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CYNTHIA MOE-LOBEDA

Climate Justice, Environmental Racism, and a Lutheran Moral Vision

What is the vocation of a Lutheran college at this particular point in history? I begin with a simple response and then spend this essay deepening it. *A central aspect of that vocation is to prepare students for what Thomas Berry calls the “great work” of our era, drawing upon the distinctive gifts of Lutheran traditions in doing so. That “great work” is to forge a sustainable relationship between the human species and our planetary home and do this in ways that diminish the gap between those who have too much and those who have not enough. This daunting challenge is a defining face of God’s call to love neighbor as self in this age of ecological peril.*

From a Lutheran perspective, the call to neighbor-love permeates all aspects of life, including our lives as individuals and our lives as members of societies. Neighbor-love bids us to shape societies in ways that enable all people and Earth’s web of life to flourish, with particular attention to the wellbeing of people who are vulnerable to exploitation by others.

What are some distinctive gifts that a college or university shaped by Lutheran heritage can offer to this panhuman and interfaith challenge of our day? I will focus on one set of resources that revolves around what I refer to as moral vision. Moral vision begins with a courageous commitment to “see reality for what it is”—that is, to recognize “what is going on” and especially to recognize evil where it parades as good. I am drawing here on Luther’s insistence on calling a thing what it is. Lutheran theologian Winston Persaud, describing Luther’s conviction, writes, “when reality seems distorted and sinful, and seemingly God-forsaken...a theologian of the cross is not afraid to recognize reality for what it is” (Persaud 265-66). In

Luther’s words, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is” (“Heidelberg Disputation” 53).

Most of us do not recognize reality for what it is today. We do not acknowledge fully the reality of ecological peril and the horrendous inequity that is built into it. This reality seems too God-forsaken, too hopeless. *Seeing* this reality, however, is crucial. We cannot reverse our headlong race into environmental catastrophe without recognizing that we are on that way. As James Baldwin once said: Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed unless it is faced. We must see what is going on.

This initial aspect of moral vision—seeing what is—is brutal. Neither we nor our students nor anyone should risk it without also engaging a second and a third aspect of moral vision. The second is seeing more just and sustainable alternatives, and the third is seeing God’s saving presence at work in the world to bring abundant life for all. Do not gaze at the cross forever without seeing also the resurrection. We will begin with seeing what is, but do not fear that we will stay there.

Seeing What Is

We face a moral crisis never before encountered. One young and dangerous species now threatens Earth’s capacity to regenerate life as we know it. We are using and degrading the planet’s natural goods at a rate that Earth’s ecosystems cannot sustain. We have generated an unsustainable relationship with our planetary home. The credible scientific community is of one

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accord about this basic reality. The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment—the most comprehensive sustainability assessment ever undertaken—proclaimed that, “Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of the Earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted” (Millennium). The problem, however, is not *human* activity per se. It is especially the activity of some of us—the world’s high consumers.

“Less acknowledged in the United States is the intricate connection between ecological degradation and social injustice.”

Let us call the ecological peril the Earth crisis. The Earth crisis alone is daunting. Less well known, less acknowledged in the United States is the intricate connection between ecological degradation and social injustice. Consider more closely two broad forms of that connection: climate injustice and environmental racism.

Climate Justice

The suffering and death caused by climate change is not distributed evenly among Earth’s human creatures. In general, the world’s people of color and people who are economically impoverished are at far more risk. The problem runs much deeper. Those of us most protected from the effects of ecological degradation are also the ones most responsible for it. Therein lies the justice issue at its starkest.

Citizens of the United States daily produce nearly 50 times the greenhouse gases as do our counterparts in some lands, while the world’s more impoverished people and peoples suffer most and first from the life threatening consequences of global warming. Martin Parry, chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Working Group II declares: “The people most affected by climate change are and will be those living in developing countries....and within those regions it will be the poor that will be most affected” (IIED). Even a slight degree of warming decreases the yield of the world’s food staples—wheat, corn, rice, barley—in seasonally dry areas (Parry). Subsistence farmers and people with little money will go hungry. We will not. Rising sea levels are not likely to force you or me permanently from our homes and livelihoods in the near future. Not true for many of the world’s more impoverished people in low-lying areas. The Maldives, a nation of tiny islands and atolls no more than a mile wide or eight feet above sea level at any point, is threatened with loss of its entire land mass. The entire

nation may be forced to relocate. The Maldives has become a leading nation in calling for serious action around climate change. Its president is one of the world’s most eloquent voices entreating the world community to take seriously the reality of climate injustice. “Please ladies and gentlemen,” he implored, “we did not do any of these things [lead high carbon-emission lifestyles] but if things go business as usual, we will not live. We will die. Our country will not exist” (Nasheed).

