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JASON A. MAHN

## Shelter in Place: Reflections from March 22, 2020

This is getting real.

I'm up well before dawn after a handful of hours of restless sleep. Last night, Facebook Messenger lit up with rumors of a first case of COVID-19 in our small city. One cryptic message from our neighbor D., who often knows things before they are public, specified that the boys and I should not, under any circumstances, play pickup basketball this afternoon, which we had done a week ago, the last day that my college's rec center was open. No sooner had my spouse, Laura, read me the message than I began to connect and create dots: I think the wife of the player who likes to drive the lane works in the emergency room. Did he contract it through her? Did either of my sons, Asa and Gabe, guard him? Did they use enough hand sanitizer between games? Could they die?

A subsequent text from our neighbor clarified that she just didn't want us having any contact with anyone; basketball was only an example. No need to dwell on the questions above—minus the last one, which kindled my anxiety long after we said goodnight to the boys.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. The gospel lesson is the story of the man born blind, whom an un-beckoned Jesus hastens to heal as the disciples debate over who is to blame for his condition. My family will have "family church" at 10:30 this morning over chorizo egg bake, which I promised to the boys last night. Sitting under a warm blanket on the couch,

watching the sky spit sleety snow, my contemplations and writing this morning feel especially like prayer, or at least like the difficult (non-)action of paying attention, which Simone Weil identifies as the essence of prayer.

We will abide by the Illinois Governor's executive order to "stay at home," one of five statewide decrees at present. "Shelter in place" is no longer being used for these orders, given that the



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phrase conjures frightening images of active shooters and classroom lockdowns in many people's minds—especially those of Gen X, who have trained for school shootings since they were in kindergarten. For me, though, to shelter seems much more accurate to the purposeful action asked of us. Deriving from the word *shield*, to shelter is to take guard—and more so, to protect

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those who need guarding, as in providing lodging for the homeless poor or taking in stray animals. My putting egg bake in the oven, and Laura's designing word games for the kids, and our planning of hikes with our dog Gracie at Sylvan Island, each make shelter for our family. The difficulty is how to shield those who are not already under our roof. Whom else will I be called on to shelter? What can hospitality look like across property lines?

Two days ago, I received an email from E., a recent graduate from my college and former student in my upper-level seminar, "Suffering, Death, and Endurance," who moved to Boston to look for jobs and attend to his mental health. Students like E. make me proud to teach at a Lutheran liberal arts school. He identifies as nonreligious, but would visit during my office hours to discuss faith and hope and spiritual wellness. He wrote his final paper in the "Suffering" class on the theodicy of hip-hop music, which first turned me on to the prophetic and profane musical artist, Brother Ali. I dare not tally the teaching versus the learning that I give/receive from students like E.

He reported last week that the streets and squares of Boston have been disconcertingly quiet, like the calm before a storm. "Still, it's not all bad," he writes. "People are settling into their new norm. I'm starting to get involved with the mutual aid networks popping up across the country. It's wonderful to see how much people are willing to share, both in knowledge and resources. I'm grateful for social media allowing us to stay connected while remaining distant." He says he's been organizing people in his Sommerville neighborhood, ensuring that channels of communication remain open. And then, with characteristic humility, E. asks me for advice about how to talk with people about the pandemic itself. He confesses, "I'm not sure how to talk about this moment in time we're living through. I want to be a source of stability, but I don't want to be more than what I am."

There's so much here to comment on, including all the ways that E. is enacting neighbor love much more creatively than I am. I am particularly struck by the wisdom of not wanting to be more than he is. He could have said that he didn't want to overextend himself or that he didn't want to do more than he could effectively do. But his language is about personhood and character, not activities and tasks.

He's writing about his sense of calling, that understanding of oneself and one's necessary limits that must be carefully discerned and then courageously lived out in service to others. While many idealistic young adults bravely want to change the world in whatever ways they dream up, E. has intuited the more discerning insight of American author and activist Parker Palmer—namely, that pretending you are something you're not is a recipe for resentment, then fatigue, and then cynicism. We must rather, in Palmer's words, "accept that our lives are dependent on an inexorable cycle of seasons, on a play of powers that we can conspire with but never control." Accepting those God-given limits alongside our God-given gifts can be painful. We inevitably "run headlong into a culture that insists, against all evidence, that we can make whatever kind of life we want, whenever we want it. Deeper still, we run headlong into our own egos, which want desperately to believe that we are always in charge" (97).

"E. is discerning his deepest self, and its responsive and purposeful work in the world, even as he keeps one eye open for an ambush of his ego."

E. is discerning his deepest self, and its responsive and purposeful work in the world, even as he keeps one eye open for an ambush of his ego. I am proud of him, and wrote back saying as much.

The networks of church-related higher education in which I am a part have, over the last few decades, doubled-down on their central missions to educate for vocation. From *vocare* (calling) and *vox* (voice), *vocation* is something one hears (usually metaphorically) and then responds to—or not. Many identify the ultimate Caller as God, who uses the voices of human and nonhuman creatures to beckon a person toward work for the flourishing of all creation. Others hear the call as originating from particular people and places who call out for help and compassion. Either way, undergoing education for a life of vocation provides a very different understanding of higher education than the leading consumerist model. Students don't only pay for college to get a degree that

gets them opportunities to advance their chosen careers. They also—and more importantly—accept the invitation to carefully listen for and critically understand what the world most needs, and then develop skills by which they can capably and confidently respond. While many if not most students come to college primarily to get a good paying job (and there’s nothing wrong with that), among them are students such as E., many of them first generation college students and others with a strong sense of appreciation for this opportunity, who have a handle on their gifts and passions and are ready to leverage each for the flourishing of the common good.

Language about neighbor love is easily translated into the idiom of purposeful callings. Lutheran higher education follows its namesake, Martin Luther, in equating vocation with love and service to the neighbor. Whereas before the sixteenth century “godly work” had been the work of the professionally religious or explicitly religious work (such as taking a pilgrimage), Luther redirected such work away from the desperate attempt to please God and towards the free, creative, and even joyful effort to work on behalf of the neighbor. As Luther put it 500 years ago in “The Freedom of a Christian”:

No one needs even one of these works to attain righteousness and salvation. *For this reason*, in all of one’s works a person should in this context be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor. (520, my emphasis)

When the old self, the ego, is upended by the unearned gift of divine love, it then—and *for this reason*—can finally see what the neighbor actually needs and will do what it can to respond. Luther assumed that the transformative turn-around happens in baptism, whose waters drown a person’s pious perfectionism, together with her doubt

and despair. For most today, death of ego and the rebirth of a summoned life probably only come from brushes with actual death. Being made to face our mortality—for example, by sheltering in place, glimpsing the vulnerability of your family, or getting sick yourself—can sometimes kill the self-reliance to which many of us otherwise so fanatically cling. Self-reliance is replaced by the gift of grace, which then redoubles as gracious attention to others.

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My colleague from our music department, M., also reached out by email last week. She is a wise leader within this year’s “Education-for-Vocation” faculty seminar. She wrote to me of that key vocational discernment question that David Brooks asks, and which we had discussed a few weeks before: “To what am I being summoned?” Then referencing the worldwide pandemic: “If this is not a moment of summoning, I don’t know what is.”

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