

## 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

Though the calendar says it is Spring, the weather here in Minnesota has not yet turned spring-like, but we nevertheless find signs of hope in the many academic year-end events wherein we celebrate the achievements and promise of our graduates. Our Augsburg commencement ceremonies occur next week and these will be especially meaningful to me as our oldest, Thomas, graduates and sets off for his new gig as a management trainee at Enterprise Rent-a-Car. How exciting!

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

>>Remember <<

I preached this homily on Maundy Thursday in the Augsburg University Chapel.

23-26 Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,

This is my body, broken for you.  
Do this to remember me.

After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:  
This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.  
Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt. (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26, The Message)

34-35 “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other.” (John 13: 34-35, The Message)

This morning we hear these familiar passages from Paul’s letter to the community at Corinth and from John’s gospel – passages assigned for this Maundy Thursday; maundy from the Latin mandatum, referring to Jesus’s mandate to his disciples that they remember, gather at table, wash each other’s feet, and love one another.

On this Maundy Thursday, I’m drawn to Eugene Peterson’s translation (in The Message) of Paul’s message to the Corinthians in verse 26: “You must never let familiarity breed contempt.” – and I wonder if in that mandate we might find a renewed call for God’s faithful people in the world. Perhaps familiarity is our stumbling block...

Nearly 2000 years after Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Passover meal, so much of our lives are grounded in the familiar – familiar words and rituals, familiar excuses, familiar behavior, familiar comforts, familiar expectations. What would it look like to step back from the familiar – to fight the temptation of contempt – and to renew our calls to be God’s Easter people in the world?

Come with me as we explore what such a Maundy Thursday call might look like...

First, we are called to reenact that Passover, for as Paul tells us, “every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master.” Is that what we really do? In my Lutheran Christian tradition, we come to the altar every week to celebrate Holy Communion with little wafers and little cups – we hear the familiar words of institution, we walk the familiar routes, we depart with familiar blessings. Some still use a common cup, though likely not as often as pre-pandemic. Others are experimenting with less familiar forms of reenactment like dinner church or communion outside of church walls. I think of what happened during the Covid pandemic when many of us communed alone at home, watching a screen, perhaps with the pre-packaged wine and wafer (who knew there was such a thing!) And though that was a necessary change to our reenacting the Lord’s Supper, perhaps its lack of familiarity reminded us of why gathering at table together is so central to our calls to live as God’s people in the world.

But reenactment of any form is not simply the ritual practice, it must be the occasion to reflect on what the ritual points to, to reflect on the death of Jesus, to find in the experience of gathering at table the meaning, the inspiration, the emotions, that propel us to a deeper faith, a less familiar path forward. Some of my most meaningful experiences of reenactment came in the kitchens or hospital rooms of the parishioners I served as pastor at a small church in Indiana. There was something about those intimate moments that challenged the familiar, that led me to reflect on what it all meant for God’s people in the world. One particular moment was in a hospital room with Betty and her family. She had been away from our little church for several weeks and very

much wanted to celebrate Holy Communion as a way of being connected to her faith community. I spoke the words of institution, shared the bread with those gathered, and then passed a cup of wine around our circle. Betty was the last one to receive the cup and instead of the tiny sip each of us had taken, she proceeded to “chug” down all the wine that remained. We might laugh about Betty missing her daily happy hours, but instead what I found meaningful in that moment was that Betty understood, Betty believed that drinking from that cup was the gift of her faith, and when she took that cup in her hands, she said to herself, “here is the blood of Christ, shed for me and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. I will take a big swig from this cup, because I know that Christ died for me - I believe”. Betty died shortly after that moment, but I know she did so in the blessed assurance of Christ’s love.

We are called to reenact and to reflect so that we might reimagine. I think one of the important facts about Jesus’s final days that we must recall is that he was executed at the will of the religious elite of his time and at the hand of the empire’s anointed representative. When we forget this in the midst of the familiar rituals of our faith, we succumb to the temptation of contempt – contempt for the authentic calls we receive from our God who overcame death and grave on Easter morning, our God whose rule challenges earthly power and privilege. The Old Testament scholar and renowned preacher, Walter Brueggemann, challenges us to the work of what he calls prophetic imagination. In a passage from his *Journey to the Common Good*, Brueggemann writes:

“It is our propensity, in society and in church, to trust the narrative of scarcity. That is what makes us greedy, and selfish, and coercive. Even the Eucharist can be made into an occasion of scarcity, as though there were not enough for all, Such scarcity leads to exclusion at the table, even as scarcity leads to exclusion from economic life. But the narrative of abundance persists among us. Those who sign on and depart the system of anxious scarcity become the historymakers in the neighborhood...those who have enough energy to dream and hope..(from which) come such neighborly miracles as good health care, good schools, good health care, good care for the earth, and disarmament.” (pp. 34-35)

At the Lord’s table – set for all - we reimagine what it means to live as those who know God’s abundance, to be the historymakers we are called to be!

