
Silent Voices, Still...But Faith...Lifting Up the Voices of the Daughters of Hagar in ‘Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action’

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Introduction

Patricia Hill Collins in her work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, suggests that justice is doomed to fail if either women or men are subordinate and if interracial analysis is not conducted.¹ Justice is also doomed to fail if black gender ideologies that inform black sexuality are not explored. This essay is an attempt to address Collins’ concerns and connect them to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s (ELCA) social statement “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action.” The (2019) social statement notes many of the teachings and traditions of the church, outlines the problem of sexism and gender injustice, and proposes responses as a church and in society.

This essay is a response to the statement. It is written on behalf of African American Lutheran women in the pews whose voices and perspectives are not often heard, like Hagar’s daughter. Hagar’s daughters are the black women who often feel left out and who are in the wilderness and dare to speak to God in faith. Like the biblical woman Hagar, their voices and presence are often overlooked. This essay, written for parish pastors, suggests that consideration of the lived experiences and muted voices of African American women sitting in our congregations are needed. The essay is not a criticism of this social statement. It is an article for reflection, adding nuance to this statement of the church.

This response to the social statement is not written from one who is an authority of all African American Lutheran women’s experiences, but from a specific social location of an African American Lutheran womanist theologian and from a position of privilege as one who holds a terminal degree with the benefit of engaging in theological reflections as part of her education and vocation. While there were some women of color, specifically African American women, who worked on this project and even reviewed the statement, still my sense is that their voices are somewhat silent.

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

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‘Faith, Sexism, and Justice’—A womanist theological read

“Hush No More! Constructing an African American Lutheran Womanist Ethic” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* was a preliminary report of the construction of a womanist ethic based on the lived experiences of African American Lutheran women, both lay and clergy.² Ten years have passed since it was published, but still the need for the voices of African American women expressed through their faith is warranted, especially addressing the ethical mandate to be responsible and to act on gender justice.

Womanist theology

Womanist theology takes seriously the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Coined by Alice Walker in her book, *In Search of our Mother’s Garden*, Walker describes a womanist as responsible, in charge, and serious.³ A womanist defines humanity as an appreciation of all people and takes seriously the sin of the devaluation of humanity.⁴ According to womanist theologian

2. Beverly Wallace, “Hush No More! Constructing a Lutheran Womanist Ethic” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies*, ed. Mary J. Streufert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 179-196.

3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2003), xii.

4. Delores S. Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspective on Evil and Suffering*, ed.

Delores Williams, to devalue African American womanhood and sexuality is sin.⁵

The rise of womanist theology occurred when African American women theologians not only critiqued white “classical” theology and black male liberation theology, but as they also critiqued white women/feminist theology. White feminists appeared to engage in theological reflection assuming that because of their gender “all” women’s experiences were the same. Without close reading of this social statement, the same might be said about this document. With the demographics of the ELCA being majority white, it is not surprising that the statement reflects that reality. The document does, however, acknowledge the use of the term women and girls and underscores the diversity of women. Still there is a sense that the voices of majority women are dominating this discourse and voices of African American women and other women of color could add needed distinctions to the statement.

Womanist theologian Jacqueline Grant suggests theology is not unrelated to socio-political realities of existence.⁶ As noted in the social statement, theology can be a resource or a challenge. Womanist theologians such as Grant recognize too how theology has been used to maintain and protect the social political advantages of the status quo.⁷ Unfortunately, African American women’s experiences (and voices) are protected only as long as they coincide with either white women’s experiences or the experiences of black men. Therefore, the particularity and experiences of African American women and all women of color that may not coincide with the experiences of the status quo should be considered.

Class matters

Some African American women argue that the women’s liberation movement is a white middle-class movement that is irrelevant to the situation of black women. Womanist theologians offer a counter to the argument, taking seriously the experiences of African American women. An important aspect of a womanist theological perspective is the recognition that “class” matters. The number of African American women in the Lutheran church who are *not* middle-class is not known, but the recognition of the socio-economic status of women must also be included in the conversation. The question as it relates to this statement is “how is this liberative movement and actions addressing justice reflective of and relevant to women of *all* social economic classes, especially those who are not middle-class?” An analysis of the problem that engages a class analysis is essential.

