

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

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Can We Be a Multicultural Church?

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Can We Be A Multi-Cultural Church?

<http://mcsletstalk.org/can-we-be-a-multi-cultural-church/>

The place names have become commonplace: Ferguson, North Charleston, Charlotte, Baltimore, Chicago. Their names have been ingrained into our memories: Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald. The specter of racism has taken over our electoral politics from talk of border walls to the banning of entire populations. Even the Oscar Awards have not gone unaffected. Clearly there is a much-needed conversation about race going on out there. The question is, is that conversation going on within our church? This Lenten period of reflection and introspection is a fitting time for this dialog. The beginning of our services is often referred to as the Gathering. Here the people of God make space to come together in Christ's name and oftentimes in this season, to confess our sins to God and one another. We hope the readers will consider the following articles as a gathering of sorts to reflect on the questions of race and multiculturalism in the ELCA.

In [Breaking Free](#) Wayne Miller begins the conversation with emphases of Lent: self-examination and confession, and poses three views of theological anthropology that may inform the church's engagement with racism.

Francisco Herrera has an initially more celebratory response to the question, but also sounds the trumpet for lament in [Can the ELCA be Multicultural? I'm Glad You Asked](#).

Recent police shootings and community protests call to mind the killing of Amadou Diallo for Stephen Bouman, and he weighs the call of Ta-Nehisi Coates and the call of Leviticus in [Reparations? ... Jubilee!](#)

Coates is also on the mind of John Flack, as is Pope Francis. In [Bodies and Worlds: Coates and Francis](#), Flack contemplates the future of the body of the world and the body of Christ.

Finally, in [Working in a Multicultural Parish](#) Josh Ebener gives an on the ground description of multicultural ministry in one congregation.

Breaking Free

by Wayne Miller

<http://mcsletstalk.org/multicultural-church/breaking-free/>

Like many in our Church, I am deeply grateful to our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, for raising the challenge to re-engage on questions of race and privilege in our society. This is work in which I have been personally involved for many years, and frankly, one that continues to challenge and sometimes to frustrate me at every turn.

Let's Talk has now risen to the challenge of highlighting this critical matter, and the editors have asked me to share some perspectives in this forum.

So I begin with a bit of brutal honesty in confessing that despite nearly 30 years of intentional effort and high profile discussion, the ELCA does not appear to be making much headway. We have done fairly well in diversifying leadership structures on a denominational level and in many of our schools, seminaries and social service agencies, where discretionary choices about employment allow us to be disciplined and intentional in creating leadership employment opportunities. Similarly our representational principles for governance structures have helped to diversify some formal leadership roles.

Nonetheless, the sociological profile of the ELCA is overwhelmingly white, middle class, and comparatively well-educated. And the Conference of Bishops (elected in general assemblies) reflects this demographic pattern in that the vast majority of us (including me) continue to be white, middle class, well educated, male and straight. So how might we respond now, to break free from this pattern and to make some difference that we have not been able to make in 30 years?

I will not be presumptuous enough to claim a clear answer to this question. But I think it worthwhile for us to begin by looking more deeply at a few of the theological and ethical considerations that are likely to provide the platform for a new conversation and a new approach.

Theological Anthropology

There are at least three significantly different views of the human condition that provide starting points for the conversation about racism:

- *Racism is a personal moral failure.* This is certainly true to the extent that there are egregious individual expressions of racism. Stereotypes, racially based humor, acts of cruelty and violence, choices by those in power to discriminate or deny equal access to opportunity are all expressions of individual racism that must be unequivocally named as sin. Regardless of its cause, the continuation of this behavior is a personal choice that demands confession, contrition, and amendment of life. In its individual manifestation, racism calls the church to respond with all “three functions” of God’s law: constraint of the behavior, exhortation to repentance, and a call to the Godly (in this case, non-racist) life. But is this personal moral failure ALL that racism is?

