
But Will This Preach?

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“**T**his church shall develop social statements...that will guide the life of this church as an institution and inform the conscience of its members in the spirit of Christian liberty.”¹ “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” is the thirteenth social statement approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) since its formation in 1988. These social statements have guided ELCA advocacy in federal and state governments, encouraged development of new resources from the publishing arm of the church, and shaped curricula at church-related colleges and seminaries. Hopefully this most recent social statement will do the same. But how does it “inform the conscience of [the ELCA’s] members”? How do people engage this social statement within their congregations? Some congregations will organize forums and study groups. But even if attendance is excellent, it is probably true that more people will participate in worship than in educational forums. How can preaching awaken people to the call for justice described in this social statement?

Preaching *about* the social statement

Some people studied the social statement as part of the review process leading up to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, while others still don’t even know it exists. Preaching about the statement may sound like a series of lectures, but that doesn’t mean such preaching will be overly academic. Over time a preacher makes use of different sermon forms, and a teaching sermon should be part of the mix.¹ Most Lutheran sermons engage scripture texts along with other writings. This social statement can be one of these other writings. Preaching a series of sermons for a month, however, is likely to cause more resistance than is helpful. Some people may decide to stay away if they know a month of Sundays will be devoted to a statement that has the word “sexism” in it.

A better option is to preach on themes from the statement over time, perhaps once a month or when there is a particularly appropriate connection to the lectionary texts. A brief portion of the statement can be read as the “epistle” for that Sunday. Many of Paul’s epistles dealt with questions or problems in communities he had visited, or in the case of Romans, a community he hoped to visit soon. A social statement is like a letter to each congregation

1. Ronald J. Allen, *The Teaching Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) is a helpful resource and includes five models for teaching sermons.

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at this time of history.

For example, each sermon could ask a question related to the social statement. The questions that follow refer to specific pages in the statement, with several more pages available as additional resources:

- “Does God really desire abundant life for all—even *those* people?” (2, 8, 14)
- “Does sin only mean my personal sin or is sin something bigger?” (3, 13)
- “Is there a unique Lutheran reading of scripture?” (4–6, 25–26)
- “How does patriarchy harm men and boys?” (21–22)
- “What does it mean to respect diverse bodies?” (7, 16)
- “Does it really matter if we always call God ‘Father?’” (6, 33)

Start with the “Short Statement” (2–8) to determine which themes seem most important for this congregation. Since each topic in the Short Statement corresponds with more information in the “Full Statement” there is more than enough material for a sermon.

Remember that a teaching sermon is still a proclamation of the Gospel. A sermon on sin doesn’t leave people in despair but promises forgiveness and transformation. In his book, *The Word Before the Powers*, Charles Campbell says sermons that call for transformation need to both *expose* and *envision*. Exposing alone leaves people in despair; envisioning alone leaves people wondering what world the preacher inhabits!²

Looking ahead at the lectionary readings, preachers will also find texts that relate to themes in the social statement. On July 12, 19, and 26, consider preaching a series of sermons on the Holy

2. Charles Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), Chapter 6, 105–127.

Spirit. Romans 8 is the appointed epistle for those Sundays, lifting up Paul's vivid images of the Holy Spirit. The social statement doesn't dwell at length on the Holy Spirit, but the neglect of the Spirit in theological writings relates to the neglect of women's voices. The Hebrew word *ruah* is feminine and the Greek word *pneuma* is neuter, but these Spirit-words are seldom translated as "She" in scripture, creeds, or liturgies. Even as women and girls have been silenced for too long in church and society, the Spirit has been silenced within many churches. Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson laments this ongoing neglect of the Spirit in our time:

What is most baffling about forgetfulness of the Spirit is that what is being neglected is nothing less than the mystery of God's personal engagement with the world... the mystery of God closer to us that we are to ourselves, drawing near and passing by in quickening, liberating compassion.³

Romans 8 offers compelling images of the Spirit that can give voice to this neglected part of the Trinity. Such a series also encourages people to expand images for the Spirit in the liturgy and in hymns such as "Like the Murmur of a Dove's Song" or "Mothering God." Both hymns are in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

A teaching sermon will be more effective if there is flesh on the bones of ideas and concepts. This is especially true when there is resistance to statements about patriarchy and male supremacy. Stories that show how patriarchy harms men and boys can break through walls of resistance. In *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, the authors share this story about one man's experience:

When I was about 6 years old my father suddenly stopped holding my hand when we went shopping or walking together. I never understood why. At about the same time he stopped tucking me in at night and no longer gave me a good night kiss. I remember thinking that I must have done something wrong to make him stop loving me, but I was afraid to ask...

