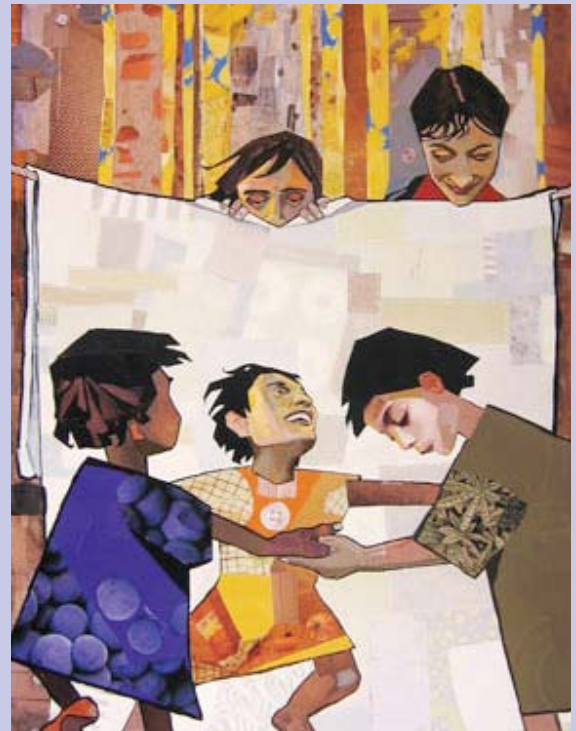




Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Humanity in God's Image

A Bible study series
advocating gender
justice





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A pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America

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Loved

A preface to the “Humanity in God’s Image” series

I smiled into the darkness as Torsten, our 4-year-old son, passed on the family night blessing. “April Maja Almaas,” he said solemnly, “you are known, you are loved, you are accepted. You are a child of God forever and ever.”

Across the room, I rocked the glider back and forth, nursing our daughter to sleep. As the hush settled, I drowsily began to ponder what ifs. What if everyone heard this blessing before they slept? What if all children could grow up confident that they were beloved? What if every citizen of this small planet knew they were a member of one sprawling family tree? What if we were ever-conscious, in our relations with one another, that to God each of us is equally precious?

I knew that my what ifs were impossibly naïve. But this time—cradled within the time-out-of-space-ness of sleepy time—I didn’t rein in my fantasies. I let them spin. They culminated in a paradise-like image of a cherishing global community. I pictured young hands holding old hands; gay and abled, poor and straight, disabled and rich; all genders; the apricot, tan, brown and cream hues of humanity together. All of us created in God’s image.



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“And the wolf dwells
with the lamb.”

Isaiah 11:6

Then came the “think,” as reality reeled me back down to the now. In the “then,” the wolf will dwell peacefully with the lamb. But today, we live in “not-yet” times. And, given half a chance, the wolf *will* feed.

Martin Luther emphasized that, although we live in the “not-yet,” we are nevertheless responsible for making the most of the “now.” We are to act for justice, to be Christ to one another. So what needs to be made just? Who are the wolves of our time?

Wolves can surely come in the form of individuals, yet Luther’s understanding of sin means we need to pay attention to the ways that we all sin through pervasive systems of privilege and oppression, such as sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism or ethnocentrism. These forces of sin are tightly woven into human life and prey on entire groups of people.

The hardest part for me to own is that, in the battle for my children’s flourishing, I’m not just up against the baddies out there. I’m part of the system too. We all are. Individually and corporately, actively and passively, consciously and unconsciously, we participate in matrices of privilege. And as participants in sexist, racist, classist, elitist, heterosexist and ethnocentric systems, we are bound to their unjust consequences. We are the wolves.

One way to realize more deeply our participation in unjust social systems is through the specific case of white privilege and racism. Marsha Foster Boyd and Carolyn Stahl Bohler wrote a deeply challenging piece that forwards the idea that all European Americans are either racist or actively anti-racist. They argue that—due to the rewards and benefits that a racist social matrix doles out to the privileged at the expense of the unprivileged—the only thing between being actively racist and being actively anti-racist, is to be passively racist (which is still racist).¹ As tough as it is to swallow, I find that their argument resonates. In fact, I think this principle applies to all of the “isms” with which we wrestle. If we are passive, we are complicit.

We’re often passive in matters of justice, not because we are pro-injustice but because we have been trained to feel that the status quo is normal. As Allan Johnson cautions in his book *The Gender Knot*: “Culture provides no end of smoke and mirrors that normalize and shield the status quo from view and criticism.”² It takes conscious effort to view the systems in which we live with new eyes. And it hurts to look at the disconnection between what we believe to be just and where we are today.

We long for justice. But we don’t want to feel guilty, beleaguered and miserable. The “Humanity in God’s Image” series has been crafted to offer a safe space for all people to gather together in dialogue. As we educate ourselves, consciously take the pulse of our institution, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and cultivate our awareness, we are taking active steps toward justice.

Even though we are not yet where we need to be, God sees us just as we are now. And we are known, we are loved, we are accepted. We are children of God forever and ever.

Song for the Journey:

ELW 325, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.”

Selected Bibliography and Recommended Reading

1. Boyd, Marsha Foster and Carolyn Stahl Bohler. “Womanist-Feminist Alliances: Meeting on the Bridge.” In *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, 189-209.
2. Coogan, Michael D., ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
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¹ Marsha Foster Boyd and Carolyn Stahl Bohler, “Womanist-Feminist Alliances: Meeting on the Bridge,” *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 195.

² Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 133.

Known

The church as a liberated co-humanity

Suggested Opening

Light: You may light a candle symbolizing God’s presence with us at all times and in all places.

Song: ELW 801, “Change My Heart, O God.”

Prayer: Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear and hatreds cease; and that with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.³



receive salvation. Through the font we are formed into a community. Emerging from the water, each one of us is seen by God as beloved—equally forgiven, equally loved, equally accepted, equally valued. The church is called to be a liberated co-humanity.

In her book *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*, Stephanie Paulsell points to the early church baptismal formulation in Galatians 3:27-28, saying:

In baptism we are clothed in our true identity as children of God, an identity deeper even than our ethnicity, our social status, our gender... . The trouble is, in this broken and struggling world, whether our bodies are honored or dishonored is usually not based on a recognition of our true identity as God’s own children, but precisely on our ethnicity, our social status, our gender.⁴

Introduction

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28).

Baptism is the great equalizer. Everyone is welcome to the font. Through the font we

There is a profound need for us as a community of the baptized to find ways to overcome the disconnection between our actions—guided by the systems of privilege that have shaped us—and our beliefs—rooted in Jesus Christ’s assurance of justice, liberation and the inherent worth of each us. Where might we start?

³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care: Occasional Services, Readings and Prayers*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 381.

⁴ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 57-58.

Martin Luther held that through baptism we gain both a key to understanding how we ought to live and self understanding as to what manner of person we are.⁵ Can we apply these considerations to ourselves corporately as a church?

The ELCA has already articulated an answer to the first piece: How ought we, the ELCA, to live? We have stated in our “Plan for Mission” that since “we are marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.” As one expression of this church, the churchwide organization carries from this church’s mission statement a commitment to “confront the scandalous realities of racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, age, gender, familial, sexual, physical, personal and class barriers that often manifest themselves in exclusion, poverty, hunger and violence.”⁶

This is how we believe that we “ought to live.”