Emilie M. Townes (New York: Maryknoll, 1993), 130–149.

5. *Ibid.*, 132.

6. Jacqueline Grant, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology” in *Sisters Struggling in the Spirit—A Women of Color Theological Anthology*, ed. Nantawan Boonprasat-Lewis (Louisville: Women’s Ministry Press, 1994), 177.

7. *Ibid.*

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Language of ‘freedom’ and ‘serve’

The social statement notes that Christians have the “freedom and responsibility” to serve all neighbors in love. Two key words in the statement are “freedom” and “serve.” Because of sin and racial and gender subjugation, African American women experience limitations on their freedom. What then does it mean for African American women to embrace the requisite, “freedom” to serve? Jacqueline Grant, in her essay, “The Sin of Servanthood,” suggests that the use of the term “servant” also needs to be reconsidered, noting that some women are more servants than others.⁸ The word “discipleship” connotes a better understanding of the relationship of African American women with God and humanity. Examination of the meaning of words might uncover diverse theological understandings. Language is important.

The problems

The social statement notes many of the problems with suggestions related to gender justice and sexuality. The statement suggests that women of color and specifically African American women are considered and should be able to participate at all levels of the church, particularly at the decision-making levels. However, it is not enough, for example, to have one African American woman synodical bishop. There is also a need to challenge the systems of oppression and organized opposition that created a situation so untenable that it led to the resignation of another African American Lutheran woman bishop. There is also a need to explore the systems of oppression that led to the dismissal of another African American Lutheran woman bishop. It is essential to invoke black women’s stories and memories in the advancement of a social statement, a call for action, and the construction of a theology of hope. Understanding our faith and theological perspectives,

8. Jacqueline Grant, “The Sin of Servanthood—And the Deliverance of Discipleship” in *A Troubling in My Soul*.

I propose that we consider the long Christian faith tradition of African American women.

Faith, salvation, and the cross

The social statement acknowledges that the Christian tradition is both a challenge and a resource. Several key concepts were reviewed. Faith, salvation, and the cross are among some of these concepts. Other concepts gleaned through the theological reflections of African American women and other women of color might bring additional perspectives. The history of Christianity is indeed a source of violence. As Paula Gunn Allen writes in “Violence and the American Indian Woman,” the abuse of Indian women and children by Indian men can be traced to the introduction into Indian culture of alcohol and Christianity.⁹ The message of the conquerors was that female subservience was the will of God. This systemic abuse of women occurs against a background of terrorism. The history of abuse and mistreatment of Indians by missionaries and mission schools are well documented. The same can be said about the experiences of African American women.

Because of the reality of life in this American context, African American women’s experiences and their struggles for justice have had to be rooted. The struggle is rooted in faith. This faith has been utilized by African American women for centuries. Faith is a knowing of a God who “makes a way out of no way.” Because of racism, classism and other forms of oppression embedded in the church and society, we need salvation. Accordingly, because we have been living in a world of sin, salvation is necessary.¹⁰ Salvation then is about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Womanists have varied understandings of salvation. Joanne Terrell, for example, discusses the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, concluding that there is something sacred and powerful in the blood of Jesus and black women.¹¹ Other womanist theologians understand that salvation is about the ways in which black women are liberated from various forms of historical and contemporary assaults against their personhood. All believe salvation flows from an understanding of Jesus Christ. They see salvation—not as freedom from all pain—but as a social activity of teaching and healing that leads toward “survival, quality of life and the holistic transformation of the world.”¹² Salvation, according to Monica A. Copeland, is always social.¹³

The cross, God hidden in the world, disrupts the very expectation we have of God and changes the way we create and live theology.¹⁴ Some African American women might agree with this

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statement. For others, the cross is not hidden, but present. For many African American women, God is present even in the harsh realities of black living. This is a God that freely takes on the depth of the pain, heartache, and suffering of black bodies navigating life. At the same time, the cross is an indictment of the harshness of a people who have no regard for life—even the life and body of Jesus and of God.¹⁵ As it relates to the social statement, these perspectives will add nuances to our theological understanding of the cross.