And all of this, then, brings us to the call imbedded in the words of institution themselves: “Do this to remember me.” And though we may hear the word “remember” as pointing us to some past event, recalling something from long ago, what if, instead, we hear “remember” as a call to the work that is here and now, the work of re-memorizing the body of Christ on earth now, the work of reenacting, reflecting, and reimagining what we are called to be and do in the world as God’s faithful people.

The 15th century mystic, Teresa of Avila, captures this call 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 the body of Christ on earth now, not letting familiarity breed contempt, not accepting a narrative of scarcity, so that we might love our neighbors and our neighborhoods with our hearts and hands and minds. Reenact, reflect, reimagine, remember. Do this, my friends. Blessings in these three most holy days. Amen.

>>Promises, Promises<<

I preached this homily during Lent in the Augsburg University Chapel.

Jeremiah 30: 12-22

Several years ago I joined with members of my South Minneapolis church in a 365-day read through the Bible initiative. We started on Ash Wednesday and finished the entire Bible – old and new testaments – by mid-February the next year. Despite all my years of theological training, I had never read the Bible through cover-to-cover, and I found the discipline and experience most meaningful.

My early observations, in the first couple of weeks through the book of Genesis and just into Exodus, were just how full these early pages of the Hebrew Bible are with promises, promises – and more promises. We've got promises between God and Adam and Eve, and then with Noah and Abram/Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Jacob/Israel and Joseph. We've got promises between these various characters and the myriad other good folks named in Genesis. And these are not only promises made and kept. But these are promises made and then broken, then made again, with perhaps a few acts of deceit thrown in to make things interesting, and then made again. You get the idea. This is a complex and complicated and messy set of relationships, depicted in all their mundane and ordinary details.

I think there was, in my experience of reading about these early days of God's engagement with God's people, an incredibly powerful lesson for our Lenten journeys – a lesson we 21st century faithful tend to overlook in our often jaded and cynical perspectives on life in the world. All over the book of Genesis, we have the story of God in conversation with God's people. God is there and here and there, paying attention, watching over, talking with the various characters, personally engaging in the business of promise-making and keeping. God is here and there and here – here, in our midst, talking with us, making and keeping promises, paying attention when we succeed and fail, when we get it and don't, when we prosper and suffer, when we are in need and self-sufficient. What do you think of that possibility, my fellow faithful? Are you talking back, paying attention, making and keeping your promises?

Our assigned scripture for this morning comes from one of my favorite Old Testament books, the prophet Jeremiah. It is a later tale in the saga of God's chosen people, set against the

background of the Babylonian exile, when the temple and city of Jerusalem have been destroyed, the Israelites have been exiled to Babylon, and to be quite honest, this whole promise-making and keeping dynamic is being tested. Our passage articulates this tension pretty clearly. On the one hand, the Lord first proclaims, this is not looking good for you. “Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is no one to uphold your cause...All your lovers have forgotten you...your guilt is great...I have done these things to you.” Ouch, we might say.

But then, on the turn of a phrase, redemption is at hand. Despite all of this sin and sadness and captivity, you are still my people and I will restore health to you. “I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings...the city shall be rebuilt...Out of them shall come thanksgiving...I will make them many and honored.” And then these remarkable words, “And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

Words that are emblazoned on the hearts and minds of all God’s faithful. You are my people and I am your God. The abiding promise of our awesome God.

So, how are we to understand this God, our God, who stays with us, no matter what? How do we make sense of this God who speaks with us in our 21st century lives? I think part of the challenge for those of us who read these Old Testament stories from a Christian perspective is that the filter of the cross and resurrection sometimes leads us to forget that the relationship between God and God’s people is not completed on Good Friday and Easter, rather it is renewed and redeemed so that we can return freed to listen to God, to the promises made and kept in the midst of all the messiness, to the work we called to do on behalf of God’s people and world.

To this end, returning to the experience of the Israelites and their ongoing engagement with God offers us helpful glimpses into what our God expects when promises are made and kept (or made and broken and made again...) And in those glimpses, we also have a roadmap for the ways we might engage each other in this community and in the neighborhood.

God’s promises are, first of all, always marked by generosity of spirit and means. God doesn’t hold back for God’s people. From the wonders of all creation to the lush garden of Eden to the seeds of renewed life on the Ark to the abiding protection of God’s people living in alien lands, God does not leave God’s people comfortless or without what they need to survive and prosper. In our promises to each other, how are we being generous with each other, sharing all that we have so that we might prosper together?

Second, God’s promises are characterized by a bias toward reconciliation and forgiveness. Think about Adam and Eve – there were consequences for their breaking the promise in Eden, but God never abandons them. How about Abram – he laughed at God when promised offspring, but God keeps his promises nonetheless. And then there’s Jacob, who steals his brother’s birthright and blessing, only to become the progenitor of all of Israel. Are we the

forgiving kind? Do we leave our sins at the altar and live as those reconciled to each other, no matter what?

