

“Church in Society” (27May18)
John15:12-19, Ps146, ELCA SocStmt

We’ve got 12—almost 13—ELCA social statements, documents that are intended to help us reflect on complex issues and consider them from a Lutheran perspective.

These involve lots of work—the new one on Women and Justice is a decade-long process—but you may have hardly known they existed. Last week in adult ed, John Brugge the elder asked what happens to them and how members of congregations are supposed to know about them, so we’re going to touch on six in Advent services this summer, starting with this one that was the first adopted, back in 1991.

Since we can’t read the whole things in worship—nor would that really BE worship—I haven’t quite figured out how to help you encounter and engage in the reflection. We’ll hear a little snippet. I’ll preach what I can. And other parts of the service will try to hold the theme for us, too.

Uh-oh! “Church in society?” Here we go, mixing politics and religion.

Some may see this discussion as a failure to separate church and state, muddling divisive issues, almost as bad as confusing science and the Bible.

While I expect we’d argue against a theocracy—a society where my view of my god sets the rules for how you need to behave—still an oil-and-water separation of society and church can’t suffice, since it’s pretty easy to see such barricades as mistaken, that God absolutely and clearly must care not just about what happens in this room or your heart, but about life in this world.

We might start with your baptism. I suspect many of you were baptized as infants. That must indicate something about God’s concern for babies. And concern about babies then has to reflect on life in families. That relates to how children are raised, which must have impacts on making sure they have enough food to eat and

growing minds through education. Further extensions of God’s concern mean parents need jobs, and need roads or internet to get to those jobs. Not just water for baptism, kids need clean water to drink and air to breathe.

Or, in that environmental direction, if we begin by saying that God created this world and everything in it (and everything outside it), then—unless God was sloppy or made it then forgot about it—we’d have to say that God cares about this planet and its creatures. So we have to believe that our life and place in this world is a matter of care for God, and how we live amid this world flows quite directly from our understanding of God.

I realize I’m arguing against the choir, so to speak, since you’re (in all likelihood) not flat-out opposed to mixing religion and politics or dispute the notion that church and society interact. I’m trying to convince you of something you already believe. But maybe it’s the question of how. God could’ve given us rule over creation to do whatever we want to it. Or if God’s concerned about education, it could mean churches should run the schools. Because these things don’t stand autonomously, with aspects of our existence in silos, it’s obvious church goes with you to the streets, and the happenings in the Capitol wend their way into worship. That can’t be stopped.

So to ask directly: how might church inform your behavior in society? What of here gets carried out the doors? [Answers of supporting each other, feeding the poor, welcoming the stranger, loving enemies...]

Gathering those thoughts from worship and the Bible, basically, you’ve just participated in the initial stages of an ELCA social statement. These are crafted and considered from what we believe and how that belief interacts with the world around us, what our understanding of God and Jesus calls us to practice and strive for more largely. It’s not about right answers to resolve everything. It’s not some hierarchy telling you you’ve gotta do such-and-so. It’s this very Lutheran process of asking together, “What does this mean?”

Social statements involve long periods of study and input from across the church; last summer at this time, we had discussions on faith and sexism as part of background for the Women and Justice statement, and we'll encounter that draft in July. Eventually the writing needs to be approved by a two-thirds vote at a Churchwide Assembly, involving about a thousand voting members from across all parts of our denomination. At that point, it may guide policy decisions or implications in the church—from whom we are able to ordain to where retirement funds are invested to ways that our official lobbyists might interact with Congress or encourage us to advocate or simply on how it intersects with our lives.

That it involves some complexity and isn't directly black and white is pretty easy to acknowledge, especially with some of the paradoxical phrases showing the ambiguity in the little excerpt we heard: that we live in a time of now and not yet, both experiencing it but not experiencing it, already knowing what a Jesus-shaped life is like and the promise of resurrection, but still struggling for it. It acknowledged that we may be the communion of saints, but are simultaneously sinners. Being in the church doesn't raise us above the broken mess, as is unfortunately so easy to observe, and being the church calls us actually to enter it more deeply. As Lutherans, that's distinct; other Christians may believe they're better than everybody else or able to be separate from the world's problems or having all the answers, but not us. Again, we may be part of the new creation in eternal life, but marked by the cross. We celebrate God's good creation while lamenting its bondage to sin and death.

This social statement, and our faith itself, are just thick with these both/and confusing statements. We pray for the peace of the whole world with restlessness and discontent. There's the question of when to support systems or programs and when to confront them. That this is sinful as well as holy, human as well as divine, that the church is in the world but not from the

world. And, in the words of Jesus from our Bible reading, our task is laying down our lives in love, even when—or even though—it may mean being hated.