- *Racism is an arbitrary and artificial social construct established and enforced by members of a privileged dominant culture.* This view is also grounded in the assumption of free choice. But in this case, the brokenness is collective, political, and systemic. It is not sufficient for individuals to repent and reform their personal attitudes and behaviors when they continue to live as beneficiaries of a system that maintains the social structures of racism. But this anthropology is also grounded in a humanistic optimism that imagines the possibility of progressive sanctification. Since wrong-thinking people created and chose the problem, right-thinking people can choose to solve the problem or, at least, to chart a path of continual self-improvement through intention and effort. The remedy, then, begins with a course of readings, workshops, retreats, or conversations to enlighten awareness and ends with political activism to legislate the solution.
- *Racism is both an individual and socio-political expression of original sin.* In this view racism, like many other patterns of sin, is more or less “hard-wired” into us. The problem cannot be solved by intentionality, effort, or discipline, but only by throwing ourselves into the arms of Jesus Christ through a daily process of dying to sin and rising with Christ. We will never be done. There is no clear pattern of progress to a resolution, because we continue throughout this existence, as both saints and sinners living under the sovereignty of both law and gospel. But there is new hope each day for those who trust Christ’s promise to live and work in those who live in him. The remedy becomes something more analogous to a life-long 12-step recovery that begins with an admission of powerlessness.

These three understandings of the fundamental relationship between God and humanity are not mutually exclusive, but my guess is that most readers will be strongly drawn to one, more than to the others. And these predispositions will suggest different approaches to the problem of race and racism.

Christ and Culture

One of the most reliable characteristics of a powerful dominant culture is the belief that their cultural worldview and value system is transcendent, universal and normative for everyone. All other worldviews and values are, therefore, judged as closer or farther from the truth based on their proximity to the worldview and values of the dominant group. The result is that the cultural constructs of the dominant group are insidiously and uncritically merged into the body of what is seen to be “revealed truth.”

But in recent years, Dr. Linda Thomas, of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago has offered a compelling challenge to the notion of a “Christ above culture.” In her view, even if there is such a thing as a pre-cultural or objective and universal body of truth, we cannot know that truth apart from the cultural matrix that mediates religious truth to us. Religion and culture are distinguishable but inseparable. The medium is the message. The form is the substance.

If this is, in fact, an accurate insight, the implications for our work on race and privilege are enormous. Even though the ELCA can in no way be considered “a culture,” in any monolithic sense, we are most definitely held together by certain value assumptions, languages, and behavior patterns which range from worship values to constitutional polity, to the way our boards and corporations are structured, to the application of GAAP accounting principles, to our attitudes about time, to our way of making decisions... all of which, are rooted in the conscious or unconscious framework of white, middle class, well-educated North American dominant culture.

These unchallenged cultural assumptions will necessarily stand as a barrier to belonging for many members of other cultural groups for whom they are not the primary cultural language. And they will prevent us from ever addressing the problem of race and racism creatively or effectively so long as we try to do this purely with the internal resources of the ELCA. We must force the conversation and the work outside of the Church Council or synod councils or seminary faculties or ELCA assemblies; in fact outside the ELCA altogether into active interfaith and ecumenical engagement on a local, relational level. Even though there is still an important role for structural leadership in driving that circle of engagement wider, in the end, it is in that local interfaith arena that “the other” is re-humanized into personhood, that the “I-It” relationship is transformed into an “I-Thou” relationship, and the struggle against systemic racism and social privilege becomes an expression of solidarity with someone I love from a different culture, rather than an ideological debate or a seminar topic in our own house or gated community.

Convergence and Interconnectedness

Racism is a distinctive social problem and stands as a root cause for many other social evils. But racism is not our only social justice problem. We are also dealing with vast, growing and catastrophic conditions of poverty and violence.

Poverty is not specific to any racial group. Income disparity, wealth disparity, educational disparity, unemployment, unequal access to health care, housing conditions, food and water purity and availability are all social problems that cut across racial and cultural boundaries.

Similarly, violence does not limit itself to questions of race. Domestic and family violence, community violence, sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, gender-based violence, geo-political violence, gang warfare, criminal justice cruelty or inequity, religious hatred, and genocide are all rampant and cross-cultural issues.

Nonetheless, systemic racism, as it is manifested in daily life in North America, is inseparable from the spatial and socio-economic segregation that disproportionately concentrates poverty and violence in “communities of color.” Children growing up in these environments of concentrated racism, violence and poverty are then traumatized and permanently wounded in a way that limits access to choice and opportunity for their whole lives. And over time, all three problems are exponentially intensified.

Any future efforts to work constructively on racism must include interventions around the concerns of poverty and violence as well.

At the present time it is impossible to predict whether or not the ELCA will be able to overcome the limitations of its racial, socio-economic, and educational homogeneity. But it is certain that the future of our institutional health, as well as our faithfulness, are dependent upon our ability to do so. So we must set our hearts on trying again with an effort that is grounded in a thoughtful understanding of God’s love and the human condition, open to a world of experience and perception beyond our own, critically aware of the complexity of our broken world, but above all trusting in the Christ who is coming soon to make all things new.

