

Reflection April 2010

During Holy Week, I read a number of recent books about Easter by such varied writers as Walter Wangerin, N.T. Wright, Eugene Peterson, and Thomas Merton. Each book in its own way reminded me that before the glory of the Resurrection came the shame of the Cross. If we are to follow the Risen Christ, we must also carry the Cross—not a popular message in any culture—but perhaps especially not in 21st century America.

While I have been thinking about these readings as they apply to my personal life, I am also thinking about them as they apply to Houghton's work as a Christian liberal arts college. Two circumstances of last week helped to further my reflections.

On Wednesday, I was on the west side of Buffalo at Jericho Road, a center started by a Houghton alumnus physician to meet the health needs of the increasingly diverse population in this neighborhood. Now the center also offers a range of other services related to housing, legal help, as well as providing a home for a local congregation on Sunday.

I, along with others from Houghton, was there to talk about the launching of two new initiatives in Buffalo—the Buffalo City Semester and the Wesley ServiceCorps. Both efforts are part of Houghton's larger strategy to prepare graduates who have the skills and the ability to succeed at any level in their chosen vocational area but who also have a heart to serve—in some way or another—those who *most* need what they have to give.

On that occasion, we were surrounded by a dozen or so recent Houghton graduates who are currently serving with AmeriCorps in Buffalo—or who found such joy and fulfillment in that service that they have continued in non-profit work in the Buffalo area. These alumni have formed a lively community of competent collaboration and a mutual support network that is helping to transform that part of Buffalo in noticeable ways—always in partnership with the local business community and area churches. This is the Body of Christ at work—each lending what it is most able to give—in some cases special knowledge, in some cases leadership, in some cases financial resources, in some cases tireless energy. It is no accident that the Houghton graduates, trained to think of their learning in dialogue with their faith and both in dialogue with the challenges of the real world, are effective “salt” and “light” as they bring flexibility, problem solving skills, and hope grounded in both knowledge and love. This would seem to be exactly what a Christian college education should be—preparing graduates to make a tangible difference for good in the world in the name of Jesus.

Two days later, I was talking with an individual who has dialogued with many parents from elite Christian high schools about the next step in their children's education.

According to this person—and I would have doubted if I had not already heard the same thing before—most parents of students at Christian high schools are not interested in Christian higher education. They want a “prestige” education first and foremost. For that prestige, they will knowingly choose an education that allows intellectual development to happen quite apart from one’s most fundamental spiritual and moral commitments.

I am not at all suggesting that all Christians should choose to go to the same kind of college and university. There are many legitimate ways to choose an institution of higher learning. Nor am I suggesting that “prestige” is never a factor that might be used for the glory of God. I *would* say that it is one of those gifts that we ought not to ask for the privilege of stewarding. We should be reluctant rather than eager to accept such a trust.

Neither am I at all blind to possible unfortunate reasons for choosing a Christian liberal arts education. There are even potential temptations to volunteering for service after graduation--possibly as a way to avoid moving into the supposedly *real* “real world.” Volunteering can be a way of putting off riskier choices with longer term implications. There are many ways in a fallen world in which we can go wrong!

There is no simple solution here or neat conclusion. Mostly I am simply suggesting is that we as American Christians—even very doctrinally correct Christians—may be sending our children very different messages about what it means to be successful in choosing a college or in preparing for the next stage of their journeys.

During this Eastertide, I invite you to continue reflecting with me about how we live our lives and make decisions that honor a God whose work of Redemption and Resurrection seems always to involve a Cross—and rarely one of our own choosing.

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