Black sexuality politics

This social statement is important in that it offers an opportunity to explore hegemonic and heteronormative threats impacting women’s identity. As is the topic of this essay, African American women’s gender and racial identities and oppression and sexual mythologies are many of the important threatening issues to be explored. The complexity of these topics is too large to explore with depth here, but black sexual politics and the monitoring of sexuality of African American women needs to be highlighted.

The social statement affirms that sin subverts human flourishing in many ways. This includes the sexuality of African American women. As womanist theologian Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes, “our history of racial oppression has always been sexualized.”¹⁶ Historically, black sexuality meant freedom for free African people. Yet hegemonic ideologies of sex and sexuality meant oppressive sexual politics colored by white heteronormative gender ideologies considered racialized sexism. Historically, black bodies were seen as chattel and during times of enslavement, there was a “just war” on black bodies.¹⁷ That war continues today,

9. Paula Gunn Allen, “Violence and the American Indian Women,” in *Sisters Struggling in the Spirit*, 198-205.

10. Monica A. Copeland, *Making a Way Out of No Way—A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 13.

11. *Ibid.*, 24-27.

12. *Ibid.*, 12.

13. *Ibid.*, 19.

14. Deanna Thompson, “Hoping for More: How Eschatology Matters for Lutheran Feminist Theologies” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies*, 279-290.

15. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 193.

16. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “The Loves and Troubles of African American Women’s Bodies—The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence” in *A Troubling in My Soul*, 232-249.

17. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and*

expanded to include the killing of black transgendered women's bodies.

Trapped by the history that devalued African American women because of their gender and their ethnicity, the issue of African American women's sexuality is complicated. Hegemonic gender ideologies, including black hegemonic gender ideologies, continues with African American women's bodies considered outside the "norm" of white women beauty. This "racialized sexism," Gilkes says, compounds the African American community's ambivalence about the meaning of being black and female—and, I would add, sexual—in America.¹⁸ The social statement, with understandable limitations, can't explore these issues. However, viewed through the lenses of African American womanist perspectives, the statement offers African American women (and men) the opportunity to engage in sexual discourse and specifically a sexual discourse of resistance.

A sexual discourse of resistance

A sexual discourse of resistance addresses the issue of respectability politics rooted in racism, sexism, and homophobia.¹⁹ Women (and men) are to act in respectable ways deemed appropriate based on white normative standards. A sexual discourse of resistance is important to correct historical misinformation, dispel the myths of sex and sexuality, and expose oppressive sexual respectability politics and the horror of sexual abuse. Engaging in this type of discourse will promote healthy sexual engagement and healthy intimate relationships. A sexual discourse of resistance will also help to reimagine images and roles of women of color and seeing black women's bodies as sacred.²⁰ Without a black sexual discourse of resistance, the pain of black women injured by gender injustices cannot be addressed and the continuation of "respectability politics" which will not ensure that justice will prevail.

Justice

Addressing respectability politics, racialized sexism, and hegemonic ideologies, for African American women the personal is political and justice is important. Culpability in issues of violence against women and specifically African American women and other women of color, issues of justice need to be discussed. For example, how will congregations account for and remember those women who were martyred at the Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina? God's justice means an end to the culture that has declared war on black bodies. This means an end to the systemic, structural sin which makes black bodies the target of war.²¹ The social statement speaks of justice as meeting the needs of others. While there is such a need, the work has to be done in concert with the "other." Honoring the other would allow one to honor the gifts of the others. The collective work needed is the removal of any

the Justice of God (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), chapter 3.

18. Gilkes, "The Loves and Troubles," 238.

19. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 68-71.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 232.

Hope is the theological construct that moves black women beyond endurance and survival to transformation of their personal and communal realities. Hope is the informed engagement of life through the power of the Holy Spirit. Hope is what keeps African American women going. Without hope, African American women would not survive.

obstacle that hinders those gifts. The work and the responsibility, as noted in the statement, is to address the impact of sin.