Can the ELCA be Multicultural? I'm Glad You Asked.

by Francisco Herrera

<http://mcsletstalk.org/multicultural-church/can-the-elca-be-multicultural-im-glad-you-asked/>

I always chuckle a little bit whenever someone asks me the question - often with furrowed-brow and misplaced intensity: "Can the ELCA be multicultural?" It's a tough answer. Internal estimates place the whiteness of our denomination at 94.7%. **This summer's sobering PEW research study of ethnic diversity in US religious communities has us at 96% white, making us the *whitest* church in the United States despite nearly three decades of trying to be otherwise.** So sure, there is cause for worry, but having been in the vanguard of this very discussion for some time now, I always sport a sly grin whenever this topic pops up - because there is some good news that me and my Black and Brown ELCA'ers know that many white ELCA'ers don't and it invariably twists the corners of my mouth a jaunty angle:

How Racially Diverse Are U.S. Religious Groups?

% of each religious group in each racial/ethnic category, and each group's diversity score on the Herfindahl-Hirschman index

	White	Black	Asian	Mix/ Other	Latino	Index
Seventh-day Adventist	37%	32	8	8	15	9.1
Muslim	38	28	28	3	4	8.7
Jehovah's Witness	36	27	6	32		8.6
Buddhist	44	3	33	8	12	8.4
Nothing in particular	64	12	5	5	15	6.9
Catholic	59	33	2	34		6.7
All U.S. adults	66	12	4	4	15	6.6
Assemblies of God	66	3	5	25		6.2
Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)	65	3	3	28		6.2
Churches of Christ	69	16	4	10		6.1
American Baptist Churches USA	73	10	5	11		5.5
Atheist	78	3	7	2	10	4.7
Agnostic	79	3	4	4	9	4.5
Presbyterian Church in America	80	6	3	5	6	4.4
Orthodox Christian	81	8	32	6		4.2
Anglican Church	83	12	4			3.7
Church of God in Christ	5	84	4	8		3.5
Southern Baptist Convention	85	6	5	3		3.4
Mormon	85	5	8			3.4
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	88	5	3	4		2.8
Church of the Nazarene	88	2	3	7		2.7
Unitarian	88	7	4			2.7
United Church of Christ	89	8	2			2.5
Jewish	90	22	24			2.3
Episcopal Church	90	4	32			2.3
Hindu	4	2	91	2		2.1
United Methodist Church	94	22				1.4
African Methodist Episcopal Church	2	94	3			1.4
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	95	22				1.2
Evang. Lutheran Church in America	96	2				1.0
National Baptist Convention	99					0.2

MORE DIVERSE ▲
 LESS DIVERSE ▼

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study.

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Blacks, whites, Asians and others/mixed include only those who are not Latino. Latinos include people of all races.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The ELCA already is multicultural.

It's true. Firstly, I know this because **since beginning Th.M./Ph.D. studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 2013 virtually all of my guides and mentors have been people of color.** My [advisor](#) is from India, my ["step advisor"](#) is Puerto Rican, and my [mentor-of-mentors](#) is African American with roots in Jamaica. What's more, if you have two free days to attend the ELCA's three-day **Global Musician Training in Chicago** you will marvel - with its more than 20 ethnic groups and languages all singing and crying and laughing together - at the broad range of voices and harmonies and dissonances that echo under our little church's roof. Don't believe me? **Watch this video of [last year's training](#)** - and if you don't blink you might even witness the author shaking maracas and playing viola!

But even more encouragingly, did you also know that of the 512 churches and synodically authorized worship communities that have joined the ELCA since 1988, 365 of them are either from communities of color or are racially mixed? In short, in our denomination's brief history, **68% of all new growth is ethnically diverse**, while only 32% of it is exclusively white. Though most ELCA communities may have resisted the ever diversifying reality of the US, the new mission starts have embraced it. For whatever reasons, ethnic diversity is in their ecclesial DNA from the get-go and it clearly shows. **So while we may now be 96% white, the future of the ELCA is unquestionably multicultural. These statistics prove it.** So when I say that that the ELCA already *is* multicultural, this is why. And it's pretty great.

