

Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy

Meeting notes

January 10, 2020

Meeting via Zoom teleconference call

Present: Ruth Frey, Anne Hodges-Copple, Sarah Lawton, Brant Lee, Guy Lemmhuus, Lallie Lloyd, Jose Rodriguez-Sanjuro, Reuben Varghese, Susanne Watson Epting

Absent: Andrew Dietsche, Dora Mubwayesango, Prince Singh

Sarah opened the meeting with prayer before Lallie shared her reflection. See her attached written reflection.

Discussion and thoughts following the reflection:

- Anne: Struck by the movement from personal story (and tragedy) to the cosmic Christ. This touches our theology of the Body of Christ: a living body that is always in circulation, in motion. And what is the heart that is pumping? We say, "Create in me a clean heart, oh God." That said, what do we do with our theology of baptism and adoption through baptism into Christ? Who if any are outside that Body? So the metaphor works and doesn't work.
- Sarah: The phrase "right relationship" in understanding "righteousness" – our movement toward social justice advocacy starts with relationship. But we are stymied by being separate from each other, such as with residential segregation—which then affects our educational system and so much more. How can the church call us out of segregation into relationship?
- Jose: Appreciated the move from individual psyche to an understanding of the complexity of human relationships. As a priest working with multiple Hispanic communities in a rural, southern state, sees so many who are formed by the theology of individual salvation and assumption that we succeed through individual effort. Right relationship implies something more communal. How to articulate this theology in his context.
- Brant: Noted the shift in family history that took place in Lallie's story – the story can change. Why don't we change our story?
- Ruth: Responding to this and to Susanne's theological questions posted earlier this week (Do our theological concepts work anymore? Or have they been co-opted by our church's identity with affluence and whiteness?) Lallie's concept of co-creating implies something very different. Are we ready as a church for this challenge?
- Lallie: Yes, these are challenging ideas But also comforting, in the sense of being "bigger than me." The energy we see in this work is an expression of God's longing for our reconciliation. We can be a part of that work, but as individuals, not the most important part. Giving up being at the center of things (speaking from whiteness and privilege) is okay when we are part of the larger work.

- Susanne: Speaking of our theological DNA and also the concept of circulation articulated by Anne very personal experience in death of son as a young man of offering his organs for donation. What does it mean to give a heart, perhaps to meet the recipient of that heart, does it matter who that person is? Experience of “body” and our collectivity as a body, Body of Christ, starts there.
- Guy: In all these stories, there is not one size fits all theology – although common themes, every story is different and as we start to move in the direction of gathering in these reflections in order to say something coherent to the church, we need to be careful not to lose the particularity of experience. This group is sensitive to that and to the particularities of how different folks have experienced oppression and also God’s love through different life circumstances (racism, homophobia). We are aware of the need to decolonize our theology. The church as a whole may not be ready. How can we speak to this?
- Reuben: Right relationship begs the question: Who are we in relationship with?
- Anne: Quoting Bishop Curry – when seeking common group, reach for higher ground But we are a church of hierarchies (as indicated visibly by a bishop’s miter and staff!) and we have replicated western European hierarchies and privileges. What different lenses do we need? How do we graft our different human stories to each other and to the larger Body so that we can tell the cosmic story? And speaking of body Social justice resistance work can be seen in bodily terms as resistance to disease / dis-ease.

Housekeeping: Perhaps Jose can do the next reflection, in February? In one of the upcoming meetings, either February or March, Lallie suggests we start with homework to read past reflection/notes and begin to bring the strands together, before our work in person in April. Sarah reminds everyone to be sure to block out April 20-22 for our in-person meeting. Guy will do the prayers next meeting, in February.

Sarah closed the meeting with prayer.

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(See Lallie’s reflection, below)

Notes taken by Sarah

Lallie Lloyd
January 10, 2020

One thing I've heard across all our sharing is the extent to which our theologies of social justice advocacy have deep roots in our personal experiences. I deeply honor and value the extent to which we as a committee have named our roots before we turn to what can so often become a cerebral disembodied experience of developing a theology of anything.

My journey toward social justice advocacy is interwoven with my personal life experience because it took personal heartbreak and struggle to open the eyes of my heart to the social structures, patterns, and attitudes that had formed me, from which I had benefited at others' expense.

So I'm going to start with pieces my personal story.

I was raised in Haverford, a town on Philadelphia's Main Line, where my father was a partner in an investment banking firm founded by J. P. Morgan and in which both his father and grandfather were partners before him. My mother left college when they married in 1950 then graduated 20 years later when my youngest sibling was in middle school.

The dominant family myth of my childhood concerned my mother's family. We were told of their ancestry and social prominence, which she traced back to colonial Boston and even to the village in northern England where her Puritan ancestors lived before they travelled to the colonies in the 1620's.

These ancestors included Anne Hutchinson, known to some as an independent free-thinking woman who claimed a direct relationship with God unmediated by male clergy, and to others as a witch.

They included John Singleton Copley, for whom Boston's Copley Square is named, a revolutionary era portrait painter who married a British loyalist and moved to England, because more people there could afford portraits than in the colonies.

Most prominently for my mother was Thomas Handasyd Perkins, whom I was told made his fortune in the China Trade. He was a benefactor of many Boston cultural institutions that still exist today. He became problematic for me when at a Diocese of Massachusetts presentation on the traces of slavery trade in our diocese. Byron Rushing mentioned him by name as one whose wealth from the slave trade had benefitted the founding institutions of the diocese. This was a moment of awakening for me - I was sitting in the audience, among many friends and other Episcopalians, to hear the findings of a commission. Byron mentioned "Thomas Perkins," and bells started ringing in my head.