Our church has just and noble intentions. But what about the second piece: What manner of institution—all of us together—is the ELCA now? How would we answer the following questions?

- How is our diversity? Is it increasing?
- Are men and women understood to be equally full leaders in every scope of leadership across all ELCA-related institutions and congregations? What is the female to male ratio for positions of leadership within our institution, including, for example congregation council presidents, presidents and CEOs of separately incorporated ministries and academic institutions, as well as deans and bishops?
- Is there equity in the number and frequency of second calls given to female

clergy as compared to male clergy?

- How long does it take for LGBTQ clergy to get calls as compared with straight clergy?
- Why is there a discrepancy in pay between African American and European American clergy?
- How equitable are pay and promotion practices at all ELCA-related institutions?
- Are women and children sexually harassed or assaulted at ELCA events, meetings and within our schools, congregations and other institutions?

Some of the answers might make us wince.

We are freed as children of God, and yet we have been born into and shaped by systems of injustice. It is difficult to look outside the matrix of these systems, to begin to challenge things that have seemed unquestionable, and to begin to see possibilities for new ways of being. But it is in our very questioning and dialogue together that we gain traction against the status quo.

Luther writes, “We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.”⁷ What would the church as a liberated co-humanity look like? In what direction do we—the members of the ELCA—need to guide our institution so that our life together in Christ honors the full co-humanity of us all? Let us approach the following text in the hope that our meditation on it and dialogue about it will inspire and guide us on our journey.

The Reading

John 4:1-29, 39-42 (Please find the complete version of this text in Appendix 1.)

⁵ Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 179.

⁶ See “ELCA Plan for Mission,” www.elca.org/planning.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 32: Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 32:24.

Commentary

The opening of the classic Samaritan Woman pericope is a well story. And in the Hebrew Bible when a man and a woman meet at a watering hole, the story is loaded with romantic overtones.⁸ The Bible has many such meetings: Rebecca and Isaac (Genesis 24), Rachel and Jacob (Genesis 29), and Zipporah and Moses (Exodus 2). According to this literary genre, when someone asks, “Please, offer me your jar so that I can drink,” it’s like the Cinderella slipper. If the response to this request is generous, it marks the giver as “the one.” Our Gospel writer plays with this convention, knowing that readers of this text would expect a love story once they recognized that it’s a well story.⁹

Jesus, a stranger, blows into town. He meets a woman at a well and asks her for a drink. He asks her if she’s single: “Woman, go call your husband” (4:16). And *voila!* The woman says, “I have no husband” (4:17). But *then*, instead of an embrace and trip into the city to meet her parents, Jesus breaks with the betrothal genre saying, “You are right in saying ‘I have no husband;’ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband!”¹⁰

This pericope is usually understood literally. In such a reading, Jesus confronts a “loose” and “ethnically inferior” woman. He stuns her with his supernatural knowledge of the private details of her relational life. Then the embarrassed woman tries to change the subject by saying in essence, “I see that you’re a prophet. . . . soooo, how about that mountain?” (4:20). Ultimately, however, her attempts to side-step the seer are in vain, and the conversation

continues until she comes to a place of faith in Jesus. And that is a solid approach to this text.

In this study, however, we are actively seeking new ways of looking at established systems. Therefore, I’ve chosen to approach our text from the less common metaphorical angle.¹¹ By choosing to read it in this way, we don’t have to narrowly define the woman in the text as a loose woman. The reasons that she and her people are considered ethnically inferior are examined and considered (not just taken as given). Seen in this way, the text shows Jesus taking this woman very seriously, and dialoguing with her about centuries of ethnic, religious, historical, political and geographical conflict.

Before diving right into the classic pericope, let’s note the interesting transition between Jesus’ activity in the Judean countryside in chapter 3 and how he came to be sitting “tired out” (4:6) at a well in Samaria at the start of chapter 4. Jesus is on the run! The Pharisees had heard that Jesus was “making and baptizing more disciples than John” (4:1). And Jesus—threatened by persecution—is fleeing to the safety of Galilee.¹² This is no leisurely retreat; the situation was so dire that “he *had* to go through Samaria” (4:4).

Danger shrouds the narrative. Samaria was not a safe place for Jesus and the disciples. Around this time, the long-standing hostility between Judeans and Samaritans was burning intensely. Josephus, a Jewish historian, reports of a mid-first century Samaritan attack on Galilean pilgrims who were traveling to Jerusalem. At that time, it was common for Judeans to avoid traveling into Samaria at all. When traveling to

⁸ David K. Rensberger, “Introduction and Annotation to the Book of John” in Harold W. Attridge, et.al., eds. *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Fully Revised and Updated, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1822.

⁹ Allen Dwight Callahan, *A Love Supreme* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 64.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ I am grateful to Allen Callahan for introducing me to the metaphorical approach of understanding this pericope.

¹² Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Chapters 1–6. Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 218.

Galilee, they would take the much longer route by Peraea, circumventing inhospitable Samaria completely.¹³

Jesus and the disciples' presence in Samaria is not only dangerous but also highly unusual. Verse 9 of this pericope notes: "Judeans do not share things in common with Samaritans." In fact, Judean disgust for Samaritans was so great that the rabbis had instituted prohibitions against eating with Samaritans.¹⁴ Yet in this pericope the desperate disciples are in the Samaritan town Sychar buying Samaritan food (4:8).

Meanwhile, by initiating conversation with a Samaritan woman, Jesus is not only breaking the social taboos prohibiting Judean contact with Samaritans, but he's violating gender conduct norms as well. It was against the social customs of the time for a Jewish religious teacher to speak in public with a woman.¹⁵ The text says that even his disciples were "astonished" when they came back and found him speaking with a woman (4:27).

Further, Samaritan women were considered to be perpetually unclean. Regulations stated that the uncleanness of a Samaritan woman would be conveyed by any vessel she touched. So if Jesus were to accept water from this woman's drinking jar, according to a strict reading of the law, he would be considered ritually unclean until evening.¹⁶ It is not surprising that the woman in our text is so taken aback by Jesus' request for water that she exclaims: "How is it that you, a Judean, ask a drink of me a woman of Samaria?" (4:9).

But on what is all this mutual rancor based?
Both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament

mention Samaritans very rarely. We are told that Judeans hated them and considered them ethnically inferior. Why? Who were they?

Samaritans¹⁷ trace their lineage to the Hebrew tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, which had historically inhabited Israel—the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israelites. During the first century, the religion of the Samaritans was similar to that of the Judeans. They worshiped YHWH. They accepted the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—as true Scripture. They observed certain Jewish feasts, practiced circumcision, and longed for the coming Messiah.

However, the Judeans—the descendants of the ancient Southern Kingdom of Israelites—did not acknowledge the authenticity of the Samaritan observances. They looked at Samaritans as being of mixed blood and mixed religion. In Judean eyes they were neither Jews nor gentiles.¹⁸ And why is this?

