

## **Taking the Measure of Things**

It has been a wild and crazy week for those of us caught up in the Reaccreditation Visit of our seminary by staff members and representatives of member schools of the Association of Theological Schools and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Hearing all the acronyms invoked by the all-knowing can be baffling to the uninitiated: ATS, SACS, COC, COA, QEP, SLO. The lingua franca of accreditation is as full of acronyms as the Presbyterian Church (USA). But what is important about this “every ten year” reaccreditation process is that it invites each school to “take the measure of things” deemed central to its mission and to the on-going life of the teaching-learning community. As you know, we have been “taking the measure of things” for two years. Many of you have been closely involved in that process and we are grateful for your participation. Furthermore, we are grateful that the visit went well, that it produced helpful affirmations and suggestions for our continued work, and that it is over!

I must confess that while I believe in evaluation and what direct and indirect measures of assessment can tell us about student learning and

the success of our degree programs, this type of measurement will never capture the totality of the educational experience at Louisville Seminary, in the lives of each teacher, student, administrator, and staff member, or the ways that God's mercies are new each day on this campus. The transcendent and mysterious presence of God and the transformation of mind and spirit are but two categories that defy direct measurement.

Each spring, about this time of year, I share with students in the Methodist History and Doctrine class a doctrinal paper on John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection that was written by Jonathan, a student in my very first class in Methodist Heritage taught sixteen years ago at another seminary. I have shared this paper with my Methodist Heritage students each year for three reasons: it is an exceptionally well-researched and written paper; it is a celebration of a wonderful student who had hopes of earning a Ph.D. in New Testament studies and was only too happy to give me permission to use his paper as a model for future classes; and, it makes a powerful point about the connection between the academic study of doctrine and the crucial role of doctrine

in people's lives. You see, unbeknownst to me and most of the faculty, Jonathan was terminally ill and in his last weeks of life. He was a young married man about to cross the river into the hands of God. When I first took the measure of his paper, I was unaware of his personal situation, and I thought it curious that he focused the last paragraph of his essay on Wesley's belief that most Christians attained Christian perfection at the instant of death. But a month later, shortly after he died, I realized that Jonathan's reflections on sanctification as a process and as a goal were a part of his own holy living and holy dying. And I and my Methodist students have been "taking the measure" of Jonathan's paper and Jonathan's life in Christ ever since.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Bible focuses on "taking the measure of things." The image of the "plumb line" in Amos 7:8 is a familiar one in prophetic writings, and it is used as an emblem of strict justice and a symbol of God's judgment. By using the plumb line in speaking God's word to the people of Israel, Amos intimates that God would visit them according to their sins and prophecies that the northern

kingdom would fall: “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” The “plumb line” was a measuring device to determine the straightness of a wall. The line was weighted down to achieve this measure and the weight or plummet at the end of the line depended on gravity. In Isaiah 28:17, this image of the plumb line is even more vivid: “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plummet.” But not all measures or plumb lines are equal. In another passage in Isaiah, we read of God’s judgment of the nations, and in particular, Edom: “The Holy One shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plummet of chaos over its nobles. They shall name it “no kingdom there” and its princes shall be nothing” (34:11-12). This plumb line of emptiness stands in stark contrast to the plumb line of justice and righteousness. In other words, we need to be clear about the measure we use and what we are measuring and to what ends.

As Lent comes to a close, it is well for us to “take the measure of things.” What is our plumb line? How do we measure ourselves before God and before one another and our own best selves? What keeps us

straight and upright? In my ecclesial tradition, there is a popular expression: “It’s not how high you jump on the day of your conversion, but how straight you walk thereafter.” We all know the temptation to “shout glory on Sunday” and be otherwise the rest of the week. What keeps us grounded, weighted to the justice and righteousness of God? For some, it is being centered in the Word of God. For others, it is the priority of the Gospel lived out in justice-seeking advocacy and work.

Whatever it is, hopefully Lent has been a time for us “to take the measure of things” not only in our lives, but in our world. As John Wesley observed in his Notes on Isaiah, the plumb line was used not only in wall construction, but also in structural demolition. If structures were deemed weak, unstable, even dangerous, they were torn down. If the plumb line of justice suggests to us today that certain structures and systems of injustice need to be torn down, then we must be willing to “take the measure of things” and speak and act accordingly. I think it is no accident that the call narrative of Jeremiah devotes twice as many verses to uprooting and tearing down than to building up. I have studied

adult education and I embrace many of the principles of adult learning, but I am not ready to say that all life experiences are equally valid or even helpful. Indeed, here at Louisville Seminary, much of the teaching and learning we do, much of the therapy and counseling we do, much of the ministry we do requires us to unlearn or relearn. This is a process of educational demolition, if you will, or as John Dewey would put it, the reconstruction of experience. All of us recognize the challenges of letting go of old idolatries and images of self that are unhealthy, of reworking and reappropriating beliefs and practices that have become uncomfortable and are in need of transformation, of stepping out of our privilege and taking the measure of things from the perspective of the other. Need I tell students, these are dying and rising processes, accompanied by both grief and joy. How to stay centered and grounded in seminary is a deeply and profoundly spiritual matter, and I would suggest that we all need to be clear about the plumb line by which we measure our lives, our faith, and our vocation.

As we approach the table and we enter next week, Holy Week, I invite us to take the full measure of things of what God in Jesus Christ has done for us. Let us not be tempted to jump from the shouts of hosanna to the strains of Easter joy without ever passing through the streets of Jerusalem to weep along the way. Instead, let us ponder the plumb line of the cross, the towel and the basin and the washing of feet, the personal acts of betrayal and faithful companionship, and the God of Love who, despite the multiple ways we fail to measure up, walks with us and never lets us go.