But now for the bad news, the hard and depressing news:

Those making the diversity in our church possible have paid a VERY high price.

To illustrate this, and I ask this especially of the white readers here at *Let's Talk*, **read the following paragraph and ask yourself how you could do ministry under these conditions:**

Is it possible to continue respecting a colleague after she reacts that you're not "a real Latino" let alone "a real Lutheran"? How would your church after your first time through Candidacy was marred by racism - and then heard that a friend had experienced the exact same treatment by the exact same committee 10 years later?

If a white bishop asks you for help placing more first-call pastors of color and then doesn't follow through on any of his commitments, when he asks you for help a second time do you give it?

How do you continue to worship with your community after you learn that your black husband was never paid for his musicianship while the white musicians were?

How long do you marinate in student debt and despair while awaiting a first call - one year, two years, three or four...? - after watching most of your white fellow-graduates sign their first contracts within 6 months, and everyone else within one year?

And after years of being mobbed by white colleagues every time you try to speak honestly about how you've been racially profiled or marginalized and demeaned, do you stay in your denomination and keep being abused or do you jump ship and potentially destroy your entire career and the security

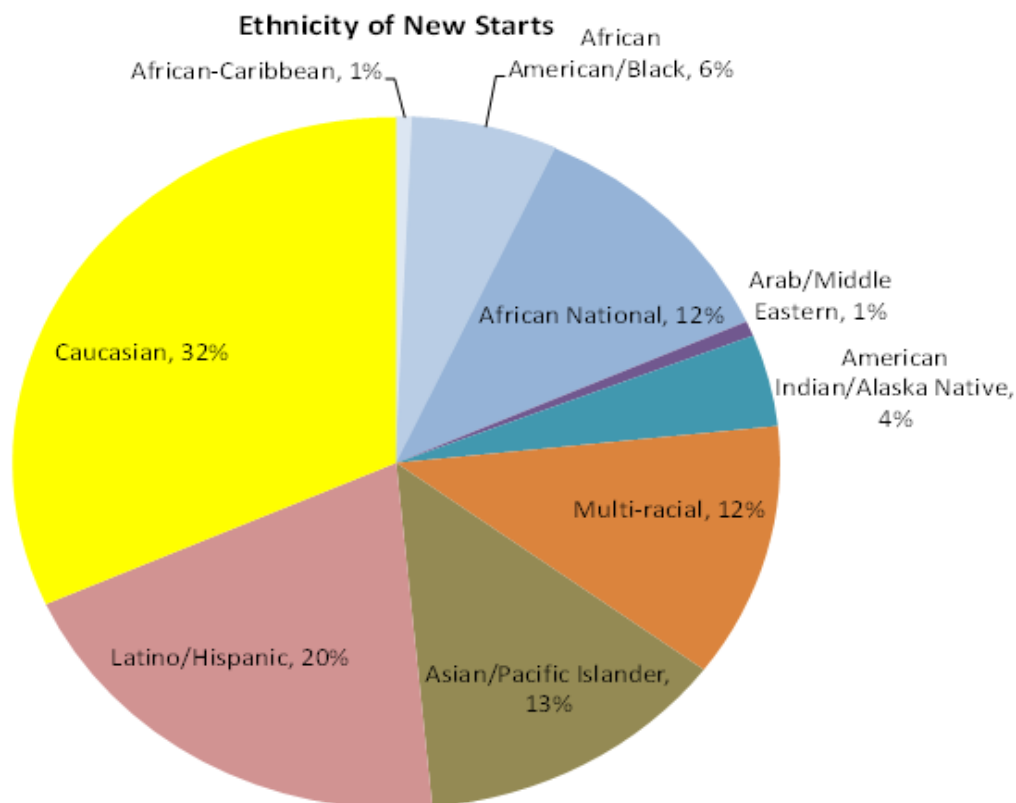
of your family and future?



