why. To wrestle with reason. To spot the problem. And propose new parts. To walk toward your fears. To find the heart.*

*We are Called. We are Auggies.”*

May we all continue to lean in, to make our world more just, fair, and compassionate, to find the heart. I know we will, because we are called Auggies!”

>>Lessons for our public engagement<<

As part of a chapter on the ways in which colleges and universities engage their various publics, I have crafted these four lessons:

1. **Ground this work in mission and strategy:** Find the threads of your institutional saga that inform your community-based work and then ensure that both your mission and strategic plan name this work as central to your identity and daily work.
2. **Leadership matters, but so does what happens on the ground:** Presidential leadership and advocacy for this work is important but it is not sufficient if the commitment and work is not integrated across all aspects of the university's work, including curriculum, campus life, business practices, and community engagement.
3. **This work requires a commitment to mutuality with neighbors:** One of the temptations, unfortunately too often endemic to academic institutions, is the tendency to believe we know best how to respond to community challenges. This work only succeeds if it is grounded in mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. Those relationships must be built and sustained over time through consistent, intentional efforts to align our work together around shared interests and values.
4. **Finally, this is all about democracy – not as the machinery of government but as a social ethic:** This is about living together with our neighbors, working to create more just, healthy, safe, and compassionate communities. And that only happens when we practice democracy in our words and deeds.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Those of you who follow higher education news likely have read about the controversy at our sister school, Hamline University, across the river in Saint Paul. I won't recite entire episode here – Google it and you'll find plenty of commentary – but I will say that the clash between religious images and academic freedom that played out at Hamline has occasioned important conversations for all of us who work in religiously plural settings. Laurie Patton, scholar of religion and President of Middlebury College, has written a helpful guide to these issues in *Who Owns Religion?: Scholars and their Publics in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

I have previously mentioned that our Lutheran colleges and universities have crafted a statement of common purpose called “Rooted and Open,” (available at [elca.org](http://elca.org)). Subsequently a group of 15 faculty members from our institutions have come together to publish *So That All May Flourish: The Aims of Lutheran Higher Education* (Fortress Press, 2023), a collection of essays grounded in the “Rooted and Open” framework on how Lutheran faith and values shape the education we offer students on our campuses,

>>In this place<<

Poet Amanda Gorman has captured our imaginations in so many settings these past few years – from presidential inaugurations to super bowls. Here is an excerpt from her ode to the poet in all of us.

“Hope—  
we must bestow it  
like a wick in the poet  
so it can grow, lit,  
bringing with it  
stories to rewrite—  
the story of a Texas city depleted but not defeated  
a history written that need not be repeated  
a nation composed but not yet completed.

There’s a poem in this place—  
a poem in America  
a poet in every American  
who rewrites this nation, who tells  
a story worthy of being told on this minnow of an earth  
to breathe hope into a palimpsest of time—  
a poet in every American  
who sees that our poem penned  
doesn’t mean our poem’s end.

There’s a place where this poem dwells—  
it is here, it is now, in the yellow song of dawn’s bell  
where we write an American lyric  
we are just beginning to tell.”

Amanda Gorman, 2017

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2023

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<sup>i</sup> Gordon, Mary. *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels*. New York: Pantheon Books. 2009, p. 87.

<sup>ii</sup> Op cit., p. 84.

<sup>iii</sup> Marty, Martin E. Personal correspondence.

<sup>iv</sup> Luther, Martin. *Works*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing. 1955. A search of the on-line version of Luther's Works (in English) shows that neighbor (or similar words) appears some 2200 times, more than justification or faith, though far behind righteousness (5700). On Luther's ethics, see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1972.

<sup>v</sup> As quoted from Gracia Grindal in *The Promise of Augsburg College*. DVD media. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg College, 2008.

<sup>vi</sup> Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Translated by Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2008, p. 83.

<sup>vii</sup> Palmer, Parker. *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1983, p. 16.

<sup>viii</sup> Wordsworth, William. From *The Prelude*, Book Fourteenth. Public domain. 1888.