Not only economic privilege but also white privilege marks the climate crisis. The over 600 million environmental refugees whose lands will be lost to rising seas if Antarctica or Greenland melts significantly will be disproportionately people of color. So, too, are the people who go hungry as global warming diminishes yields of food staples. The 40 percent of the world’s population whose lives depend upon seven rivers fed by rapidly diminishing Himalayan glaciers are largely not white people. Ongoing ecological destruction, especially in the forms of climate and water issues, could be the most deadly manifestation of white privilege and class privilege that the world has known.

These are examples of what many voices from the Global South refer to as “climate injustice.” Two years ago, while working in India with a number of seminaries and the National Council of Churches of India (NCCI) on eco-justice ministry and theology, I realized the extent to which white privilege and class privilege offer to a few of us relative protection from the earliest and severest impacts of global climate change. The NCCI describes climate injustice in a recent draft of a policy statement: “[T]he powerful nations and the powerful within the developing nations... have emitted and continue to emit green house gases beyond the capacity of the planet to withstand. However the subaltern communities with almost zero footprint are forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of global warming” (NCCI)

In short, “climate injustice” refers to the imbalance between nations responsible for climate change and the nations suffering or predicted to suffer from its effects. While we all may be in this together, we are not all in it in the same way or to the same deadly extent, at least initially.

Environmental Racism

The social justice/ecology nexus takes a second form. Closely related to climate injustice, it commonly is identified as “environmental racism.” The term was coined in 1987 by Benjamin Chavez, an African American civil rights leader, in the groundbreaking study, “Toxic Wastes and Race,” commissioned by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice.¹

Environmental racism refers to government and corporate regulations and policies that directly or indirectly target certain impoverished communities and communities of

color for dangerous land use. As a result, people of color and impoverished people are far more likely to be exposed to toxic and hazardous waste. (The term initially referred to environmental discrimination based on race alone. But it quickly came to denote the disproportionate distribution of environmental dangers not only in communities of color but also communities of economically marginalized people.)

Illustrations of environmental racism are endless. They are international and domestic. The aforementioned study documented the disproportionate location of facilities for treatment, storage and disposal of toxic waste in or near “racial and ethnic communities” in the United States (Chavis). Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the extent to which black and economically impoverished people are more vulnerable to climate related weather disasters. Mississippi’s “cancer alley” is not in a white wealthy area. In Seattle the industrial flats full of polluted water and truck exhaust are smack in a low-income area of town.

Environmental racism on an international level is even more pernicious. A small dark-skinned woman from a tribal community in India walked quietly into the basement office of an Indian social movement organization that I was visiting. Clinging to her hand was a very tiny boy with a tube through which he breathed. They had come to spend the night in the office. The child’s birth defect was caused by the disastrous gas leak from a Union Carbide subsidiary’s plant in Bhopal, India. That plant and the careless safety precautions that allowed the horrendous leak would not have been located in a wealthy white neighborhood of United States.

While disasters such as Bhopal are present in the public discourse, much environmental racism on the international level is easily hidden from the public eye in this country. The transfer of ecologically dangerous production plants to countries of the two-thirds world is one major example. So too is the Coca-Cola plant in India that has destroyed the water supply and therefore the crops for thousands of people—dark-skinned people.