For months I have listened to these stories from ELCA leaders of color of every sort from nearly all nine of the ELCA's regions - and for all their permutations there is one thing that unites *every* one: **regular racial harassment from white colleagues is the norm and most have chosen to be silent about it.**

However, since the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston this summer a dam has burst for many people of color in the ELCA. Since not only were victims Senior Pastor Clementa Pinckney and Associate Pastor Daniel Simmons both graduates of the the ELCA's Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, but even the shooter [Dylann Roof](#) himself is a baptized and confirmed ELCA member. For many *this was truly the last straw.*

So now leaders of color are starting to break the silence. Tiffany Chaney, a bi-vocational Pastor Developer in Montgomery, Alabama shared [powerful testimony](#) of how **the hardest thing she has ever done in life is to be "both black and Lutheran."** I myself wrote an [essay relating the trials of people of color in the ELCA to Luther's theology of the cross.](#) And then there is the ELCA's Program Director for Young Adult Ministry, Rozella Haydée White, and her harrowing experiences after [admitting the burdens of her racial estrangement before an audience of white ELCA pastors.](#)



We may be few, but over time more and more voices will come forward, and I know that our concerns will not be denied or easily mollified. The ELCA's progress on diversity may have firm root, but if our denomination truly wishes to continue expanding ministries among communities of color **it must do more. It must also work to bring justice and healing to the thousands of people of color in our denomination who have suffered much from working in such a white church.**

It is the only Christian thing to do.

So what next?

For starters raise a microphone to the voices of color in the ELCA that have so often been marginalized and to allow us to boldly lament for what we have been through. I specifically use the term "lament" here. As I have suggested [elsewhere](#), when people of color talk about their pains and sufferings *never* treat it as a discussion. **Rather, understand it as lamentation** - a moment when we are crying out for justice and healing before both God and humanity so that we may be raised up to new life from the burden of our trials. Seeing our testimonies as lament, will also help ensure that we are not shut up - for someone engaged in a discussion can be debated, queried, or even silenced, ***but you can do no such thing to someone who is lamenting.***



Being silenced is often the most common injury we face when we speak openly of our racial harassment. Understanding our testimonies as lamentations makes it hard - indeed impossible - to see interrupting or interrogating our testimony as anything other than what it truly is: *un-Christian*. Consequently, understanding our testimonies as lamentations can then aid sympathetic white leaders and parishioners in the ELCA to acknowledge us and give us the space to vent and grieve, space that we are almost always denied and so desperately need.

And now, as for how the church can ensure our lament makes a difference:

1. Have Church-Wide leadership initiate **a survey of people of color and racial harassment**, asking them if they've ever made an official grievance due to racism - then asking what happened if they had, and why they chose to stay silent if they hadn't. **Record the data and report back.** It could even be announced in another webcast on the ELCA's home page.
2. For that matter, **have a "Conversation on Race" that focuses specifically on the racism that people of color have dealt with in our church**, and use the conversation to expose to the realities that we people of color face every day to the 96% white majority of the ELCA.
3. Deeper yet, as we did a massive study on sexuality, **do a similar study on race relations within the ELCA.** It is wonderful that the leadership on Higgins road has condemned the world's racism so boldly and unambiguously. **Now we need to turn the lens inward and clean up our own house.** Having these hard conversations in every synod and every parish brave enough to do so would go a long way in acknowledging the trials of Black and Brown church leaders and give them just that much more acknowledgment and power as they continue in their ministries. And as for parishes and synods that don't want to ask these questions, *ask them why.*



There is much to be happy about, even in addition to the good news I mentioned in the beginning of this article. In direct response to last summer's Pew Study [the February issue of *The Lutheran* is going to have a feature on multicultural congregations in the ELCA.](#) Following-up their "[Confronting Racism](#)" conversation in the summer on **Thursday, January 14, 2016**, Bishop Eaton and ELCA Church Council member William B. Horne II had another such chat "[Confronting Racism: A Holy Yearning](#)" **focusing on racism and the US criminal justice system.** I can personally speak some good things about our synod here in Chicago as well - **as *all* of the African-American graduates of the M.Div program at LSTC in recent years now are following calls in this synod.** There *is* cause for rejoicing.



And just because many people of color in our church have had and are having a hard time, ***we are not going anywhere.*** Yes, there are trials. Yes, we get worn down. But never ever forget - ***we love our work.*** We accept and embrace the challenges because we know that if we remain silent in "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14) when so many in our communities are perishing then we would be in total denial of our call and betraying the love and power that the Gospel has given us. We cannot do that. The question then is, my beloved white brothers and sisters, will you answer our call - our lament - too? Will you come with us, weep with us, at the foot of the cross? Will you come and be with us at the feet of our Lord?