My ancestors were early landowners in western New York and southern New England. Very little is known within my family now about our history of land appropriation and how we benefited from the enslavement of other people. This is a journey of research and discovery I am embarking on now as I enter retirement.

As you may imagine, I have needed to challenge and interrogate most of these stories as an adult. As children we were taught we deserved our social and economic privilege; that our

forebears were benevolent, talented, courageous, and charitable. While some of that may be true; it is certainly not the full truth

I was also formed by my three year old sister's death when I was five. She fell out of a car while our parents were out of town. Over the decades, I have come to understand the lingering trauma from her death as having more to do with my extended family's incapacity to grieve; their unwillingness to be emotionally vulnerable and to share their sadness. As a result after we lost Muffy, we lost the memory of her -- her presence never lingered in our midst. Our parents didn't share stories about her around the dinner table. I now see this as evidence of their intense grief -- they were doing the best they could -- and also as an expression of their class values of stoicism and closed off emotions.

Despite all that, my mother taught us that Muffy was in Heaven with God. So, with the concrete thinking of a five year old, I internalized that Heaven was a real place and God a real presence. This confidence in God -- as being, presence, and force for healing, safety, and love - - has been the greatest gifts of grace of my life.

A third critical influence from my formative years was attending Quaker elementary school. As you know, Quakers are committed to non-violence; their consensus that slavery was immoral, through it took 200 years to reach, changed the conscience of the governing classes in the United Kingdom and led to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. What I experienced as a child in the 1950's and early 1960's was the Quaker commitment to racial and religious diversity. My classmates included students from diverse religious backgrounds as well as some with physical and emotional disabilities. I learned that people are different and each one's gifts enrich each of us and the whole.

I had an evangelical conversion experience when I was seventeen. My years within that community taught me the formative value of daily prayer and Scripture study; the liveliness of how the Holy Spirit shows up in Bible Studies as we listen, both privately and together, to how the Word is speaking to us today.

My first intentional step toward a social justice lens was in the early 1970's as an undergraduate when a close friend told our prayer group he is gay. The teaching of our mentors at the time was that being gay was sinful. I was profoundly uncertain and uncomfortable with the implications of that teaching for my friendship -- but I knew it would not be right to turn away from a friend. That began a period of questioning many other evangelical teachings of the time - - about women's rights, women's ordination, and gay rights, among others. I began to step away from what I perceived as a limited and exclusionary understanding of God's call to community into the greater diversity of the wider Episcopal church.

I became passionate about education equity after my husband and I -- along with our infant daughter -- shared a household for two years with seven African-American girls who had been admitted to a residential high school program in Guilford CT - outside New Haven. These girls were talented, motivated, and hugely supported by their families to gain a quality of

education and college preparation and support that was not available to them in their under-invested communities and schools at home.

Eventually -- and this did not happen quickly -- I came to see profound injustice in our US system of education. The randomness of where I was born -- and to whom -- meant I received one of the best educations available to any girl anywhere in the world across all time. While these girls had to leave their homes, parents, siblings, communities, and friends, and accommodate to white suburban living to get the educations they needed and deserved.

Over the following twenty-five years my husband became an ordained Episcopal priest, we raised three children. I got a Masters in Business Administration and began a career in philanthropy focusing on education reform. Then he died, I remarried, moved, got divorced, and landed in seminary at Episcopal Divinity School as a step toward rebuilding my life.

Following Ruth's example, I offer these theological principles that have deep power for me and that I offer for our consideration as grounding concepts for our theological reflections.

We are co-creators with God and living members of the Body of Christ. It surprises me that it's only been in the last few years that I've taken what I always thought of as a metaphor of the body of Christ and thought what if the living resurrected Christ literally lives in each of us right now today tomorrow the next day in our Christian communities and that is the way Christ is present in the world. Not as an abstract theological distant resurrected something that is far away but as something actually manifested in our lives and the communities we are building. That is a primary motivator for me to social justice advocacy because then I want to say, "What that's going on in my life here today would Jesus resist what would he advocate for or against and Scripture is rich with examples we can extrapolate and apply today. We know he resisted the purity culture that Prince talked about with us a couple of months ago. We know that he resisted centralized systems of oppressive power in the temple structure of his time. He resisted the idolatry of wealth, he reached out to women and other marginalized communities of his day. This for me is a very vibrant life-giving reflection.

"Righteousness" means right relationships, not purity. Every time I hear this word I substitute right relationship, which makes it a much more concrete interactive, neighborly encounter. How can I be building right relationships with other people, what's my responsibility? What can I give and what can I ask for?

There are many things for us to know that have not been revealed yet, because we are not ready to receive them. Gives me energy and playfulness and creativity comes from confidence that God's true and revelation of God's own self is being continuously revealed in new ways - new wine, which we don't put into old wine skins.

God's mission of healing and reconciliation transcends all time and all space - It preexisted the formation of this beautiful planet. It transcends sizes from the microscopic to interplanetary; from the deep recesses of individual psyches to complexity of human social

systems. At every dimension in every layer at all times God is working for the healing of God's own creation in which we are invited to participate, and in the reconciliation of all things that have been broken or estranged from God, from ourselves, and from one another.