“Transboundary dumping,” or dumping waste across national borders, is another example of international environmental racism. Much of our garbage ends up in landfills in the Global South. As incinerators close in the Global North, they are often sold to companies in the developing world who then incinerate our municipal, medical, and hazardous waste. Beginning in 1986, the *Khian Sea*, a 500-foot vessel hauled 15,000 tons of toxic incinerator ash from Philadelphia around the world for *sixteen years* trying to dump it in port after port. Initially a large portion of it was dumped on a beach in Haiti, labeled “soil fertilizer,” but thereafter every port refused to accept it: Senegal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Cape Verde, and Indonesia. Finally the rest disappeared somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

In like manner, computers and other electronic goods that are discarded by consumers in the United States are often shipped to cities and villages across Asia, Latin America, and Africa where residents disassemble them for sale in new manufacturing processes or where they are simply dumped as waste. Each computer monitor contains highly toxic materials. This practice is essentially a massive transfer of hazardous waste products from the wealthy world to the poor.

The fossil fuel industry demonstrates environmental racism both in the United States and in the Global South. The peoples whose communities and lives are devastated by coal and oil production tend to be already marginalized people: Africans of the Niger Delta, African Americans in Mississippi, poor whites in Appalachia, Indigenous of Latin America and North America, and other people on the underside of power and privilege.

Ecological Imperialism

In sum, we see at least two broad dimensions of the link between social injustice and ecological degradation. They are climate injustice and environmental racism. Together on the global stage, they are known by some as “ecological imperialism.” The stark reality is that, in general, people with relative economic wealth and people of European descent stand a greater chance of protection from the impacts of global warming and toxic waste than do many of Earth’s peoples. This concern demands holding social justice and ecological well-being as inseparable in the quest to embrace creation and to build a sustainable relationship between the human species and the planet. Eco-justice is a term for that linkage.

These realities are gut-wrenching for people of relative economic privilege who live in the Global North, including me. Our lives are wound up in and benefit materially from economic structures and norms that breed deadly ecological destruction for many people whom we fail to see. Our everyday life, in the ravenously consumptive and petroleum dependent mode that we consider normal, threatens Earth’s web of life and many neighbors whom we are called to love. This is a deeply troubling aspect of “reality as it is” for us today. A crucial step in moral vision is to *see* it.

Seeing What Could Be²

So what does all this mean for the vocation of a Lutheran College? I do believe that faith in a God who loves this creation and all of its people with a boundless and gracious love calls us to equip ourselves and our students for countering the climate injustice and environmental racism on which our lives are built. This requires seeing them. But it is a horrible

sight. My own experience convinces me that clear vision of our corruption into this systemic sin is indeed too dangerous. It easily aggravates denial, hopelessness, or despair. Yet love for neighbor demands seeing where neighbor is brutalized. The question before us is what can make “seeing what is” morally empowering instead of morally defeating?

A Lutheran theological perspective insists that while daring to see what is in terms of human brokenness and sin, we also cultivate a second and a third form of vision. They are seeing what ought to be and what could be (more just and sustainable alternatives are) and recognizing the presence of God, “flowing and pouring through all things,” and working there toward creation’s flourishing. That entails recognizing God with us, for us, and within us. We ought not teach our students or ourselves to recognize what is going on in terms of ecological violence and the related social inequity without also opening the floodgates of hope. The other two forms of vision are two of those floodgates.

Practicing the second, “seeing what ought and could be,” includes enabling students to see, experience, study, and engage with ordinary people and groups who are forging paths toward sustainable Earth-human relations marked by justice. The world is full of them. Vast numbers of people and groups around the globe are creating ways of life that Earth can sustain and that do not impoverish some to the benefit of others. They are forging lives, institutions, and bodies politic in which huge transnational unaccountable corporations are not free to toxify communities’ water supplies and land, or to emit limitless greenhouse gasses in the quest to maximize profit. They are re-shaping households, businesses, schools, and cities to live in harmony with Earth’s economy of life. They are building communities in which the well-being of humankind and otherkind trumps wealth accumulation. Public policies, practices of daily life, and re-constituted principles of economic life are their building blocks.

Paul Hawken and the Wise Earth Network that he founded conclude that “over one—and maybe even two—million organizations currently are working toward ecological sustainability and social justice.” “I believe this movement will prevail,” he writes. “It will change a sufficient number of people so as to begin the reversal of centuries of frenzied self-destructive behavior” (Hawken 2, 186, 189). Peasants and other farmers, scientists, economists, factory workers, educators, elected officials, students, healthcare professionals, homemakers, educators, journalists, and more comprise this social force. Some are from communities of oppressed people. Others emerge from communities of conscience among highly privileged people.