In 721 BCE the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians used a conquest tactic of removing the ruling elites from Samaria and then importing colonists to rule Samaria. Details of who these five foreign rulers or *ba'alim* are can be found in 2 Kings 17. It reads:

The King of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and placed them in the cities of Samaria. . . . [T]hey worshiped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away (vv. 24, 33).

13 Callahan, 63-64.

14 Haenchen, 219-220.

15 Michael D. Coogan, et. al., eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154.

16 Haenchen, 220.

17 It should be noted that today Samaritans are still an existing ethno-religious group.

18 Coogan, NT, 153.

Hence, the people who lived in the region—the descendants of both the remnant of Israel and the imported elites—were considered ethnically, religiously and politically a mixture.

When the descendants of the southern Israelites returned from Babylonian exile, they formed a holy community from which they excluded the descendants of the Israelites who remained in the land after the deportation.¹⁹ So when the Judeans built the second temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, they rejected Samaritan offers to help with the building. And once the temple was built, they excluded Samaritans from worshiping in it. This decision estranged the two groups.

In response to their exclusion from the holy community, the Samaritans built a rival temple 37 miles away, in Samaria on Mount Gerizim. The Judeans didn't view this kindly, and in 128 BCE they burned the Samaritan temple down.²⁰ This resulted in all-out hostility between Judeans and Samaritans.

When reading the text metaphorically, we understand Jesus to be referring back in history to the very start of the rift between the Judeans and the Samaritans in this interchange. In 4:18 Jesus tells the woman, “You have had five *ba`alim*.” The ancient Aramaic word *Ba`al* is typically translated as “husband” in this pericope (hence, the woman has had five husbands). However, *Ba`al* can also be translated as “ruler” or “god.” And so when we use the latter translation, we read Jesus' statement about five *ba`alim* to be referring to political rulers, not husbands or lovers.²¹ Consequently, the typical perception of this woman is radically altered. She is not loose.

She hasn't had five husbands. She is merely a member of a community with a particular political history.

Finally, when Jesus refers to the woman's sixth husband who isn't really a husband, he is jumping forward in history, to the current political environment in which he and the Samaritan woman lived. He is referring to the Roman occupation. Although Rome ruled the region from within Judea, not Samaria, the Samaritans were still subject to imperial rule.²²

So when we understand that Jesus is talking politics, not referring to this woman's past husbands or current lover, her seemingly odd response of pointing to the mountain suddenly makes sense. In verse 20 she says: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Here, she is courageously claiming her identity as one of the chosen people. She's saying in essence: “You Judeans may refuse to acknowledge us as true followers of YHWH or let us worship in your temple on Mount Zion, but do not forget that the Israelites who first entered the Promised Land—those were my ancestors too. In fact, do you remember the first thing that our ancestors did when they entered the land? They renewed our covenant with God, AND do you remember where they did that? They did it here. Here in Samaria. Here on this mountain. Yes, you people might have burned down our temple, but that doesn't change the fact that this mountain—not Mount Zion in Jerusalem—is one of the oldest and most venerable sites in the Bible!”²³ What an informed and gutsy response to Jesus' comment about her having had five *ba`alim*!

19 Callahan, 63.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, 65.

22 Ibid.

23 Rensberger in Attridge, 1822.

Then instead of responding with the typical Judean arguments defending Mount Zion, Jesus breaks the dam and lets the living water flow freely. He calls a stop to the rivalry.²⁴

He says the time for local religious claims is over. The time for exclusion and rejection is over. Israel doesn't need a geographical center—not at Zion or at Gerizim. It's time to worship God in spirit and truth.

New Testament Scholar Ernst Haenchen asserts that “[here the] Johannine doctrine approximates the Pauline: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek’ (Galatians 3:28).”²⁵ I would add that the Johannine doctrine, as articulated here, also relates to another stanza of the equalizing baptismal formula cited by Paul in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer male and female.” For immediately following his assertion that worship of God in spirit and truth will replace the cultic importance of both Mount Zion and Mount Gerizim (“There is no Jew or Greek”), the Johannine Jesus reveals his true identity as the Messiah for the first time:

Samaritan woman: “I know the Messiah is coming.... When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us” (4:25).

Jesus: “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (4:26).

Jesus doesn't make this disclosure in front of a large crowd or to a group of male disciples. He first reveals himself as the Messiah in private, to a woman—a Samaritan woman!

Invitation to dialogue and reflection:

1. This text highlights the fact that Jesus talked with women, taught women, valued women and commissioned

women, as well as people with whom his own “group” historically distrusted and detested. It reminds us that walking in Jesus' radical love we are called to do things that challenge the status quo, social norms and societal boundaries. What are some things that we need to question and challenge as we live out our baptism?

2. “You're a Samaritan and possessed by a demon!” was an insult thrown at Jesus in John 8:48. In many biblical passages Samaritans and Samaritanism are referred to negatively.

- a. What initially comes to your mind when you think “Samaritan”?

Now let's consider that the longest texts involving Samaritans in the Bible are the one we're discussing (the Samaritan Woman at the Well: John 4:1-42), the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and the pericope of Jesus healing ten lepers, where only one—the Samaritan—returns to thank Jesus (Luke 17:11-19).

- b. Do these positive portrayals alter or inform our mental pictures of Samaritans? In what ways?
- c. Name some stereotypes about other groups and about women that are contradicted by actual people we know. How can we be more mindful of the contradictions between stereotypes and reality? How can we challenge them?

3. This pericope involves two ethnic enemies meeting at a well. In the United

²⁴ Callahan notes, “The concluding clause of 4:22 is usually translated, ‘for salvation is of the Judeans.’ The verse is more properly rendered, ‘For it is salvation from the Judeans.’ Jesus offers deliverance from centuries of Judean antipathy; he speaks of liberation from the enormous ideological and political pressure that Judea has exerted on the Samaritans for centuries” (65).

²⁵ Haenchen, 228.

States, only 50 years have passed since many states stopped enforcing racial segregation. Under Jim Crow laws, people of color were prohibited from drinking water from white-only water fountains. Relationships of intolerance have followed us throughout history and across cultures. How is the church currently struggling with racial prejudice and race-based privilege? What about prejudices and privileges based on gender, sexual preference and economic status? In what ways are you struggling with privilege and prejudice?

4. What could it mean that Jesus chose to reveal himself as the Messiah first to a Samaritan woman? What does this choice say about Jesus or about the Samaritan woman? What does it tell us about the model for relationships into which Jesus calls us?

Closing:

Song: ELW 751, “The Lord is My Song.”

Prayer: Faithful God, you care for us day by day, and with you as our companion we are never alone. Grant to each one of your children fulfillment in life, confidence in your steadfast love, and support in the community of your people; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.²⁶

Selected Bibliography and Further Reading

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²⁶ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*, 374.

Chosen Our Shared “Imago Dei”



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Suggested Opening

Light: You may light a candle symbolizing God’s presence with us at all times and in all places.

Song: ELW 532, “Gather Us In” and/or ELW 296, “What Child is This.”

Prayer: Direct us, Lord God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and extend to us your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name; and finally, by your mercy, bring us to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.²⁷

Introduction

The Feast
He who is mighty has done great things for me.... He has filled the hungry with good things
(Luke 1:49, 53).