Many, many years later I understood why. I overheard him in a conversation he was having with my cousin, who had a young son. "You shouldn't be showing him affection like that anymore; he's too old for that!" My father proceeded to explain that if he did things like holding his son's hand or giving him a kiss he would "make him gay."

I doubt that my father's withholding affection made me straight instead of gay. Even if it did, the cost was much too high. He and I will never be able to recover the years of lost affection. All I ever wanted was to know that he loved me.⁴

3. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 131.

4. Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph E. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993),

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A story such as this not only shows the harm done to one man but points to the intersectionality of gender and sexual orientation.

Preaching shaped by the social statement

Hopefully all preaching will be shaped by this social statement even if the statement itself is not quoted. Preachers are called to ask questions such as these: Do I include stories about women and girls in my sermons? Do my stories reinforce stereotypes of female and male roles? Do people hear the voices of multi-cultural, multi-racial women even if the congregation is 99 percent white? How can my preaching be shaped by expansive language for God? (It can be easier to explore new language in a sermon than to change words that are printed in the hymnal.) How can sermons engage contemporary issues that affect women in particular ways: intimate violence, mistreatment of immigrant families, diminishment of women's access to reproductive health care, murder of trans women (especially women of color), and other oppressive actions that are in the news?

Most ELCA congregations follow the rhythm of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), though a number use the Narrative Lectionary created by Luther Seminary. This year the RCL focuses on Gospel readings from Matthew, along with readings from the Old Testament and semi-continuous readings from the epistles. The "Preaching Helps" in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* begin with Palm/Passion Sunday and Holy Week. After a detour into John's gospel, the year of Matthew continues through the end of the church year in November. While it isn't possible to look at every Sunday, a glimpse at a few Sundays gives a taste of how preaching can be shaped by this social statement:

Palm/Passion Sunday and Holy Week

In many congregations the focus for this Sunday will be the Passion story from Matthew. Palm Sunday takes a back seat, read as an introduction to the Procession with Palms but seldom engaged for preaching. (For a discussion of whether to emphasize Palm Sunday

or Passion Sunday, see *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Vol. 44, No. 2, April 2017, 43–44). The preacher and worship committee could decide to focus on Palm Sunday as the primary text even though that choice has gone out of favor. The appointed gospel reading from Matthew 21:1–11 includes the promise made to “the daughter of Zion” in Zechariah. What daughters might be part of the “very large crowd” praising Jesus as he enters Jerusalem? Scan the gospel of Matthew and you’ll find several women who could be in the crowd: the woman cured of a hemorrhage, the young girl Jesus brought back to life, the feisty Canaanite woman whose daughter was cured, the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, and others whose stories we’ll never know. In describing the crucifixion, Matthew says, “Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him” (27:55).

If Passion Sunday is the focus, begin the gospel reading with Matthew 26:6 rather than 26:14, which is appointed. The omitted verses tell the story of the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany. Defending the woman’s choice to anoint him with expensive ointment, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (26:13) But her name has been forgotten! When the Passion Story is read there is often no sermon, but the liturgy could honor the memory of this woman. Include her story at the communion table: “Not long after Jesus was anointed by an unnamed woman, he gathered with his closest friends. He took bread, broke it and blessed it...” and continue with the Words of Institution.

Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Vigil of Easter can be very troubling for women, even as The Great Three Days are central to communities of faith, including women. Perhaps this issue of *Currents* comes too close to Holy Week for more reading, but two excellent books are helpful resources, if not for this year, then next: *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad, and *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, edited by Mary J. Streufert. Both books include diverse voices that not only challenge what is harmful but construct transformative, life-giving perspectives on the cross.

