

Seeing-Remembering-Connecting Crescendo-ing Today: At the Anniversary of Ordaining Women and in a Time of Political Crisis

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I write this in the context of today's global pandemic, alarming natural calamities, an upsurge in various protests against systemic inequalities, polarization that threatens democracy, and in light of fifty years of women pastors in Lutheran churches in the U.S. These may seem to have little in common but they have come together and reached a crescendo in 2020. The impetus began some years ago, but is upsurging today.

Five years ago, I wrote a book, *Seeing-Remembering-Connecting*¹, with these commonly recognizable verbs for what the church as long been about, and their potential to communicate with those who consider themselves as “not religious.” But these three verbs have new relevance and poignancy today.

“Seeing-remembering-connecting” has become far more urgent, subversive, even revolutionary. Although rooted in recognizable religious practices, these three verbs are crossing boundaries that go far beyond the church. Many developments are coming together and reaching a fevered pitch: the pandemic with new ways of living, communicating, and working; heightened awareness of systemic racism and vast inequalities; raging wildfires, intense storms, and other evidence that climate change is an urgent challenge. The current pandemic may be only a foretaste of what the twenty-first century may be like. We live in a revelatory time, provoking us to see-remember-connect in new ways.

This current pandemic may be waking us up that a far more sweeping revolution is needed. What has been “normal” may be no more. What is unknown, and spreading vehemently in ways that no human strategy or solution can meet, is being revealed. *This virus is itself revelatory.* Human life and nature have become out of sync, no longer mutually dependent. No matter how ingenious are any human efforts, what is being revealed again is that humans cannot control “nature”—even how this virus spreads. What we can and must do is keep our distance or cover our faces so as to not contaminate others. Beyond that, what is unknown leads many to cave in to fears, which make them vulnerable to various appeals, including those that are authoritarian. Fears are especially manipulated through polarizing appeals, whether from the right or left.

1. Karen Bloomquist, *Seeing-Remembering-Connecting: Subversive Ways of Being Church* (Eugene Ore.: Cascade, 2016).

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What is being revealed again is that human beings are not in control, and cannot control this virus, or nature in general—especially for the sake of human well-being and economic progress. We turn to science and technology to save us, and indeed, they are important—especially in this pandemic. But being out of control, and unable to predict the future is especially feared. We live by predictability and normalcy as we have known it. Fears escalate when this is no longer the case.

Various technologies have been innovated to convince humans that we can control what is “of nature.” This now is where we place our hope—that these will save us, eventually. They have become our hoped for “savior.” Suddenly we have been hit with a virus that cannot yet be controlled by vaccines, and people throughout the world panic.

Fifty years ago, I had become increasingly aware of movements for justice. I graduated from college, and was present at conventions of two Lutheran churches (LCA and ALC) as they changed policies to begin ordaining women. I had started seminary, sustained especially by other women ecumenically, as

together we challenged male bastions of power, language, and imagery. We were mostly white, well-educated, and considered radical “women libbers” for daring to do so. We were viewed suspiciously, not only by male-holders of power, but also by many of the women who came after us.

We “see” for ourselves, not being *told* by those who often are not trusted. Abstract theories or opinions won’t suffice. What is occurring can be seen by all; it is obvious. Women pastors are increasingly common, visible, and quite diverse in their location, identities, and views—although in mainline Protestant churches, most are still white. Many first have had other careers and jobs. Many are now elected to be bishops. Fifty years ago, we were seen as rare anomalies who didn’t quite fit in. But what is seen in many places is that women pastors are increasingly common and “normal.” “Pastor” no longer needs to be modified by “woman.” It has become the new norm.

The social and economic inequalities in society are being widely seen and exposed through the pandemic. They have long been there, but are often overlooked, not seen. Police and other brutalities are now exposed through cameras. This cannot be denied; the brutalities can be seen. This now is accentuated—becoming ever more obvious in the disparities between those infected and affected. Although this often is passed over, even with theories or opinions that would deny these realities, the inequalities are blatantly visible, in who is most infected and affected by this pandemic, who disproportionately are Native, Black, Latinx or poor. Many are seen as workers “essential” to us all.

