

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:
A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE
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*“I guess I just wanted to see
if the Church would still take in anybody.”*

*My wife Karen and I are unashamedly fans of Garrison Keillor and his radio show, *Prairie Home Companion*. Nevermind the Saturday nightlife of the culturally-rich Adams Morgan area of Washington, with its string of African restaurants. We tend to be ensconced instead by the radio in our home, listening to tales of a “quiet week in Lake Wobegon.” Except two weeks ago, when we seized on our chance to see the show, live, out at Wolf Trap.*

There’s not a lot of directly African-relevant stuff to Garrison Keillor’s eclectic mix of music and stories – to say the least – and his reminiscences of life among “Lutheran bachelor farmers” in his mythic town on the edge of the Minnesota plains may not even be on the edge of awareness of many WOA supporters. But he has quite a few theological insights that, contextual to Minnesota Lutherans as they may be, speak far beyond that setting. Maybe even to those of us with Africa on our mind.

Out at Wolf Trap he got to talking about a man who “escaped” Lake Wobegon as a youth, lived a curious if not bawdy life, then in his later years, unkempt, made his way back home. On a Sunday morning he surprised himself by showing up at the Lutheran church. “I’m not sure why,” he said to himself. “I guess I just wanted to see if the Church would still take in anybody.” Keillor paused, then added: “And of course, they did.”

His little story may not seem all that relevant to those of us engaged in faith-based work for justice in and toward Africa, but I think it is. On the one hand, if the Church we serve with our particular Africa calling “takes in anybody,” then we are part of a faith community that is seeking to live justly by being related far beyond particular priorities and understandings. Of course our churches fail on this all the time, here and in Africa. Much of the current tense debates here has to do with whether being “inclusive” is actually a good thing; in Africa, for the East African Revival to describe themselves as the “chosen ones” raises some pretty serious questions about the one Body of Christ. And yet, the very hope that the Church “still takes in anybody” challenges those in justice ministries to see beyond ourselves, toward a wholeness that embraces the richness of God’s call to God’s people. And that’s to the good, especially for a bunch of folk like us who can easily be consumed by “our” issue and our presumptions.

On the other hand, “taking in anybody” threatens to mute strong prophetic voices. That has been the long-standing suspicion – sometimes realized – of our justice partners outside faith settings. We’re more likely to want to be “balanced,” they say, and to “be nice” to everyone. How can we do that and still be prophetic? But denying inclusiveness in the name of prophetic purity leads into some dangerous waters. When the Church takes in anybody, it takes us in too. At its better moments it not only grants us a voice but strengthens and sustains our voice. And that too is to the good, especially for that messy community of faith which can easily dismiss “our” issue and our presumptions.

Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we’ll remove you from our list.

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