The milkful breasts brim blessings and quiet
The Child into stillness, past pain: El Shaddai
Has done great things for me. Earth nurses Heaven on the slopes of the Grand Tetons.
Grown-up, he gives breakfast, breaks bread,
Itinerant host at a million feasts.
His milkfed bones are buried unbroken
In the Arimethean’s tomb.

The world has worked up an appetite:
And comes on the run to the table he set:
Strong meat, full-bodied wine.

Wassailing with my friends in the winter Mountains, I’m back for seconds as often
As every week: drink long! Drink up!
—a poem by Eugene H. Peterson²⁸

All humans are created in the “imago dei” (the image of God). According to the creation narrative in Genesis 1:26-27, the creation of humanity was simultaneous and equal. The text reads:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and

²⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*, 362.

²⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 168. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.

over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So, God created humankind in his²⁹ image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The first humans were then simultaneously given the shared task of caring for creation as co-partners. This not only informs our understanding of gender relationships, but this is the basis for the Christian belief in the sanctity of human life.³⁰ Every person is created in the image of God and merits reverence as such.

Throughout history much debate has centered on exactly what it is about humanity that is in God’s image. Theologian Janet Martin Soskice enumerates some of the options: “Might it be in virtue of rationality or mind, or the soul, our freedom, our possibility of self-determination, or in our capacity to make moral judgments?”³¹ Personally, I am drawn to theologians who emphasize the relational nature of God.³² The God in whose image we are created is three distinct persons in non-hierarchical relation with one another. This God also created humankind equally and in community. I believe that this understanding of God and humanity has a lot to give to us when we make decisions regarding the formation of just social structures.³³

In the text for this session we will look at Mary, Jesus’ mother. The biblical text depicts Mary as a tremendously influential figure, first by the na-

ture of her role as the mother of the Messiah. The incarnation of the second person of the Trinity is a seminal event bringing about the very redemption of humankind, and God chose Mary to partner with the Divine to bring it about. Next Mary’s own actions are significant: Mary bore Jesus (Luke 2:5), birthed him (Luke 2:7), partnered with Joseph in raising him (Luke 2:40-51), and encouraged Jesus to perform his first miracle (John 2:1-5). And when he returned home—after beginning his ministry—and the people in Nazareth said that he was “out of his mind,” she was concerned, gathered her other children, and took them en masse to talk with Jesus (Mark 3:20-32), and when he was tortured and crucified she was there “standing near the cross” (John 19:25-27). Afterward, she accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to see where Jesus’ body was laid (Mark 15:47). After the ascension, when the core group of disciples gathered to vote on Judas’ replacement and to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, she was there too (Acts 1:13-2:4). Mary is a role model of human courage, tenacity and strength.

And yet, some choose to view Mary through patriarchal lenses that portray her as an archetype of female submission. In contrast to Eve, Mary has been held to be “beyond woman”—unattainable, perpetually virginal, pure, the exception to the rule. Women have been encouraged to imitate Mary’s so-called docility, to obey authority without question. Patriarchal framing of her life and tradition have tragically resulted in her becoming a somewhat ambivalent figure for some women.³⁴

29 Despite masculine God language, we recognize that God by nature transcends all categories of human gender. God is more than male, more than female, more than can be described by our culturally and historically limiting terms.

30 Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41.

31 *Ibid.*, 37.

32 Soskice, for example, writes: “Whatever meaning we give [the] startling divine plural of Genesis 1:26 ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ is not accidental. The Church Fathers saw in it a reference to the Trinity. It may originally have signified divine speech to an angelic court, but however we construe it, some connection is being made between the sociality of the Godhead and the sociality of the human race which is [also described as being] more than one, male and female. The point is not an androgynous God, or even a God who is both male and female. . . . The point [is] difference, and from within difference creativity, reciprocity, and generation, not as of God, but as of the creature made in the image of God. God is love. We learn love through the reciprocity of our human condition, through being in relation to others who are different from ourselves” (50-51).

33 Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 31.

34 *Ibid.*, 42.

When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, I had the privilege of being in a seminar course on preaching in which the late Peter Gomes instructed us not to avoid the difficult passages that sometimes land boulder-like in the path of the text. He told us that we weren't supposed to try to squeeze and contort our ways around these goliaths. Instead we were to march right up to them and address them directly. I am going to take this Gomesian approach with regard to the misogynistic writings of some of the men who helped to shape Christian theology. I hope that reading the typical positions touted by some of the church fathers can give us some helpful perspective and serve to remind us that it is imperative for us to be cautious and discerning when we accept the opinions that have been passed down to us.³⁵ Here are a few examples:

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225) lived around the time of the formalization of the New Testament canon. He was a prolific writer who was very influential in the early development of Christianity. He was also deeply misogynistic. In his writings he blamed Eve and the female sex for the fall of humankind:

The judgment of God upon [the female] sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one who unsealed the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting.³⁶

Augustine (354-430) authored many of the theological texts that were influential to the formation of Christian doctrine. He believed and taught

that women had “weaker minds” than men:

[There is a] natural order observed among men, that women should serve men, and children their parents, because it is just that the weaker mind should serve the stronger.³⁷

Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160-1240) was a medieval chronicler and theologian. His sermons give a bird's-eye view into contemporaneous ideas about the allegedly crafty and dangerous nature of women. In one of them he writes:

[T]he husband is his wife's head, to rule her, correct her (if she strays) and restrain her (so she does not fall headlong). For hers is a slippery and weak sex, not to be trusted too easily. Wanton woman is slippery like a snake and mobile as an eel; so she can hardly be guarded or kept within bounds. Some things are so bare that there is nothing by which to get hold of them. . . . So it is with woman: roving and lecherous once she has been stirred by the devil's hoe.³⁸

This sort of patriarchal misogyny—rooted in ancient philosophy—certainly does not reflect the mutuality of the creation account.

Unfortunately, some of the prejudices propagated by classically based opinions such as the ones quoted above continue to live on today in the patriarchal structures operating within society and within the church. While modern patriarchy does not tend to be as blatant as the examples we've just read, it has been informed by these past stances and continues to perpetuate deeply rooted prejudices about woman's aptitudes and capacities,

35 I am by no means advocating that we throw out everything that the church fathers wrote or thought. I'm simply advising caution. Yes, these men were human and products of their time, but they have also gifted us with much profound theology.

36 As quoted in Alcuin Blamires, ed. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 51.

37 As quoted in *Ibid.*, 77.

38 As quoted in *Ibid.*, 146.

whispering and hinting about the allegedly weak and emotional female nature and the supposedly strong and rational male nature. Ultimately, modern patriarchy manifests itself in unjust discriminatory practices, including violence, which are limiting and damaging to women and girls.

Some blame religion, the church or the Bible for prejudices, assumptions and practices that hurt women and stifle their flourishing. Many feminist, mujerista and womanist theologians, however, do not. Bonnie Miller-McLemore describes these women as “contend[ing] that Judaism and Christianity, when critically reinterpreted, hold an array of *antipatriarchal* [and] *antiracist* values.”³⁹ These theologians implore the church to own and eradicate the unjust systems of privilege operating within it. As helpful to the process of cleansing and healing, these theologians highlight the importance of articulating the religious grounds for radical mutuality⁴⁰ and the value of underscoring the creation of both women and men in the image of God.⁴¹

Today let us each strive—if only within our own minds—to combat modern patriarchy’s rankings of inferiority and superiority and the systemic granting and depriving of privileges based on these designations. As we dive into the next text, let us continually remind ourselves that we are all equally valued children of God, created in the very image of the Divine. And as such, each of us deserves equal regard and equal opportunities.