But hope...love and action

The preface to the social statement indicates a desire for "hope." The writers hope that the Holy Spirit will move readers into fruitful understanding, commitment and action, living in hope of God's promise. Most African American women live in hope. Hope as such is not a new concept. According to A. Elaine Crawford, a theology of hope is an abused black women's narrative. In her work, *Hope in the Holler*, Crawford says that these troubles engendered the 'Holler,' and God provided the hope.²² Hope is the theological construct that moves black women beyond endurance and survival to transformation of their personal and communal realities. Hope is the informed engagement of life through the power of the Holy Spirit.²³ Hope is what keeps African American women going. Without hope, African American women would not survive. It is this hope that assists African American women to stand up straight in a "crooked" room. It is that life-giving energy of hope at the intersection of faith and social action propelled by love that moves African American women to action.

Love

Love is what moves women to action even in non-supportive environments. Prominent to African American women's ethic is love. Alice Walker's definition of womanist lists a litany of whom and what black women love. Love for food and the folk, love for other women sexually and non-sexually, and love for self—regardless. Love is also equated with respect for women and the fluidity of her sexual orientation. bell hooks describes love

22. A. Elaine Crawford, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

23. Ibid.

also as a verb. It is the will to our own and another's spiritual growth. To truly love, according to hooks, we must learn the various ingredients of love—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and honesty.²⁴

Love has power.²⁵ A radical love of Jesus requires justice. One cannot practice love and at the same time practice racism. Quoting James Cone, Grant notes that according to the Kairos document, “the most loving thing we can do for both the oppressed and for those who are oppressors is to eliminate the oppression.”²⁶ Love then is working for political, social and economic racial and gender justice. Actions within congregations will demonstrate how seriously this statement is considered and how much they really love.

A call to action from a womanist perspective

Silent Voices is the title of a book capturing the narratives of African American women from the south.²⁷ It gives space to the lived experiences of women whose voices are often not highlighted, yet their actions in a variety of ways changed the course of history. African American women's voices are often silenced. Yet their experiences and actions bear witness to their role in the work of justice even in an oppressive and “holler-provoking” society.

Jacqueline Grant raises the question that should not be overlooked. She asked: “how is the gulf bridged between two groups of people, who have lived (and perhaps even worshipped) in close proximity (in the same Lutheran denomination), having radically different lives?”²⁸ This is an important question that should not be taken lightly, especially if we are to join in the quest for justice for *all* women and girls. Exploration and openness to hear the experiences of African American women and other women of color is therefore paramount for this work. To engage in the call to action could mean rethinking the faith, raising the questions, hearing and remembering Hagar and her daughters' stories of bondage, subjugation, and encounters with God even in the midst of a struggle, perhaps, too, using a womanist theological framework that takes seriously the intersectionality of race, gender, and class.

Using a womanist theological framework

Karen Baker-Fletcher is quoted in the chapter, “Hush No More,” published in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies*, asking the question: “If we propose that God is a God of freedom and justice, how do we fully participate in God's freeing just activity? What kind of theology can give adequate direction for such participation in a God's freeing activity?”²⁹ A womanist ethic and theology are

24. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 3.

25. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

26. Grant, “Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience.”

27. Josephine Garson, *Silent Voices: The Southern Negro Women Today* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969).

28. Grant, “The Sin of Servanthood,” 209.

29. Wallace, “Hush No More,” 180.

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suggested. Perhaps the majority church can take the position of Korean theologian Inn Sook Lee, who embraced a womanist theological perspective in the writing of the experiences of women from her community. Noting that the majority of Korean women suffer deeply because of ongoing patriarchal ideology prevailing in the Christian communities, she recognized the affinity of Korean women's God-talk with womanist theology.³⁰ In her writing, Sook Lee recognized that a womanist way of being is committed to the survival of women themselves and their people and seeks an encounter with the God of compassion even in “wilderness life” (like Hagar). Perhaps the majority church might also start from this inclusive theological perspective. The church can recognize the “daughters of Hagar,” some of whom are like Mary, a poor teen mom, yet one who is regarded by God as the mother of God incarnate. Engaging in a class analysis, poor white women and poor women of color can be included in the analysis and recognized in this social statement.