One word about the Vigil of Easter. While worship manuals list four texts that *must* be read, plus eight additional texts, this traditional list can be changed to include more stories about women from Hebrew scripture. Don’t be afraid to color outside the lines of worship books!

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1–10 is the Gospel reading this year. As in all four gospels, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. She’s the only person who is always there. In Matthew she is accompanied by “the other Mary,” identified earlier as “Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (27:56). Don’t neglect these women even when the focus is on the risen Jesus.

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Third Sunday after Easter

The Gospel for this Sunday is Luke’s story of Cleopas and another disciple meeting a stranger on the road to Emmaus. We know the stranger is Jesus—but who is the unnamed disciple? Some feminists have ventured to say the other disciple was Cleopas’ wife. (Theologian Letty Russell made that claim in a lecture when I was in seminary at Yale Divinity School.) There’s nothing wrong with imagining in a sermon as long as you let people know what you’re doing. (“Who was that other disciple? Could it have been Cleopas’ wife?”) Because women were often left out of scripture, preachers need to find ways to listen to their presence beneath the surface of the written texts.

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2 offers some of the strongest affirmation of women as prophets and leaders. Preaching on a text from Joel, Peter proclaims that sons *and daughters* will prophecy. Even those considered at the bottom of society—the sons *and daughters* of slaves—will prophesy (italics added). This is a day to celebrate the 50th anniversary of women’s ordination, the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color, and the 10th anniversary of the ordination of partnered LGBTQ people. *We Are Church, We Are Called: 50, 40, 10* is a wonderful resource available on line [<https://www.elca.org/50yearsofordainedwomen>]. Listen, too, for stories of women prophesying in this time of history—young activists such as Greta Thunberg, Jacinda Ardern, the courageous prime ministry of New Zealand, and women in your own community.

Trinity Sunday

The reading from Genesis 1 is a glorious doxology praising God for creation. In this text female and male are created at the same moment: "...in the image of God they were created, male and female [God] created them" (Gen 1:27). There is no hint of superiority of one gender over the other. This text urges us to use female as well as male language for God. Even if human traditions have resisted this equality, God was very pleased: "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31a). In the sermon and in prayers and hymns, help people experience expansive language for God, even if this language is new to them. "Although most Christian liturgy favors androcentric and Eurocentric language and imagery, expansive language and imagery are both scripturally rooted and theologically faithful" (Statement, 29; see also 6, 11, 23, 33, and 47).

Two Feast Days that Could be Honored

The church calendar designates two summer days as feast days for Mary Magdalene, Apostle (July 22) and Mary, Mother of Jesus (August 15). Occasionally these days fall on a Sunday, but not in 2020. Preacher and worship teams can decide to honor these feast days on the nearest Sundays. Texts appointed for both days include stories of these two women, as well as other women such as Ruth.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This important Gospel text (Matthew 18:15–20) comes on Labor Day weekend in 2020. Consider moving it, because Jesus says something here that relates to tradition and change: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (18:18) *Binding* and *loosing* are rabbinic terms carried over into the New Testament. Jesus is saying that the Church (*ecclesia*) needs to discern what is binding from the tradition and what needs to be loosed.

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Consider a debate from the middle of the nineteenth century: Should anesthesia be given to a woman in severe labor pain, pain that threatened the life of mother and child? The problem was Genesis 3:16: "To the woman God said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children...'" Medical journals in the U.S. and Great Britain published arguments pro and con. Doctors who studied Hebrew and the original language of Genesis 3:16 seemed to oppose anesthesia. On the other side, someone argued that God was the first anesthesiologist, putting Adam to sleep in order to create Eve! Over time anesthesia became available to women to ease debilitating labor pains. How did this happen? Perhaps those who supported anesthesia appealed to other scripture texts such as this one from Romans: "All the commandments are summed up in this one: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13:9). They *loosed* the authority of Genesis 3:16 because they believed love for neighbors was *binding*, and "neighbors" included women.

There are many more texts to consider between Palm Sunday and the end of the Church year. Hopefully every preacher will read "Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action" and preach sermons shaped by this historic social statement.