39 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology,” in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita L Gill-Austen, 85. Emphasis added.

40 Let us also note with the editors of *Mutuality Matters* that: “Mutuality is only possible when people can empathetically imagine the world of another without fear of losing their own voice and when they are able to change their mind or be changed by another as a result” (Anderson, Foley, Miller-McLemore, and Schreiter, eds., 8).

41 Miller-McLemore, 85.

42 François Bovon, *Luke 1:1-9:50*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 40.

43 Genesis 6:8.

44 Exodus 33:12.

The Reading

Luke 1:26-55 (Please find the complete version of this text in Appendix 2.)

Commentary

Many of us have heard the opening verses of this pericope so many times that it is difficult for us to remember just how extraordinary their content is. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to a small and unimportant town in Galilee with a stunning request for a twelve-year-old girl named Mary.⁴² The divine messenger greets Mary and tells her that God looks upon her with favor. And then he asks her if she will agree to become the mother of God incarnate. Whoo ahh!

There are very few instances of angelic visitation recorded in the Bible. And only a handful of select personages—such as Noah (“But, Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord”)⁴³ and Moses (“I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight”)⁴⁴—are described as having “found favor in God’s sight.” However, here in Luke 1:28 the angel Gabriel addresses the young virgin from Nazareth saying, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The statement of favor is repeated in verse 30: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” In the second instance she is even addressed by name—which is significant, given the dearth of named women in the biblical record.

Let us consider for a moment what Mary experienced. First, she is witness to an angelic visitation. During this encounter, she is told that she has been chosen by God to become the “Theoto-

kos” (the God-bearer). And should she accept this mission, the Holy Spirit will “come upon her” and the power of the Most High will “cover her.” And if this is not enough for a young woman to process, Mary is then told that the life that would grow in her womb, the child to whom she will give birth, will grow to become the promised Messiah. These were powerful words for a young Jewish woman in Roman-occupied Palestine.

Before the Incarnation of the Christ, before he was even conceived, Mary had a choice. She was given the option to say “No.” “No, though I may someday want children, now does not fit my five-year plan;” “No, though I may someday want children, I want to have them with my husband;” “No, though I may someday want children, I just want them to be healthy—I don’t want them to be God;” “Sorry, but no.”

To say “Yes” would be tremendously dangerous for Mary. She was engaged to a man named Joseph. This meant that a significant bride price had already been paid—either partially or completely—to Mary’s father.⁴⁵ If her fiancé didn’t believe her tale of an angelic visitation and holy conception, she would lose him. That would affect both her family’s fiscal situation and its reputation. At best, she would be publicly disgraced and her baby would be seen as illegitimate. At worst, she would be stoned for adultery in accordance with Mosaic Law.

And yet despite the risks, “No” was not the young Mary’s answer. After questioning Gabriel about how it would all be possible and then considering the answer, she looks at the angel and says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She does not helplessly or passively

submit, but she demonstrates her agreement.⁴⁶ She says “Yes.”

The Annunciation narrative ends abruptly after Mary’s “Yes.” Verse 38 reads, “‘Let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.” In the very next verse Mary is on the move; she sets out with haste for a Judean town in the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40).

The Lukan author makes no mention of the young Mary lingering in Nazareth to ponder the event or to discuss the situation with her parents or her fiancé, Joseph. In fact, the text makes no mention of her father or Joseph having any part in her decision-making at all. This is quite remarkable since legally as an engaged girl of her age, she was still under her father’s authority, although Joseph had already purchased proprietary rights to her.⁴⁷ But, it seems that Mary is not being sent away in embarrassment to hide her pregnancy. Rather she has decided to make this fairly long trip all by herself and for her own reasons.

Journeying to visit Elizabeth may seem like an odd choice for Mary. However, if we return to the Annunciation narrative, we see that in verses 36-37 Gabriel mentions a second womb, saying, “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:36-37). So the first thing that Mary does, after receiving Gabriel’s radical announcements about her own future, is to run to do the only instant pregnancy test that she could do. Gabriel had claimed that Elizabeth was pregnant and six months along. This is something tangible. Mary could easily see whether this was fact or fiction.

45 Bovon, 49.

46 Ibid., 53.

47 Ibid., 49.

Once she saw Elizabeth, she would know if it was all a dream—or if the heavenly messenger and his message were real.

When Mary enters the house, “the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt” (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks prophetically to Mary saying, “The mother of my Lord has come to me. . . . Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:43, 42). And *then* it is all very real for Mary. Then she pauses, stops running and breaks into song. The Magnificat is her joyous response to her holy pregnancy.

Mary begins with the words, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior” (Luke 1:47). Mary praises God for what God has done for her; she praises God for initiating the divine plan of redemption within her womb. She predicts that all generations will call her blessed (Luke 1:48). Then she begins to sing of the countercultural actions of God. She articulates a picture of a God who overturns systems of privilege and cares for the poor and oppressed. Mary’s God “scatters the proud” (v. 51), “brings down the powerful from their thrones” (v. 52), “lifts up the lowly” (v. 52), “fills the hungry with good things” (v. 53), and “sends the rich away empty” (v. 53). This is a song of liberation!

Some thirty years after Mary’s “Yes” at the Annunciation, and some thirty years after she articulated her liberation theology in the Magnificat, we see that Mary’s predictions were accurate. Jesus—whom we as a community proclaim together in the Apostles’ Creed as being “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁸ this man of whom we speak in the Nicene Creed as being “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made”⁴⁹—this man was

also Mary’s son. And Jesus puts his mother’s theology of liberation into action.

When Jesus was touched by the woman with blood, he said “Yes” (Luke 8:43-48). When the children were brought to him, he said “Yes” (Mark 10:13-16). When the blind asked for sight, he said “Yes” (Mark 8:22-26). Mary said “Yes” to God, and Jesus says “Yes” to us!

Invitation to Dialogue and Reflection

1. Janet Martin Soskice writes: “The [b]iblical picture is one in which reverence for and right relation with God entails reverence for and right relation with other people made in the image of God, and furthermore right relation with the rest of the created order.”⁵⁰ Discuss this statement. How does this affect the ways that we approach structures of privilege? Can you name some ways that life seems “normal” but might actually work against God’s intention of reverence?
2. When we see another person—regardless of the choices that they have made, the way that they look, or the situation in which they exist—we are meeting someone who is created in the image of the Divine. How does this affect our feelings and/or actions toward those to whom we find it difficult to relate? What are some ways that we can work to remind ourselves to see others as created in the image of God?
3. Are there ways in which the misogyny of the early church fathers still affects us today? What are they? What can be done about this?

48 See: www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief/The-Apostles-Creed.aspx

49 See: www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief/The-Nicene-Creed.aspx

50 Soskice, 64.

4. What adjectives other than docile and submissive could be used to describe Mary of Nazareth?

Closing

Song: ELW 715, “Christ Be Our Light”.