Reparations?...Jubilee!

by Stephen P Bouman

<http://mcsletstalk.org/multicultural-church/reparations-jubilee/>

"The idea that you are reborn anew, without your history, without being dogged by your past, without who you were haunting you and you having to deal with that, is uniquely American. In America, we have difficulty with acknowledging the fact that where we are in a particular moment is irrevocably tied to our past. We have great difficulty in doing that when it challenges us." (TaNehisi Coates, in a presentation at Loyola University, Chicago)

"On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee to you. In it you shall not sow, neither reap that which grows of itself, nor gather from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you. You shall eat of its increase out of the field. In this Year of Jubilee each of you shall return to his property." (Leviticus 25)

Seventeen years ago this past week, Amadou Diallo was killed in a hail of 41 bullets from police guns in the Soundview section of the South Bronx. This teenage African immigrant from Guinea was holding—not a gun—but his wallet as he died in front of his apartment. Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about it, "41 shots...American Skin." I wrote an editorial about it, which got me in trouble. I said that if Amadou had been my son (one of my sons was Amadou's age), he would still be alive. I also called on public and religious leaders to admit that we have a racial problem in our community and that we needed the resolve to face it together.

There were plans to boycott my visit to a congregation in Long Island whose membership included many New York City police and their families. I asked the pastor to read a letter to the congregation the week before my visit. I asked them to welcome me as a brother in Christ, as their bishop, and I promised to stay at the coffee hour until the last person said what they had to say to me.

The church was packed. The congregation was incredibly gracious and hospitable, and there was no way around facing the anger. I stayed a long time. I faced people who were hearing me as accusing the police of racism and murder. There were primal screams from police wives whose husbands had been shot.

But we listened and stayed in the conversation. They heard from me that during my twenty years of parish ministry I was a police chaplain, and that the cries of mothers whose children were shot by police were remarkably similar to theirs. I learned that there is no short cut to engaging one another, to facing our history: the world set by white privilege, our disconnect from the day to day experiences of people of color in that world, the legacy of the original sin of slavery in our

country, and how it disfigured us all.

The public furor, demonstrations, arrests, the acquittal of those who shot Amadou, the ensuing anger, grief and communal helplessness presaged Ferguson, Sandtown, Charlestown, Chicago today.

Brenda Smith, now Director for faith practices in the ELCA but then a pastor in an African American congregation and community in Queens, looked back on that time and said to me the other day, "We will never get anywhere, we won't settle this if we don't see each other's humanity." Her community reached out to their local precinct—and had been doing it long before Amadou was shot. They baked and delivered cookies to it after the death of Amadou. We were able to get Attorney General Elliott Spitzer to convene a meeting in her church between police and young African American males being profiled. There is no substitute or short cut from the hard work of bringing people at the table together. Peace and reconciliation is a long game.

Long also, has been our complicity in racism. The ELCA has benefitted institutionally and as individuals from the "plunder" of African Americans and their property in the history of the USA. In the past, and continuing in the present, our members and congregations moved away from African American (and Latino, and poverty stricken) neighborhoods because we did not want to live with the people moving into those neighborhoods. We left the church buildings, the debt, and the upkeep, the deteriorating neighborhoods, the draining of jobs and economic capital. Now gentrification threatens to "plunder" (Coates' term) anew, the lives and property of African Americans and people in poverty.

Coates calls for "Reparations," a concept that has been around for a long time. I remember the Young Lords occupying congregations in East Harlem fifty years ago. I agree with the concept, but I fear the perceived guilt tripping is probably a nonstarter in engaging the heart of a mostly white middle class church body—although it would be interesting to probe why that is so.

Proposal: As the ELCA continues to wrestle with issues of racial justice and the results of our own history, we declare Jubilee and reinvest in the ELCA congregations and their communities of color and poverty. A place to begin, in the 96% white ELCA, is to open up space among the 96% to face race in the decisions we make in the light of Law and Gospel. And reinvest in the 4%. Let the first fruits of the Congregational Renewal effort of the Campaign for the ELCA be used to strategically reinvest in congregations from our ELCA ethnic communities in these neighborhoods. Synods, bishops, and their Renewal Tables, in partnership with ELCA ethnic communities, could identify strategic congregations, present and potential leaders, and area strategies.

Since Amadou's death and continuing through today, I have two convictions. One: we need to open up spaces to hear one another, to face our history, to deepen relationships, so that we can leave our defended spaces, which are shrouded by fear and anxiety, which are too often exacerbated and exploited by our leaders and pundits. And two: we need to integrate into our communal experiences of racial tragedy the narrative of hope, reconciliation and restoration that is let loose in the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Bodies and Worlds: Coates and Francis

by John Flack

<http://mcsletstalk.org/multicultural-church/bodies-worlds-coates-francis/>

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.—Mark 13:37

Ask a Christian to tell you God's greatest commandment, and she'll likely say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Ask her if she knows God's first commandment, and she might say, "Don't eat the fruit of that tree!"