This second lens of moral vision sees vibrant and growing signs of hope. Indeed on a pragmatic level, hope springs forth from the courage, tenacity, and creativity of people and movements

throughout this country and around the globe who are generating alternative practices, policies, institutions, and worldviews. From a theological perspective, this second aspect of moral vision is grounded in a theology of cross and resurrection. It sees the promise that soul-searing, life-shattering destruction and death are not the last word, in this moment or forever. In some way that we cannot fully fathom, the last word is life raised up from brutal death

God’s Presence Permeating All that Is

Moral vision, from a Lutheran perspective, has yet a third lens. It sees that human creatures are not alone in the move toward more just and sustainable ways of living. The sacred life-giving and life-saving Source of the cosmos is with, within, and for Earth’s creatures and elements—human included—luring creation toward God’s intent that all may “have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In the world’s monotheistic traditions, that power is known as YHWH, God, or Allah.

“Despite evidence to the contrary,
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life with abundance and joy ultimately
will be fulfilled.”

The Holy One, as understood through a Lutheran perspective of cross and resurrection, dwells in, with, among, and beyond us. This creating and saving presence brings seeds of hope. One such seed is the claim that, despite evidence to the contrary, God’s will for all of creation to have life with abundance and joy ultimately will be fulfilled. The power of God liberating all of creation from the bonds of oppression, destruction, and death is stronger than all forces of evil that would undermine God’s promise that all shall have life and have it fully. God “will not allow our complicity in...evil to defeat God’s being for us and for the good of all creation” (Morse 249). In the midst of suffering and death, be it individual, social, or ecological, the promise given to the Earth community is that life in God will reign. So speaks the resurrection.

I do not know all that this promise means for us and for Earth’s community of life. It *does not* lessen our call to devote our lives to building a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world; it does *not*, that is, allow us to sit back and let God do the work. That conclusion would be absurd, because God works through human beings. Nor does the hope born of cross and

resurrection ensure our survival as a species in the face of climate change. It *does* ensure that the radiant Spirit beyond comprehension that is above, beyond, under, and within all, ultimately will bring all to the fullness of love, beauty, and life. We are to live trusting in that promise. In Martin Luther's imagery, if the world will end tomorrow, one ought to plant an apple tree. The resurrection promise, then, is one profound source of hope.

The cross speaks in yet another way to those of us who have glimpsed even momentarily the horror of being wealthy Christians in a world of hunger or the horror of what we are doing to earth and what it will mean for our children. Jesus' execution by Roman officials has been understood differently throughout church history. As I have noted elsewhere, there is good reason to distrust many interpretations of the cross. It is a much abused and controversial symbol of Christian faith ("Theology of the Cross," 181-195). Yet in many contexts, the image of the cross continues to unfold dimensions of God's infinite love and ubiquitous life-saving presence. It holds particular promise for this inquiry into seeing and resisting systemic evil.

We may run from this knowledge of the cross because it implies too much brokenness and evil present in our lives. Jesus' execution by imperial power, however, demonstrates that even in the depths of human brokenness, including our entanglement in structural sin, the saving Christ is present, is healing, and is liberating. This truth enables seeing the structural brutality of which we are a part without being destroyed by that knowledge. Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, says it well: The central message of the cross "is not to reveal that our condition is one of darkness and death; it is to reveal to us the One who meets us in our darkness and death. It is a theology of the cross not because it wants to put forth this ghastly spectacle as a final statement about life in this world but because it insists that God...meets, loves, and redeems us precisely where we are: in the valley of the shadow of death" (Hall 149). This I believe with my whole being.

God is present even if I have no awareness of it, and have no faith that God is present. A central message of what became known as Luther's theology of the cross is that where God seems absent, there God is. God is hidden in God's apparent absence ("Heidelberg Disputation" 52-53). The saving power of God is hidden in the form of its opposite (*sub contrario suo abscondita sunt*). Nothing can separate us "from the love of God in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 8:39). God's liberating love, working through this world, can move us from doing ecological and economic violence to dismantling it, even if that seems impossible. Salvation is "both from the *affliction* of evil and from the *infliction* of evil" (Morse 225).