Prayer: Gracious God, as you made garments for Adam and Eve when they hid from you out of shame, so also through baptism you have dressed us in the garment of salvation. Help us to trust your acceptance and love for us in the midst of every circumstance, that we, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, may come before you without fear and may offer ourselves in service to your world; through the same Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.⁵¹

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⁵¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*, 365-366.

Forgiven All Humanity Fully in Need of Redemption

Suggested Opening

Light: You may light a candle symbolizing God’s presence with us at all times and in all places.

Song: ELW 708, “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love” and/or ELW 612, “Healer of Our Every Ill.”

Prayer: God of all comfort, quiet our minds that we may make room for your healing forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁵²

Introduction

“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:22).

All humans, without distinction, are equally and fully in need of redemption. Each of us suffers from some level of alienation or brokenness in our relationship to the Divine, our own selves, our connection with others or with creation.



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And as Paul wrote in Romans, God’s righteousness is available to all without distinction. By God’s justifying grace, all who believe are forgiven and declared righteous. Further, this justification does more than bring us ultimate forgiveness in the future. It also initiates a process of mental, emotional, relational and spiritual healing in the present.

In his “Lectures on Romans,” Martin Luther associated justifying faith not only with forgiveness, but also to spiritual growth and healing.⁵³ He writes:

Christ, our Samaritan, has brought His half-dead man into the inn to be cared for, and He has begun to heal him. . . . Now, is he perfectly righteous? No, for he is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until he has completely cured him. And [thus] he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact [he is] still a sinner; but he has the beginning of righteousness.⁵⁴

⁵² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*, 364.

⁵³ Deep gratitude goes to practical theologian Herbert Anderson for bringing this to my awareness.

⁵⁴ “Lectures on Romans, 1515,” *LW* 25: 260. Luther’s original language is preserved here.

Forgiveness, spiritual growth and healing are all received on the basis of trusting in Jesus Christ, who is willing and able to cure us completely. We can go in peace, trusting in what God has already done for us through Christ, and open to what God will accomplish in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Many discussions about sin and forgiveness focus solely on the individual. It is also important, however, to consider the implications of structural sin and the need for communal redemption. What is the social nature of sin? Theologian Marit Trelstad defines it this way: “[Sin] is understood as social in the sense that our broken relationships on a human-to-human (‘horizontal’) level affect the human-to-God (‘vertical’) relationship.”⁵⁵ Trelstad further asserts that “sin is evident in the world most perniciously in systems of sin such as racism and sexism.”⁵⁶

Trelstad’s horizontal and vertical relationship paradigm resonates especially well with a text in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. In verses 31-46, all nations are gathered before Christ and each person is welcomed or instructed to depart based on human-to-human sin or human-to-human reconciliation. What we have done to each other, we have done to Christ. The powerful verses read as follows:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care

of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

Jesus seems to be stating that social justice and injustice affect the individual human-Divine relationship.

Are we individually responsible for social sins? Trelstad asserts that it is “To the extent that we perpetuate systems of oppression and alienation, [that] we participate in the social nature of sin.”⁵⁷ But *are* we participants in unjust social systems? Sadly, the answer is “Yes.” We have received systemic legacies without having been asked whether or not we want them. We have been born into systems of hierarchy, and “paths of least resistance”⁵⁸ make them seem natural or even invisible to us.⁵⁹ Consciously or not, we are participants in unjust structures.

How do we get out? How can we move from paths of least resistance to paths of righteousness? Sociologist Allan Johnson claims that responsibility is the first step, saying:

Responsibility begins with simply acknowledging that patriarchy [and other systems of injustice] exist to be understood, that we’re connected to [them] and [their] consequences, and that we have both the power and obligation to do *something* about it and how we participate. . . . We may not be able to

55 Marit Trelstad, “Lavish Love: A Covenantal Ontology” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 123.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Here is the definition from the Justice for Women Basic Vocabulary for Understanding Patriarchy and Sexism Resource: “Paths of least resistance are the easiest possible or most acceptable avenues of response or action or thought shaped by social systems. We follow them because they seem either obvious or correct. Sometimes the fact that other paths exist is not obvious until someone chooses to subvert the norm and takes an alternate route. The person/s who go outside the paths of least resistance in order to change the status quo is often the focus of resistance, whether in the form of outright violence or simple social disapproval.” www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Justice/Justice-for-Women/Sexism-and-Patriarchy.aspx

59 See Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, rev. and updated ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 216.

do much, but it doesn't take much from each of us to produce change.⁶⁰

We have great reason to hope for our communal redemption. Systems are not unchangeable; they only happen as people participate in them.⁶¹ Oppressive systems cannot stand the strain of many people acting against them.⁶² As we strive to live out our baptisms mindfully resisting injustice and consciously practicing love in interpersonal relationships and in institutions, showing acceptance, and advocating for the marginalized, battered, deprived and outcast, we will push the structures in which we live toward greater equity. We can change the systems!

The Reading

Luke 7:36-8:3 (Please find the complete version of this text in Appendix 3.)

Commentary

The biblical record often depicts Jesus with women. Jesus talks with women, teaches women and heals women. And in most instances, he does so with a respect, dignity and acceptance that is in stark contrast to the patriarchal societal norms of first-century Greek and Roman ruling families.⁶³ In fact, we see Jesus welcoming into table fellowship not only women but all people from the margins—people Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes as “the scum of Palestinian society.”⁶⁴ In the text for this session (both the pericope and following verses), we get a crisp picture of the extent of Jesus' regard for women.

In the pericope, Jesus has been invited to a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee named

Simon. As the guests—presumably all men—were seated around the table, in comes a gate-crasher. It's a woman carrying a bottle of costly oil. Ignoring the scorn of the other guests, she goes straight to Jesus and falls weeping at his feet. When he doesn't push her away, her tears become so copious that they bathe his feet. Then she lets down her hair and dries his tear-soaked feet. After this she anoints his feet with the fragrant emollient and covers them with kisses.

The Pharisee is disgusted by the actions of the uninvited woman and far from impressed with Jesus' response. He is certain that if this Jesus really were a prophet, he would know that the woman was a sinner. And he believed that a true prophet wouldn't risk defilement from a sinner's touch.

Just as Simon mentally concludes that the Galilean is not a true prophet, Jesus speaks to him. The nature of the parable that Jesus then tells suggests that he could hear the Pharisee's very thoughts. It is about a merciful creditor and two debtors. When Jesus asks Simon who he thought would love the creditor more, the Pharisee grudgingly admits that the greatest debtor would feel the greatest gratitude (Luke 7:43). Jesus affirms Simon's answer and immediately turns his back on Simon and directs his loving gaze at the woman.

Without looking away from the woman, Jesus addresses Simon again, directing him to set aside his judgment and to actually look at the woman. Jesus then proceeds to compare the woman's actions positively to Simon's and to affirm her actions over his. The Pharisee, for example, could have received Jesus with the gracious hospitality that one would lavish on a

⁶⁰ Ibid., 209.

⁶¹ Ibid., 225.

⁶² Ibid., 243.

