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Bodies and the Body

By The Reverend Dr. Amy C. Schifrin — November 02, 2009

When I visit my white-haired saints in the nursing home and ask them how they are, not one of them has ever said, "Well, Pastor, I'm in this existential morass." They talk about their aching shoulders and their failing eyesight; they show me their scars, which are more than I'd ever wanted to see; and at the last, when they really trust me, they include me among those who know the particularities of their digestive malfunctions. It's the body they talk about: what can be seen, felt, and touched. They talk about that which can experience pain. They talk about that which can be resurrected.

And the pain, oh, the pain, is so intensified if there is no tenderness of human contact, no sweet voice of mercy, no sigh that breathes deeper than any words. The body, this body, cries out to be loved, for in the fellowship of love even the worst suffering can be endured.

The church is this sort of body, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as part of this body knows intimately the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. The pain of this suffering does not reside in some distant relative, in some far-off limb, but in the vital organs that regulate breath, that pump blood, that cleanse impurities. The problems are not new, nor does knowing the diagnosis change the reality of the devastation, but without love this death cannot be endured.

So it is post-CWA for many. Before the vote on whether we trusted in the goodness of the one Who made human bodies male and female according to His purpose, before the vote which declared our public identity as ever-distancing from the apostolic witness, before the vote which will necessitate ecclesiastical rituals that contradict Scripture and the Confessions, disease in the body was clearly on the rise. The voting did not create our lack of faith but merely illumined it—an unintentional self-diagnosis that laid bare our illness for all the world to see. The ELCA in its churchwide assembly declared that a human being's interpretation of his or her own experience is the criteria for judging the Holy Scripture and the doctrines of the church. No longer is it believed that the Word speaks us into life. No longer does the Word stand over against all human pride and folly. No longer will this two-edged sword be sharpened. No longer will we cry out for the resurrection of our lives, for when sin is not sin, we are already all that we can be.

Of all the things that we sinful humans can do to destroy our bodies, that which diminishes our identity as men and women is among the most devastating. When the means that God created to give life to the generations is misused, the core of who we are

as human beings made in His image and likeness is torn apart. God gives us bodies that He may be glorified in them. Whether people engage in fornication, adultery, homoeroticism, or any other act of disordered and seductive loving, if their identities are continually shaped through such acts, the primal pain of the fall within their very bodies will continue to cry out for healing. When the church says that any of those actions are acceptable, she loses part of her identity as God's sacramental vessel for healing in this world.

As white North American and northern European cultures make such expressions a matter of entitlement and so-called equity, the church's witness to the goodness of God's intentions is received as suspect. Because the ELCA, gathered in her churchwide assembly, has been swept ever more deeply into the cultural milieu of the growing acceptance of homoerotic behavior as good and as right and as natural as anything can be, it has tragically adopted an alien word as a primary lens through which Holy Scripture is interpreted. Justice was the word spoken over and over at the CWA, but the notion of justice that was heralded was not based on divine justice but on a self-righteous interpretive move that placed Scripture at our disposal (and it was disposed of in short order).

With this worldview at its foundation, and now to be enacted in polity and liturgy, the church has lost its credibility as the body in which healing may be found. The influences that were present in lecture halls and theological journals, in pastors' studies and national advocacy groups, have now taken on an identifying status and thus have the potential to touch everyone in the ELCA's body, everyone's physical body, and the pain, the existential pain, is now public. The bandages that held this fragile expression of the body together are now saturated with blood, and whether fresh bandages are put on or a scalpel divides the flesh, there will be no healing of this battered body without the fellowship of love.

Let us not settle for a tolerance that is closer to apathy, the absence of love. Let us not settle for respect of bound consciences, for if they are bound to the self there is no conscience. Let us not settle for fear, for in distinction from our presiding bishop's word in regard to this church being and remaining a safe place, it has been anything but safe for those who dared to speak from an orthodox expression of the Christian faith.

Rather let us love, that is, let us enter the places of pain in the body and call our erring sisters and brothers to repentance. Let us not abandon them in their desperate attempts to cover their pain. For even as they shout that God is doing a new thing, He isn't—and no vote can change the intentions of Him Who created us as male and female that we might know His love, that we might be vessels of His love, that a husband and wife would become one body in His love. And let us not forget that no one will hear such a call to repentance if it is done with arrogance or malice. It will only be heard if it comes from the posture of prayer.

So put your knees on the floor and open your hands toward the heavens. You may be in a post-CWA existential morass, but God will still use your body to do His will. For in the

power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, the body will be made whole.

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