We “remember” how different are realities today than they were fifty years ago. Then we naively assumed that achievements of the 1960s civil rights movement were lasting, and that systemic racism would finally end. Almost all of the women ordained in the early 1970s were white. We were appointed to and had some access, sometimes as tokens, in ways our male colleagues did not. The ordained ministry was becoming less hierarchical. But systemic racism then and now persists, including in churches.

“Remembering” also is key in this pandemic. This involves pandemics of the past, which wiped out whole populations. For example, epidemics and diseases wiped out many Native communities in which as many as 90% may have died from such. As they remark, “what is new about this pandemic? We have experienced this before.” The many anonymous Africans who died enroute to the U.S. or upon arriving, are usually not remembered, nor are those many immigrants who died as they desperately crossed borders to get to this “land of the free.” Remembering those who have been “losers” in our own families is subversive in a society where class is usually denied. As a local business sign proclaims, “proudly run by a ‘sucker’ and ‘loser.’” Being forgotten, not remembered, may also be why many are attracted to right wing political appeals, until they remember and feel betrayed by such. Such remembering is what faith leaders and communities are especially called to today, as they have been throughout biblical history, which repeatedly calls to care for and

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seek justice for those left out.

Remembering is a crucial practice if there is to be more justice for all today, and not captive to systems based on the supremacy of race, nationality, gender, or class. This regularly occurs in faith communities, where remembering occurs through prayers and scripture readings, and for Christian churches, in the eucharist. Yet it also crosses sacred and secular divides and calls for action. It takes seriously ordinary people’s lives and histories. Remembering is being brought to light by many protest movements today. What is remembered empowers us to act. The painful memory of the lynching tree, especially for African-Americans, is transformed and impels justice struggles today.

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“**C**onnecting”: In the 1970s women pastors connected with each other, which enabled seeing, remembering, and acting in collaboration with each other. We entered ordinary life and engaged religiously skeptical folks in ways that previously were unlikely when clergy were all-male and set apart. We often identified with and were in solidarity with those who were really different or who remained excluded. We entered lives and arenas that had previously been closed to clergy. Grounds were being prepared for the incredible onrush of women who now are leading in new ways.

Today, connecting has become even more necessary. Organizing with different groups has become essential. “Intersectionality” among various issues or causes has become key. It is especially people of color or others who have been

multi-oppressed who have helped all of us realize this. Instead of having to choose or rank oppressions, these need to be redressed in intersectional, collaborative ways.

Some years ago this became more obvious to me in Africa. In a community there, old women were being killed; because of their red eyes they were suspected of being witches. Their eyes were affected by fueling cooking fires with cow dung in enclosed huts. With new stoves and fuel not only did their eyes clear, but their lives and the environment were saved. This is practical intersectionality at work.

What is remarkable today is how what much of the world has long viewed in intersectional ways has become central to organizing in the U.S. Rather than separately viewing struggles for gender justice, or racial justice, or climate justice, they need to be viewed and re-dressed together. They are inter-connected, and not competitive. New forms of collaboration and organized power across differences, faiths, and borders arise.

In the give-and-take process, and the resulting deeper connecting, there can be a ferreting out of ideological assumptions of those who differ, as we together search for what is faithful to what God intends. We can move beyond that polarization that so severely affects our common life together. We need what the experience and insights of others can bring, so that through them the “otherness” of texts might speak in new ways to us. In this Spirit-empowered process, our sense of “we” is bound to be transformed; we can no longer think of “us” in ways that stand against “others.” It is through this that a more authentic and credible public position is likely to emerge, one that incorporates a variety of perspectives and thus is pluralistic rather than driven

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by ideological differences or identities. Differences are *constitutive* of unity or connectedness, for the sake of the world.

Yes, seeing-remembering-connecting is what faith communities have long been about. These verbs, practices, and actions flowing from them are ways faith is embodied, becomes real, credible, and transformative today, in the midst of what many now recognize as a *spiritual* crisis. They lead to connecting action—for the sake of the flourishing of all. Connecting is more authentic and effective when it really *sees* what is going on—*remembers* what has been in the past, and has been incorporated in systems through which various “isms” are perpetuated today. It *connects* what previously were separate causes—of women, people of color, environmental justice, and those of a different sexual orientations, rather than in ways that compete with each other. Only as we together see, remember and connect, can the original sins of racism, sexism, classism, and colonialism be faced, transformed and eliminated, not separately but in interconnected ways, in ways that are bound together and thus must be transformed together.