Consider yet another wellspring of hope within Christian traditions. Multiple streams of Christianity, from its earliest

centuries, have affirmed that God, the source of life itself, the One who is saving and has saved, this God abides within human beings and within the entirety of creation. This claim is particularly striking when uttered by theologians not commonly recognized for it. Luther is one. He insists in various sermons and treatises that God inhabits the things of Earth: "The power of God must be essentially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf" ("That these Words" 57). God is "present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being" (58). God "is in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all" (Santmire 129, quoting Luther). Luther asserts that *everything* "is full of Christ through and through"—that *all* "creatures are...permeable and present to [Christ]" ("Confession" 386). Or again: "Christ...fills all things...Christ is around us and in us in all places...he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water" ("The Sacrament" 342-43). In these claims Luther is by no means alone. The assertion of God indwelling all of creation has been present in Christian theology since its beginning.

Fascinating to me and relevant here are the implications for moral-spiritual power. According to Luther, wherever the word of God comes, it comes to renew the world. If God is present within the trees, waters, winds, and creatures—human creatures included—then God is at play within us *and our earthy kin* to change and renew the world. We are called to hear the healing, liberating, and transforming Word of God in the other-than-human parts of creation to garner wisdom and moral power from that voice. With this move comes hope.

This third lens of a moral vision recognizes that we are not alone here on Earth in our efforts to forge just, compassionate, and ecologically sustainable ways of life. God is at play and at work with us and within this good creation. And God's justice-making, Earth-honoring love ultimately is the destiny toward which and through which creation moves, including, of course, each of us.

Conclusion

I have found that this three-eyed moral vision serves students well. It enables them to acknowledge the unfolding reality of ecological devastation, its consequences on vulnerable neighbors the world over, and our implication in it without fleeing in denial, despair, or numb apathy. To the contrary, this moral vision enables entering into this soul-wrenching reality with infinite hope, on behalf of neighbor love, seeking a more just and sustainable world.

We began by noting one central aspect of our vocation as Lutheran colleges and universities. It is to prepare students

for meeting the unprecedented moral challenge facing their generation and ours, and to draw upon distinctive gifts of Lutheran traditions in doing so. The moral challenge is to build ways of living that Earth can sustain, and to do this in ways that diminish the death-dealing gap between those of us who consume far too much and those that have far too little. Lutheran traditions, like all religious traditions, are called to bring their particular gifts to this daunting “great work.” We have considered one of many gifts from the living Lutheran heritage. It is morally empowering vision—a way of seeing grounded in cross and resurrection.

No humans before us have been called to halt a mad dash into ecological-social horror on a global scale. We can reverse this trajectory only if as a society we dare to recognize the peril, its social consequences, and our complicity in it. Moral vision, as sketched here, dares to see that reality and to move on in hope. For we move on trusting that the God who called this world into being loves it with a love beyond human imagining, a love that will never die. It is our blessed call to live that love into the world as individuals and as parts of social systems, knowing that the One who calls us also works within us enabling us to move from death to life, from inflicting ecological devastation to cultivating ecological healing. May Lutheran colleges and universities prepare faculty, staff, and students to hear and heed this holy calling.

Endnotes

1. Many people understand the environmental justice movement in the United States to have been born in early the 1980s when the North Carolina state government selected the poor, rural, and overwhelmingly black Warren County as the site for a hazardous waste facility to accept 6,000 truckloads of soil laced with PCBs. Residents and allies, furious that the state dismissed their concerns over PCBs leaching into the drinking water, lied down on roads leading to landfills. Six weeks of marches and nonviolent street protests followed, and more than 500 people were arrested—the first arrests in United States history over the siting of a landfill. Although the people of Warren County ultimately lost the battle and live with a toxic landfill in their backyard, their story drew media attention and inspired communities across the country to resist similar injustices. The aforementioned report, “Toxic Waste and Race,” was generated in part by the church’s involvement in this incident. Today, the legal challenges raised by the people of Warren county are considered by many to be the first major milestone in the American environmental justice movement.

2. This brief section is drawn largely from Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Systemic Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, forthcoming.

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