Amid such difficulty, I'd commend to us the hard effort of holding it all in tension. My internship supervisor used to say in mock disgust, "oh, you're one of those people who makes distinctions, aren't you?" Yes, in the complexity of living as followers of Jesus in this world, we pursue making distinctions. This complexity doesn't simply allow us to be anti-Trump or pro-life or anti-gun or pro-freedom. Any of those have to be weighed and tested by faith, by what we know of God in Jesus. Even under such a simple statement of identifying our core purpose (as the social statement does) that all of this is to support you in your "baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor in daily life," even to boil it down to loving your neighbor, still requires us to ponder what is loving.

Maybe a reasonable example of the ambivalence sits in front of us on this Memorial Day weekend. We might start with the easy celebration of the entrance to summer, the notion of a day of rest from work, the chance perhaps to gather for outdoor bratwurst. We can rightly see those as good, but must also demand we see more than a day of barbecued leisure.

And so we'd pay attention to what—or whom—Memorial Day is memorializing, on this 50th anniversary of it being set for this last Monday in May. The commemoration arose in the South during the Civil War and moved North, since between the two sides more than 600,000 soldiers had died, 1 out of every 50 people in the country, killed in fighting. It became a somber observance, a time for families to visit and decorate graves.

But whereas civil religion turns this into a patriotic holiday—or holy day—that declares all of those dead soldiers—plus all military veterans, and all in active combat under the United States flag—are heroes deserving adoration and worship, we must measure it differently. To the degree that they laid down their lives in love and in service,

we may affirm their vocation. If they were striving somehow on the side of life, in protection, for justice, we may find value.

But to the degree that war is always about death and destruction and is no godly way to solve problems, even when we might give thanks for the lives of these men and women, we condemn what took them from life too soon and so violently. And in that way, rather than simply cladding ourselves in red, white, and blue, we as Christians can take Memorial Day as an occasion to recommit ourselves to the work of resolving disputes and reconciling enemies and celebrating diversity and not being bound by narrow nationalism.

I know that that, literally, is no picnic. It's not so simple as saying, "let's take a day off tomorrow and relax." It's not easy work for the light-of-heart. But to be marked by the cross means laying down our lives. To live with love means not accommodating to the facile but false devotions of culture, but resisting and struggling. It isn't only the soldier, then, who sacrifices her life and risks it all, but is our calling and vocation as Christians.

That, finally, returns us to our gathering here. The social statement begins here, and lives our lives out from this assembly. This is where our identity is formed and renewed, where the truest and longest-lasting image of who we are is held. Once more, that isn't accomplished by me lecturing you on what your duties are or trying to convince you of the way to live. It's because you were given this identity in baptism. It's because here Jesus encounters you, calls you his own, gives himself to you. We love, because he first loved us. As the social statement says, through worship, "the Church is gathered and shaped by the Holy Spirit to be a serving and liberating presence in the world...The gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life."

That's why we're here. That's what God is up to in these gatherings, making you into the kind of people who bear God's creative and redeeming and liberating will to the world, as friends who

bear the fruits of Jesus. That's what God is doing. What's left for us is the subsequent task of deliberating how exactly that takes on flesh in the world.

An excerpt from the ELCA social statement on *The Church in Society*:

Through faith in the Gospel the Church already takes part in the reign of God announced by and embodied in Jesus. Yet, it still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God's promised future. In this time of "now ... not yet," the Church lives in two ages— the present age and the age to come. The Church is 'in' the world but not 'from' the world.

The Gospel does not take the Church out of the world but instead calls it to affirm and to enter more deeply into the world. Although in bondage to sin and death, the world is God's good creation, where, because of love, God in Jesus Christ became flesh. The Church and the world have a common destiny in the reign of God. The Church acts for the sake of the world in hope and prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven."

The Gospel does not allow the Church to accommodate to the ways of the world. The presence and promise of God's reign makes the church restless and discontented with the world's brokenness and violence. Acting for the sake of God's world requires resisting and struggling against the evils of the world.

The Church is "a new creation ... from God," but it is still part of a fallen humanity, sharing fully the brokenness of the world. It is a community of saints, a people righteous before God on account of Jesus' self-giving love, and at the same time a community of sinners. Repentance, forgiveness, and renewal characterize the Church that lives under the cross with the hope of the coming in fullness of God's reign.

<http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Church-in-Society>