Finally, God's promises are rooted in hope and in the patience that hope requires in a world full of evidence that runs counter to God's intentions for God's people. This is one of the most remarkable things I have found in my daily Bible readings from the Pentateuch. God doesn't give up on us. God didn't give up on the chosen people in the wilderness or in exile. God doesn't give up on humanity before the flood. God doesn't give up on Abram and Sarai, or Isaac, or Jacob. But in order to understand such a powerful message of hope in the Lord, we also must embrace the patience that doesn't seek immediate gratification, that doesn't allow the ways of the world to define a path forward, that enables us to let God's will emerge in God's time. Do we have the long view of God's reign breaking in? Do we have the patience to abide in our promises to each other, even when it seems that God's will is not being done?

Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen reminds us in his *Bread for the Journey* that:

"Patience is a hard discipline. It is not just waiting until something happens over which we have no control: the arrival of a bus...the resolution of a conflict. Patience is not a waiting passivity...Patience asks us to live the moment to the fullest, to be completely present to the moment...to be where we are. When we are impatient we try to get away from where we are. We behave as if the real thing will happen tomorrow, later, and somewhere else. Let's be patient and trust that the treasure we look for is hidden in the ground on which we stand."

Promises, promises. Lord, I believe – help my unbelief, we pray this Lenten season. Every day on this campus, in this neighborhood, in the world, we make and keep promises to each other, we break promises and make them again, we seek to be God's people and do God's work in this place. May we find in the stories of God's people through the ages the lessons of generosity, reconciliation, hope and patience – lessons of our God who is here, speaking with us, staying with us, paying attention to us, keeping this remarkable promise: You are my people and I am your God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## PRACTICE THIS

>>Love letters from the past<<

As I have reported, I am working with a group of students, faculty, and staff on a project to explore Augsburg's historic saga in an effort to make sense of our current and future work together. Several essays have been drafted as part of the project, among them "Love letters from the past: the role of an institution's archives," written by Stewart Van Cleave, Augsburg University Archivist. It is a beautiful piece and relevant to all of our organizations as we seek to understand how the threads of our past weave together to show us a path forward. Here is an excerpt from Stewart's essay...

“The archives compel the contradictions of our saga to share the same physical, digital, and conceptual spaces, overwhelming and challenging us in equal measure. On each shelf, within each box, in every absence, and in every online search, researchers will find sources of inspiration and pride interspersed with humility and even regret. Records of work by M. Anita Gay Hawthorne, Khin Khin Jensen, Mimí Báez Kingsley, Gerda Mortensen, and many others remind us of the challenges that women and people of color have overcome at Augsburg, but they should also make us pause and reflect on why they had to overcome those barriers in the first place. We can celebrate Augsburg’s diversity in the twenty-first century as we must understand the difficult path that led us to it. Even our campus, the physical testament to generations of generosity, is built on stolen land.

For nearly a century, archivists from Agnes Tangjerd to Kristin Anderson have worked to wrangle these historical contradictions together, at times without much financial support, let alone written recognition. Work in the archives is more than just putting things in boxes, scanning photos, or helping others write histories. Archivists are not the idle caretakers of a graveyard. Instead, they are the stewards of living history, a garden that grows, blooms, and leaves behind seeds that wait for future planting. The most difficult part of this work hinges on what to care for, what to weed out, and what to add. We cannot, and should not, save everything. What is important to remember? What can we forget? How do we decide? Answers to these questions are still a work in progress. Our archives are reflections of Augsburg; they have grown and changed as the institution has. They come from a love best expressed by M. Anita Gay Hawthorne in “From My Heart,” a poem she wrote with Larry Bedford and recited in Hoversten Chapel in 1997 as her last gift to us:

“In the magic of the morning  
When the day opens its eyes to mother earth,  
Think of me...  
I’ll be thinking of you.

When the flaming sun shines down in  
Radiance and sprinkles the glow over mother earth,  
Smile for me...  
I’ll be smiling for you.

When the snowflakes fall  
To cover with a white carpet mother earth,  
Miss me...  
I’ll be missing you.

In the quiet of the night  
As you close your eyes to rest,  
Dream of me...  
I’ll be dreaming of you.

When we are apart from one another  
Please know the loneliness I feel  
And love me...  
I'll be loving you!"

## PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Always in search of perspectives on life in Chicago, I found Natalie Y. Moore's *The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation* (Picador Paperback, 2016) and learned so much about the ways in which race and class intersect in Chicago neighborhoods.

I also have begun to explore Matthew Desmond's *Poverty, By America* (Crown, 2023), which indicts our country for the many ways in which policies and practices are designed to keep poor people poor.

>>Benediction<<

As we send our students out into the world each spring I have many occasions on which to describe our aspirations for them and to remind them of the privileges and obligations they now have as educated folks. This eloquent benediction, crafted originally for the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary community by one of its distinguished faculty members, beautifully captures our aspirations.

"Because the world is poor and starving,  
    Go with bread.  
Because the world is filled with fear,  
    Go with courage.  
Because the world is in despair,  
    Go with hope.  
Because the world is living lies,  
    Go with truth.  
Because the world is sick with sorrow,  
    Go with joy.  
Because the world is weary of wars,  
    Go with peace.  
Because the world is seldom fair,  
    Go with justice.  
Because the world is under judgment,  
    Go with mercy.  
Because the world will die without it,  
    Go with love."



>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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