But that's not quite right. God's first commandment to human beings was, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God meant dominion as God has dominion—to love and tenderly care for things. We know this because the first of all God's commandments was not to humans at all. "Let there be light," God said, and there was light, and it was good, because God brought it forth and loved it for what it was. That is God's dominion.

In *Laudate Si* ^[1], Pope Francis carefully distinguishes between the dominions of care and domination, saying, "...we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures." This is *Laudate Si*'s challenge: give up domination of the earth, and do it by giving up our domination of other human beings.

"The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together..." (48) Francis says, and makes sure that his readers understands a "technocratic paradigm" of domination and control (106), made easier by a lack of "direct contact" of the wealthy with the poor (49) takes our gaze away from the created things and directs it to profit. In place of direct contact with people, "...economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority is given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain...Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked," (56).

Profits trump empathy, and even the possibility of empathy and compassion erode when you profit from the exploitation of people you'll never see, and the destruction of places you'll never visit. Francis well knows that the first story after the Fall is a story of a tiller who becomes a murderer and says, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

We Americans have to look no farther than our own history to see that Francis is right. If you pay the price of environmental deterioration, you'll have bought human and ethical degradation, too. We owe much of our wealth to the American slave economy. Edward Baptist has shown that the introduction of cotton and the slave economy helped shape American capitalism ^[2], and every non-slave benefitted from its engine of wealth. Cotton was terrible for the soil: "...cotton quite simply caused, during the antebellum period, the worst soil exhaustion in southern history," ^[3], and so earned its planters the moniker 'landkillers'.

Financial speculation on land and mortgages made on the bodies of black men and women, who were tortured, raped, and murdered to peak efficiency, fueled the cotton economy. Lehman Brothers got its start financing this business. That is part of our heritage.

Forgive me if you knew that already. I discovered much of this over the summer as I tried to understand the eruption of protests for racial equality in Ferguson and New York. I am learning that racism and the exploitation of the earth are not separate ethical concerns. They are the same, united in the same way the first and the greatest commandments are united. I have also discovered that I'm late to this discovery.

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *Between the World and Me* ^[4], "Once the Dream's parameters were caged by technology and by the limits of horsepower and wind. But the Dreamers have improved themselves...and this revolution has freed Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself... It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated this age," (150-151).

The Dream, for Coates, is similar to Francis' technocratic paradigm—but with the grease of racism added to make the money wheel spin faster. It is the Dream that profit makes us good, that power makes us right. Coates, too, shows that environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. The method of their combination is the alchemy of profit. Wake from the Dream, he says, and *keep awake*.

Coates was raised to reject spooks and fairy tales, including God. For Coates, the inherent worth of a human being isn't because they bear the image of God, but because the human being is a brain and a body, both destructible. "That is why they are so precious."

And yet, it is precisely on this point, on the precious body, that the Church must find full agreement with Coates. We do not need a god to see how precious our neighbor's life is. "Before God and with God we live without God," Bonhoeffer wrote. This is the ethic Coates helps us find: to love the neighbor for himself, for herself, just as he is, just as she is.

Coates tells his son,

"I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh... You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. (70).

This ought to be the ethical stance of any Christian. The sins of the past did not occur so that we may be uplifted by overcoming them. In any case, even if we overcome the sins of the past, the sins of the present are close at hand. We can say that God redeems history, but to place ourselves at the end of the story is always idolatry. The end of the Christian story is the same as its beginning: God. Instead of placing ourselves at the end, we must look at what is before us—never to dominate it, but to love it for what it is, and to tenderly care for it. We must keep and tend the singularity and particularity of all flesh, for we have dominion over the earth and dominion over one another.

Early on in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus goes to Simon's mother-in-law's house, where she lay in bed with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up out of bed. And at sunset, the whole village brings the sick and the possessed, and one by one Jesus heals each person, all of them, one by one, each person in their singularity, and every one of them. In the miracle feedings, Jesus sends his disciples to distribute the bread, and they do distribute it, one by one by one, giving to each bread and faith.