Using one's moral imagination

Finally, there is a need to use one's moral imagination. In this social statement, we have a shared vision and a shared challenge. Living in hope, we are called to action. Our work is to dismantle patriarchy, inclusive of biblical patriarchy, sexism, male privilege, and champion gender justice for all of God's people. As suggested in the social statement, God calls us to use our creativity along with our freedom and responsibility to engage in this work. We can do so by engaging in what Kelly Brown Douglas calls employing our moral imagination.³¹

Moral imagination has as its roots a liberation tradition.³² Women such as Harriet Tubman took the lead in social change and revolutionary actions. Other biblical women include witnesses such as Shiprah and Puah, the midwife liberators who saved Moses using their wit and their feminine *ase*—their spirituality and

30. Inn Sook Lee, “An Exile Journey: Toward Womanist Theology from Korean Immigrant Women's Perspectives” in *Sisters Struggling in the Spirit*.

31. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 225.

32. *Ibid.*

power. These connected them to God, to one another, and gave the midwives the courage to refuse to kill the male children born to the enslaved Israelites (Exod 1:16).

When using one's moral imagination, according to Kelly Brown Douglas, the world can become a better place.³³ For African American women, moral imagination "allows black bodies to live as free black bodies, despite the forces that deny those facts."³⁴ I would add that moral imagination would allow *all* bodies to live as free bodies. Using moral imagination, we can address policies and practices that erode gender-justice. We can find creative ways to explore and find alternative solution to death-dealing practices, taking into consideration the lived experiences of African American women, other women of color, and for that matter, all women and men. Using our moral imagination, we cannot only live in hope, anticipating God's promise of a just world without the oppression of sin and evil, but we can engage in actions to bring about freedom and justice for all of God's people.

Conclusion

Aria is the name of my granddaughter. She is the hope of her mother and grandmother's dreams. Aria's name has several meanings. One meaning is air, the breath of God that we breathe. Justice for women is the air we all breathe, including African American women and other women of color. This air of justice is necessary for our survival. As noted in the social statement, "humanity comes to life only when God breathes the breath of life." Aria's name also means melody, a solo song but accompanied by music; a song not sung by oneself. Hearing the voice of African American women and other women of color with all of their diversity will bring a beautiful melody to the music we are all singing and the work we are engaging.

As with the many definitions of Aria's name, in unpacking the social statement we uncover the beauty of the statement, its usefulness and complexity. There is agreement that God desires abundant life for *all*. There is an appreciation of this statement's reference to women and girls, intended to be inclusive of all people who identify as women or girls in the diversity of their individual communal identities and expressions. Even in the uniqueness and the diversity of who we are as a church, we do hold a shared vision. There is encouragement in this social statement as the church is called to action to address gender justice. Yet a louder consideration of the voices of African American women and other women of color is essential. What is missing in the statement is an acknowledgement of the starting point of the problems identified. Native and African American women and other women of color have been shouting these concerns for a very long time. Unfortunately, their cries for justice were historically silenced. It is because of these muffled cries still shouting that white majority women speak.

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Again, this essay is not a criticism of this social statement or of the majority culture in this church. The statement is a wonderful starting point for conversations about gender justice and a call for action. This essay is written for the purpose, as suggested in the preface, that the statement move us into a fruitful understanding of the problems, this time through the eyes of an African American Lutheran teaching theologian. It is a call to work collaboratively to address issues of gender justice with new commitments to engage action as a church and in society. Sin does in fact subvert human flourishing. But trusting God's promises, with hope, we are emboldened to act for justice.

This justice song is not an easy song to sing. Justice for women and especially for women of color has never been easy. But faith... if it wasn't but for faith...faith in a God who hears our hope in the holler and who hears our music in the justice song; where a womanist ethic can move one toward responsibility, we can then be hushed, and are silent no more.

33. Ibid

34. Ibid.