
Carrying the Message of Love, Mercy, and Grace to Each and Every Child of God: A Reflection on the ELCA Social Statement, ‘Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action’

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From June to September 2019, I served as a synodically authorized minister at the New Beginnings Worshipping Community while their pastor was on sabbatical. New Beginnings is an ELCA congregation within the Denver Women’s Correctional Facility. The gospel reading for my last sermon at New Beginnings was Luke 15:1-10. I preached about lost sheep and a lost coin to the 45 women worshipping in this state correctional facility. Many pastors would consider convicted felons to be the lost sheep Jesus was talking about and the people the Pharisees would condemn. In my heart, however, I knew I preached to women who had been victimized and ostracized by the patriarchal system described in the 2019 ELCA social statement, “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action.” On page 21 of the statement, the assessment and results of patriarchy are described:

Harm and injustice result not simply from the acts of an individual or group, but from the policies, laws, attitudes, customs, habits, words, images, and religious beliefs and practices that inform and sanction those acts.¹

I made it a point to never ask the women of the congregation inside the prison walls what their crimes or convictions were, but my experience as a former employee of the Department of Corrections (DOC) from 1997 to 2013, as a corrections officer and parole officer, provided me with personal experience to believe that women who violate cultural, social, and religious norms are treated harshly by a patriarchal judicial system. A commentary on the criminal justice system is fodder for a different reflection article, but suffice it to say that the female offenders who made up this congregation were oftentimes incarcerated due to the policies, laws, and attitudes that support the dominant patriarchal system.

I believe I gained the respect of the women of New Beginnings because I was very open and honest with them from the very beginning by telling them that I was a lost sheep. In my introductory remarks before their pastor left for sabbatical, I told the women about the sixteen years I wore a badge. I told the women that when I began my career at DOC, I lived and presented as a man. It was in the spring of 2003, after months of therapy, that I realized I had been living a lie. I knew I had to

1. A PDF of “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” can be found at: http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith_Sexism_Justice_Social_Statement_Adopted.pdf

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live into the person God created me to be and began to present myself to the world as a transgender woman. In my final sermon at New Beginnings, the women heard me preach about being a lost sheep who was found by Jesus and returned to the flock. They heard me preach about being filled with the Holy Spirit and how, at the age of 53, I discerned a call to ministry. They heard me preach about finding Jesus within the walls of a prison and the hope I saw in their eyes—the hope that they, too, are saved by grace and the love of God.

“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” gives me hope, for I found myself in the words of this social statement. This is only the second time the term “gender identity” has been mentioned in an ELCA social statement. The first reference to gender identity was in “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” which was adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2009. In that statement, however, there is no elaboration or definition of gender identity, only the recognition that gender identity exists as a concept.² In “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” however, I am specifically included in the text:

The life stories, challenges, hopes, and gifts of women of color, lesbian and other queer women, transgender women, women with disabilities, and immigrant women have been often ignored and sometimes maligned.³

This new social statement includes women of color and transgender women, and my identity is integrated into the

2. See: “A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” found at <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf>, 29 and endnotes 17 and 34.

3. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice,” 17-18.

definition of “women and girls.”⁴ For the first time, my church has recognized me as a human being, created in the image of God, and not just an issue hidden in a footnote.

I worked as the “seminarian-on-staff” at a church in Boulder, Colorado, in 2015 and 2016, and then returned to this congregation in 2018 as the director of congregational care. The Boulder Flatirons, the beautiful foothills of the Rocky Mountains, can be seen from the window behind the altar of the church. The people of this congregation were warm and loving. From the first moment I walked into the church, they embraced me as a child of God. They nurtured me and gave me a place to learn what it truly means to be a pastor. I would occasionally tell people that the congregation was diverse because there are both Swedes and Norwegians in the pews and I would usually get a chuckle. But then there is the stark realization that the ELCA has been unsuccessful in addressing the results of the 2014 Pew Research Center study that concluded the ELCA is 96% white.⁵ I know there are incredible people in the pews of my beloved denomination, but the ELCA has not been able to find a way to proclaim the Word of God to an ethnically diverse population. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” does not make excuses nor does it imply that the ELCA has become more diverse since that Pew study was released. It recognizes the fact that race and ethnicity are contributing factors in the “reality known as intersectionality”⁶ and acknowledges that

...many women experience intersectional sexism. For women of color, sexism in the workplace is compounded by the discriminatory effects of racism. If someone is transgender, data shows staggering levels of discrimination and violence.

The people who embraced and nurtured me at the church in Boulder did not live out the concept of intersectional sexism, nor did they base their opinion of me on my ethnicity or my identity as a transgender woman. They took the time to get to know who I am as a child of God.

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 3:28 (NRSV)

“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” gives me hope because it underscores the fact that we are all one in Christ Jesus. The patriarchal domination of the church for almost two millennia has skewed the Word of God to mean that only half of the members of the church can hold positions of leadership, while the other half are to be subservient. Page 29 of the social statement reads,

4. Ibid., 17.

5. The 2014 Pew Research study can be found at: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/compare/racial-and-ethnic-composition/by/religious-denomination/among/religious-tradition/mainline-protestant/>

6. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice,” 17.

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From a Lutheran faith perspective, no particular group is superior to another based on sex (biological) or gender. Because God redeems us, we cannot rely on a belief that one group can justify themselves in the world or with God because of their supposed superiority or “headship.” Sin and grace are great equalizers. Christians are all sinful, and all Christians are equally dependent on God’s grace.

For a variety of reasons, the church sold their building and property and has purchased a different building and property in another part of the city. They decided they want to start a mission church rather than move the same church to a different building. They are committed to creating a different concept of church, and I have been called by the synod council to be their mission development pastor. The synod and congregation had the audacity to call a transgender Latina to be a solo pastor. This is what it means to live into a call to action.

The people of the Westview Church mission start have looked to me to be their pastor because they have seen my faithful witness of the Lutheran Confessions and have heard the power of the Holy Spirit when I preach the Word. They have committed themselves to celebrate and affirm the gifts and insights I bring to every expression and dimension of this church.⁷ They also recognize that I am not a typical Lutheran pastor, that I have gifts and talents earned over a lifetime of experience living in the margins.

When I was first approached by the congregation to be considered as their mission development pastor, one of my many requests was to utilize inclusive language. I admit I took this idea from page 33 of “Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action,” for I have heard words of exclusion my entire life and I knew in my heart that in the church where I would serve as pastor, I had to live into the concept where God transcends human categories.⁸ The people agreed and I allowed myself to be considered for the position. I hazard to guess that the majority of Lutheran congregations would not call me as their pastor, but I do not need a call from the majority of Lutheran congregations—just one. I was led by the Holy Spirit to that one congregation. The people of Westview Church are living into the call to action of this social statement.

If you have not read “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” I encourage you do to so. When you read it, look for yourself in the words of the document. Look for yourself in the

7. Ibid., 19.

8. Ibid., 33.

countless references to scripture. Look for yourself in the call to action. And then, look around. Look at the people in your life who have been held back or propelled forward because of their perceived sex and/or gender. Look at the gifts and talents that are overlooked and discarded because the person is not valued based on their race or ethnicity. It is up to us as disciples of Jesus Christ to value each and every human being, for each and every human being is *imago Dei* and we are all connected to each other. We need each other in order to create the world Jesus Christ talked about to the poor, marginalized, and oppressed: his disciples. We are commanded to carry the message of love, mercy, and grace to each and every child of God.

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