So also our sacraments honor and revere the body. Each person is baptized, one by one. At the table hands touch, one by one, by one, by one. The incarnation puts abstraction to death. God touches *your* hand; God touches *you*, in particular time and place, in your singularity, in your body.

In the creeds, we profess we believe in the resurrection of the body. Nowhere in our creeds do we speak of the eternal soul. To care for souls, we care for bodies. We worship God in spirit and in truth, yes, but revealed in a crucified man, betrayed, given over to the state, body exposed, body mutilated and thrown away. Our faith is worthless if we forget this body, given for us, the body of Christ, given for you—for your body, given to everyone, to each one.

If we are to continue as church, we must hear Coates' challenge to us: to stop viewing the sufferings of others as bricks in our road to redemption, and instead view them as what they are: suffering men and women. The stories we tell in our sermons, the prayers we utter in our liturgies, are they the stories of God's redemption? Or do they make us the heroes?

Where the people suffer, Pope Francis and Ta-Nehisi Coates tell us, the earth, our common home suffers. God will make a new heaven and a new earth, but the one God made for us, *this* one—are we not its keeper and tiller? Do we not hear its cry in the cry of the poor? And will we not hear that cry become our own? May God touch us, so we can awake.

^[1] Francis, Encyclical Letter *On Care for our Common Home (Laudato Si)*. Washington, D.C. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015. Print.

^[2] Baptist, Edward E., *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Basic Books, 2014

^[3] Davis, Donald E., *Southern United States: An Environmental History*, ABC-CLIO, 2006

^[4] Coates, Ta-Nehisi: *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, New York, NY, 2015.

Working in a Multicultural Parish

by Josh Ebener

<http://mcsletstalk.org/multicultural-church/working-multicultural-parish/>

St. Andrew Lutheran Church's engagement in cross-cultural ministry began in 1999 when members and the pastor talked about what mission and ministry should look like for them as they endeavored to faithfully proclaim the gospel in the context of West Chicago. This far west suburb of Chicago in DuPage county is just over half Hispanic/Latino. Church leaders, working with World Relief, started to offer ESL and citizenship classes to the community. Eventually the church decided to begin offering weekly worship services in Spanish, as well as services such as Quinceañeras (the 15th year birthday celebration), and a first communion program. In partnership with the Synod/ELCA, St. Andrew called a Spanish speaking associate pastor, and the congregation continued to grow.

The congregation decided to call one bilingual pastor in 2012, and I accepted the call to St. Andrew in November of 2013. Each weekend I lead two worship services in Spanish (Saturday at 12:00 noon and Sunday at 12:00 noon) and two in English (Sunday at 8:00 - traditional and 10:00 - contemporary). Over half of our roughly 250 people who attend worship are Hispanic/Latino, which mirrors that of our community's demographic.

Even though we have two distinct cultures and languages, we continue to grapple with what it means to be one church. Though many of our ministries reflect one culture or the other, others are very well integrated, in particular our confirmation and youth ministries. Most of our worship services are in either English or Spanish, but we intentionally offer bilingual worship services on occasion. When we do, I try to be clear about the purpose: so that we can worship together as one congregation. As the psalmist says: "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)"

Last January, Eric Law gave a workshop for our Synod on multicultural proficiency at St. Andrew, and members from both cultures participated. One of the things he talked about was the importance of intentionality and invitation in multicultural community. He invited an English speaker and Spanish speaker up and asked them: "Are you able to communicate?" Then he asked how many people were bilingual, and a few raised their hands. He then invited one of them to interpret their conversation. He also led us through a bible study using his "mutual invitation" method, which we have subsequently used for bilingual bible studies.

My experience in multicultural ministry is that it is often messy, but never boring, with many beautiful moments. There have been new Anglo families that have started attending St. Andrew because they are attracted to cross-cultural community. There are people who used to be reluctant, and even held misunderstandings about the other culture, but have seen their reservations erode as they got to know some of them.

Those for whom various cultural traditions were foreign, have attended a Posada (the nine-day reenactment of Mary and Joseph's pilgrimage to Bethlehem) at someone's home, and have had a great time. In addition, some of our Posadas are hosted by our Anglo members. Our most recent Posada this

past year took place with over 300 people at St. Andrew singing Christmas carols in Spanish and English, eating different types of foods and breaking piñatas. These and other interactions are beautiful moments which provide glimpses of the wonderfully intricate tapestry that is the Kingdom of God.

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

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