⁶³ While it is common from a Christian perspective to read Jesus as a “feminist” hero, it is important to realize that patriarchy in that time was complex. We should therefore avoid anti-Judaic readings of Jesus' ministry with and to women. See Mary C. Boys, “Patriarchal Judaism, Liberating Jesus: A Feminist Misrepresentation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 56 (2002), 48-61.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th Anniversary Ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 129.

special guest—but chose not to.⁶⁵ The woman, on the other hand, demonstrated lavish love.

New Testament scholar François Bovon argues that it is insufficient simply to say that the woman properly received Jesus as a guest when his host failed to do so. Bovon contends that she demonstrated far more than mere hospitality, saying, “Such close fellowship with Jesus is otherwise seldom narrated. Everywhere in this pericope one reads the verb ‘to love’ where one would otherwise find ‘to hear’ or ‘to believe.’” The woman comes to him and demonstrates her desire to follow him.⁶⁶

Jesus does not rebuff the woman’s love. He sees her being, her particularity and accepts her. Jesus forgives her sins. Then he says, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Bovon encourages the reader to note “the double movement, from sin to salvation (‘your faith has saved you’) and from salvation to Christian life (‘go in peace’).”⁶⁷ This peace is not simply promised for the future; the believer is already given restored peace—now.

It should be noted that this pericope has a complex and somewhat problematic tradition-history.⁶⁸ Elements of this narrative are found in John 12:1-8 (where Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus’ feet) and Mark 14:3-11 (where an unnamed woman anoints Jesus’ head). Both of those narratives give more empowered portrayals of women anointing Jesus. If one could choose only one of these three narratives, it would make sense to choose the one naming Mary of Bethany or the one depicting the woman anointing Jesus’ head rather than merely his feet (as a prophet anoint-

ing the head of a king).⁶⁹ However, the pericope found in the Gospel of Luke is special since it is the only one also to include the extraordinarily valuable list of Jesus’ female disciples.

Unfortunately, this Lukan text not only leaves the woman unnamed and depicts the woman as anointing Jesus’ feet (rather than his head), but it is also the only one of these three texts that describe the anointing woman as “a sinner” (Luke 7:37). And although the pericope does not specify what sort of sinner the woman is, traditionally, she has come to be viewed as a prostitute. This is particularly regrettable, since some feel that this association then shades the subsequent listing of female disciples, making them morally suspect as well.

Although this woman is conventionally referred to as a prostitute, it is certainly not conclusive that she was one. The text simply refers to her as a “sinner,” and in first-century Palestine the label “sinner” could be used to characterize a wide range of people. It is true that pimps and prostitutes were identified as sinners, but New Testament scholar Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that other unfortunates were also given this label simply because they worked in undesirable service occupations. For example, she lists “swine herders, garlic peddlers, bartenders, seamen, public announcers, tax collectors, servants [and] those in other occupations that were deemed ‘polluting’ or ‘unclean’ by theologians and interpreters of the Torah.” Schüssler Fiorenza also notes that the classifications of the time were such that the woman could even have been labeled a sinner simply by being the wife of a notorious sinner!⁷⁰ So we see that prostitute

65 Bovon, 296.

66 Ibid., 298.

67 Ibid.

68 Schüssler Fiorenza, 128.

69 Note that some scholars maintain that one should not choose one version over another, that these are not one story recorded differently in these gospel texts, but are in fact three separate occurrences.

70 Schüssler Fiorenza, 128-130.

is only one option from a multiplicity of “sinful” professions or associations that this woman could have had.

Even if this woman were a prostitute, surely she should not merit quite as much judgment for practicing this trade as has typically been heaped upon her. Schüssler Fiorenza describes the circumstances surrounding a woman of antiquity entering into prostitution as follows:

Prostitutes usually were slaves, daughters who had been sold or rented out by their parents, wives who were rented out by their husbands, poor women, exposed girls, the divorced and widowed, single mothers, captives of war or piracy, women bought for soldiers—in short, women who could not derive a livelihood from their position in the patriarchal family or those who had to work for a living but could not engage in “middle” or “upper” class professions.⁷¹

Further, in the specific case of first-century Palestine—which was plagued by famine, war and colonial taxation—the portion of women pressured into prostitution must have been especially high.⁷² These women were victims of systemic sin, and should not be asked to shoulder the blame alone.

Jesus demonstrated repeatedly that he did not hold such women singularly responsible for the sins of the societies in which they lived. Recall, for instance, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). While he did not deny that sin had been perpetrated and he later instructed the woman “not to sin again” (John 8:11), neither did Jesus allow the community to bludgeon this woman as the scapegoat for

a communal sin. Instead he said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:3).

It can also be fruitful for us to walk away from conventions painting this woman into the role of sinner. We can dwell instead on the sad fact that, as Schüssler Fiorenza points out, each category of sinners was “in one way or another marginal people who were badly paid and often abused.”⁷³ Just as Jesus looked past this woman’s sin and saw her demonstrations of love and faith, we can choose to focus on her actions rather than her reputation. Then we can see her as a courageous woman of faith and potentially new disciple of Jesus. And, in so doing, we will also remove the unfortunate guilt-by-proximity from the women listed as Jesus’ disciples in the subsequent verses.

* * *

These verses give me goose bumps! When I reflect on all of the images that I’ve seen and messages that I’ve heard depicting Jesus choosing male apostles, traveling with an all-male group and teaching primarily men, this text is remarkable!⁷⁴ Here we read that Jesus did welcome female disciples and that a number of women did choose to break the social mores of their time and followed him as he traveled. In recent years scholars have focused more on these women, but why hasn’t the existence of Jesus’ female disciples gotten more press time in our churches? We’re told about them right here in one of the four canonical gospels. Highlighting these women can offer rich nourishment and perspective to our congregations.

The veracity of this listing has been attested to. Bovon asserts that this list of female

71 Ibid., 128.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 299.

disciples is comparable form-critically to the lists of male disciples (such as the one found in Luke 6:12-16). He notes, “The three named women here recall the inner group of the circle of the Twelve.”⁷⁵

Just as Peter is listed first in the catalogs of male disciples, so Mary Magdalene leads the lists of women.⁷⁶ Because of the commonness of her name, “Mary,” the description of where she was from—the village of Magdala—is usually added when she is the Mary to whom reference is made. Mary Magdalene probably began to follow Jesus after he healed her.⁷⁷

The next woman, Joanna (whose name means God is merciful), is a very interesting addition to the list of disciples. Whereas many of the male disciples were fishermen and trades people, this disciple was a member of court society. Her husband, Chuza, was Herod’s steward. (Usually stewards served as administrators, overseers or governors.) Chuza’s role would have given Joanna a certain amount of prestige. It is quite remarkable that Joanna left her husband and the court to follow Jesus.⁷⁸

We do not know very much about the third female disciple listed here. Her personal name, Susanna (meaning “lily”), is rare. Although Mary Magdalene and Joanna are mentioned by name again as being among the women who visited Jesus’ empty tomb (Luke 24:10), Susanna’s inclusion on this list (Luke 8:3) is the only time she is mentioned—at least by name—in the New Testament.⁷⁹

This text notes that these three women and “the many other women with them” (Luke 8:3)

generously provided financially for the care of the group from their own personal resources. Their role, however, was not limited to that of patronesses. These women were also described as actively taking part in the life of the assemblage by providing service—probably contributing by way of hospitality and providing leadership to the traveling household.⁸⁰

This group of female followers is mentioned repeatedly by the author of Luke-Acts. “The women who had followed him from Galilee” are mentioned as being present at the crucifixion (23:49). “The women who had come with him from Galilee” are again mentioned as watching the tomb (23:55-56). And it was Jesus’ female disciples (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women with them”) who found the empty tomb and were given the message of Christ’s resurrection by the angels (24:1-11). Finally after the ascension, “certain women” were present with the apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers as they all gathered in the upstairs room devoting themselves to prayer (Acts 1:13-14). Jesus was not accompanied solely by 12 men; he traveled with female disciples as well.

Invitation to Dialogue and Reflection

1. Stephanie Paulsell writes, “Christian table life must always have room for unexpected guests. It can never be a closed system to which only the familiar and acceptable are welcome. . . . Jesus’ own table life had room for all, an openness we are called to imitate.”⁸¹ In this pericope, Jesus opens a closed table circle. What are some ways

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 301.

77 Ibid., 300.

78 Ibid., 301.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Paulsell, 108.

that our “table”—as a society and as a denomination—is closed? How can we open the table?

2. Each of us craves forgiveness or healing in some way. What wounds need to be healed and/or forgiven in the ELCA?
3. Jesus is usually depicted as traveling with a group of 12 male disciples. This text, however, names three female disciples and mentions them as being part of a larger group of women that accompanied and aided Jesus in his ministry. What could be the reason for the all-male depictions? How might the conscious awareness of Jesus having both male and female disciples with him on his travels change our perceptions of discipleship, ministry or biblical history?
4. Some assert that women are more in need of redemption than men. Why would someone believe this? What are some helpful responses that we could make to such a stance?

Closing

Song: ELW 641, “All Are Welcome.”

Prayer: O Lord our God, we need your guidance in all we do. Let your wisdom counsel us, your hand lead us, and your arm support us. Conform us to your image and make us like our Savior, that in some measure we may live here on earth as he lived and may act in all things as he acted; through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁸²

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⁸² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care*, 195.

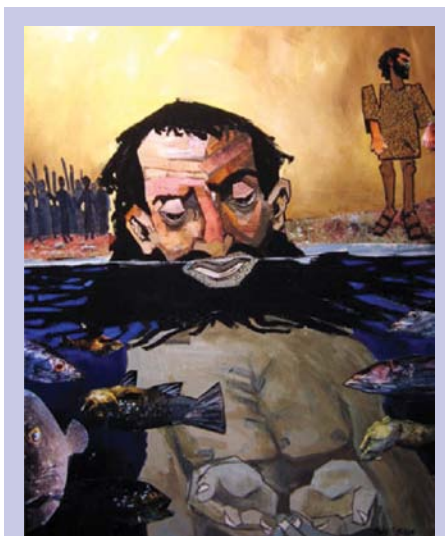
Bidden

Moving from paths of least resistance to paths of righteousness: A sending

When we are led to still waters, we need to ask ourselves why. It's easy to assume that it's for our immediate gratification. But perhaps God has us there because the waters need to be stirred in order for justice to flow. Perhaps God has brought us to the waters in order to ask us to look again to see whether they really are as clear as we've always thought they were. Perhaps God has brought us to the waters so that we can pull up someone who's been pushed down under the surface. Sometimes God asks us to "wade in the water,"

like the Israelites wading out of slavery through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-16); like Naaman washing in the healing waters of the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-15); or like the African Americans—about whom the spiritual refers—who waded in the water in order to get the bloodhounds off their scent as they followed the Underground Railroad to freedom.

But wading in isn't an easy task. Even if we see the need, value and justice in



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“He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.”

Psalm 23: 2b-3

change, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the difficulty of effecting transformation. Changing gender injustice is not a mundane task; cost, emotion and the transformation of power and privilege are involved. These changes can be uncomfortable, threatening and exhausting. So to use the words of Christie Gozard Neuger where do we muster up the “energy to maintain [a] critical perspective in the face of enormous pressures to conform to cultural definitions”?⁸³ How do we resist the forces working to immobilize us into passivity?

And how do we get unstuck?

Practical theologian Herbert Anderson proposes that in times of change and uncertainty, we have a Lutheran strength that can help us to “connect our Lutheran theology with the practice of faithful living.”⁸⁴ He contends, “The centrality of paradox in Lutheran theology means that Lutherans live in a both/and rather than an either/or world.”⁸⁵ What Anderson calls the “paradox perspective” can equip

83 Christie Cozad Neuger, “Women and Relationality,” in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 125.

84 Herbert Anderson and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 14.

85 *Ibid.*, 21.

us with the “give” necessary to consider, own and challenge the injustices of rigid hierarchical structures. The paradox perspective can be a life-giving tool; through it, for example, we remember that we are both saint and sinner. Yet ultimately Anderson holds that we require something more—something that makes us long to live into the paradox perspective. He believes that the additional piece is an “attitude of the heart” or “disposition of the soul.” He describes this soul-deep attitude as one that has been “formed in faith by the Spirit of Christ,” and that serves to work in us continually, fostering “paradoxical living.”⁸⁶ And it is this, the ability to live paradoxically, that Anderson considers to be “the necessary link between what we believe and how we practice theology.”⁸⁷

I believe that God is working restoration in our institution. I believe that we are being led from paths of least resistance⁸⁸ onto paths of righteousness. I believe that the faith of each of us individually is being formed by the Spirit of Christ. And I believe that God will trouble the waters.

“O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)⁸⁹.

Sending

Song: ELW 459, “Wade in the Water.”

Ritual: You may stand, form a circle, and go around blessing one another with oil. Dip your forefinger into the oil, mark a cross on the hands of the person next to you

and say, “May you be healed, may you be a healing presence.”

Blessing: Beloved, as you journey out, know that we are all loved and chosen. We have been since the beginning of time. We were carved into being by the Eternal Source of Love. We are welcome in the arms of the divine embrace. We are all most intimately known, accepted and cherished. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

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⁸⁶ Ibid., 14

⁸⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁸ Here is the definition from the Justice for Women Basic Vocabulary for Understanding Patriarchy and Sexism Resource: “Paths of least resistance are the easiest possible or most acceptable avenues of response or action or thought shaped by social systems. We follow them because they seem either obvious or correct. Sometimes the fact that other paths exist is not obvious until someone chooses to subvert the norm and takes an alternate route. The person/s who go outside the paths of least resistance in order to change the status quo is often the focus of resistance, whether in the form of outright violence or simple social disapproval.” www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Justice/Justice-for-Women/Sexism-and-Patriarchy.aspx

⁸⁹ Attridge, 1247.

Appendix I

John 4:1-29, 39-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” . . .

³⁹Many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans

came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41And many more believed because of his word. 42They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 153NT-155NT.

Appendix 2

Luke 1:26-55

26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37For nothing will be impossible with God." 38Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the

house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."⁹¹

91 Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96NT-97NT.

Appendix 3

Luke 7:36-8:3

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins,

which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

8 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.⁹²

⁹² Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110NT-111NT.

