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5/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Gender justice

This is my home

by Sister Clare Josef-Maier

At this time two years ago, I was nine months pregnant, anticipating the arrival of my first child. In the lovely way that people celebrate with expectant parents, loved ones and strangers alike would ask, “What do you look forward to the most about the baby?”

The answer was plain: I was so excited to meet (a lifelong process) and love the unfolding person my spouse and I were about to usher into the world. No doubt I had unconscious desires and expectations for who this child would be, but I felt a powerful and clear openness to this new person's beautiful mystery. And with that, I also felt a rising dread. The world would not be as open to the beautiful mystery of this child. I realized that just as with all children, how my child's identity unfolds into the world will dictate both the privilege and the oppression they will encounter.

And in that realization, the need for justice in all its forms took on a new clarity and intensity in my life.

Painful and beautiful

For the past seven years, I have served my denomination in dialogue about gender justice. Engaging this topic in our time and place, especially from a faith perspective, is both painful and beautiful.

Painfully, the realities of life in a broadly patriarchal society, buoyed by classic Western philosophy and theology that are rife with misogyny, are harsh not only for women and girls, but also for those whose gender identities deny or transgress binary “rules.”

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The toll is high, even after years of incredible commitment and meaningful progress in gender justice. And though we – especially those at the crux of intersectional oppressions – suffer the brunt of the violence, poverty, and degradation of gender injustice, everybody ultimately loses. Men and boys too experience a denial of full selfhood, confined by the rigidity of the power structure designed to privilege them.

There are many in my life, particularly those engaged in the pursuit of gender justice, who ask why I would choose to stay within the Christian tradition. Doesn't your religion promote patriarchy and misogyny? Aren't you weary of your ["beyond gender," but let's be honest, masculine] God? How can you tolerate ongoing refusal [in many Christian expressions] to affirm God's call to women and genderqueer people to be ordained ministers?

Do I feel the grief, anger, pain, and fatigue that are the consequence of the ways in which the human institution of Christianity harms and has harmed me and others? Yes. Daily. Do I crave the full-hearted confession and repentance of the church, naming our institutional betrayal of so many and renewing our commitment to the radically liberating gospel of Christ Jesus? Yes. Daily.

But that is not the whole story. Christian faith is enormous and complex, and the voices of the saints are so many. There is incredible beauty.

Hildegard of Bingen, 12th-century German saint, mystic, and musical and theological genius, wrote, "We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening. To use our own voice. To see our own light."

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What I want for my child is also what I want for you, for me, and what I want for the whole of created life: an outpouring of divine viriditas. One of Hildegard's guiding themes, viriditas points to holistic – both spiritual and bodily – wellness.

There is no clear or straightforward translation (because she awesomely made up the word herself), but the word blends the Latin words for “green” and “truth” and conveys greening, freshness, vitality, fruitfulness, life-force, or growth.

Gender identity is, to me, one of the most wonderful languages of viriditas. It is one of my favorite ways to dynamically “learn” another person, and to better know and love myself. The playful balances of masculinity and femininity, the intrigue of androgyny – the creativity God gives us to expand and shift and grow and change as we live our lives and encounter others in it. Our gender expressions inform one another. The more expansively we allow gender to play out, the more fully we encounter the breadth of humanity.

A gender-just world is one in which each person may use their own voice and see their own light. It is a world that is not interpreted for us by others, but one in which we co-interpret. It is one that is our own because we are all God's own. It is one in which God reveals God's creation in me and in my calling; a world in which, just as I take my charge to listen for God's heartbeat in the other as a holy one, so too others respond to me by listening and discerning with me.

Not only is a gender-just world one in which all are safe, but one where all are represented, affirmed, and included. God's creative activity in us will flow freely, freshly, and fruitfully, crashing through the dam of social constructions that dare interpret for us the scope of our truth.

Gender justice from a faith perspective names the pain of our story, but necessarily must name the beauty. It is the beauty of God's vision of humanity. In a gender-just world, I belong and I am beloved. My child belongs and is beloved. You belong and are beloved. That is the power of the gospel I know, the reconciliation of a world so loved by the God in whom I put all my trust.

I look back at those months awaiting Maeve's arrival, together now with the first two years of her life, and I am astonished by the journey. As I said, the need for a just world has taken on a new clarity and intensity in my life because she is in it. But the power of my love for her has also brought about incredible healing for me. If God's love for me and for you is fuller, deeper, and more powerful than

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this love I feel (as surely it is), then indeed I am convinced: nothing can separate us from God's love. God's activity in me—as I live, love, and seek justice with you—should demonstrate that conviction.

This is my home. This is my voice.

Discussion questions:

1. How is God's creative power working in you today? In what ways can you see the unfolding symphony of your own creation, and of the beloved in your life?
2. Does your understanding of your own gender grow richer and more dynamic in dialogue with those whose gender differs from yours? What about with those whose gender identity you share?
3. How do you or will you use your own voice, your own light, to promote a gender-just world?

Closing prayer:

Word of Life, we celebrate your incredible design. Your creative work in us is incomprehensible, rich, and rewarding. Find us in our broken and hurting places, and embrace us there. Find us in our powerful, creative places and rise with us there. You who work in and through your creation: gather us, unite us, and send us. Let your justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Sister Clare Josef-Maier is a deaconess of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America trained in mental health counseling, gender and sexuality, and pastoral studies. She serves Central Lutheran Church in Eugene, Ore., where she ministers with an intentional Christian community of undergraduate and graduate students (christushouse.org).

This article first appeared in the May 2018 issue of Café (boldcafe.org). <https://www.boldcafe.org/this-is-my-home/>

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05/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, Gender justice

Change keeps on changing

by Angela T. Khabeb

I'm surrounded by change. I look outside my window and notice the familiar sight of leaves changing colors. Daylight is fleeting as night arrives earlier and stays longer. It's almost as if autumn is Mother Nature's ambassador for change. Not only is change swirling around me, but it is also stirring from within me.

I look in the mirror and see an older, rounder woman's face where my reflection used to be. I look at my amazing children ages 10, 7 and 5, and I marvel at how fast they've grown. I'm surprised how quickly they are becoming their own individual selves. There's an old adage that claims change is the only thing we can count on. I don't consider myself to be particularly resistant to change. In fact, I remember proclaiming for decades, "Change is good!"

Now, I'm not so sure.

Perhaps change is neutral, like Switzerland. Perhaps change is neither for us nor against us, but rather we assign value to change on a case by case basis depending on our circumstances or our perspectives. Change is slippery. Even though I wrestle with it, I'm unable to pin it down long enough to dissect it, to analyze it. Change exists in time and beyond time. It has the power to connect us to our past, present and future selves. The same instance can cause physical, emotional and spiritual reformation. Yet when we are in the throes of a challenging transition, it is virtually impossible to gain an objective vantage point. It may take years to unearth the wisdom of an especially challenging transformation. Change may be necessary, but that doesn't make it easy.

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Head over heels

When I held our newborn Khenna for the first time I fell head over heels into his innocence. My eyes were transfixed by the tiny miracle I held in my arms. What would this precious bundle of potential become? I imagined his entire life. An astronaut, doctor, scientist? I reveled in his limitless possibilities, but I never thought for a second that he might grow up to become a woman.

About a year ago, Khenna told us, "I'm a boy on the outside but a girl underneath." The words came as a shock even though Khenna had been wearing girls' clothing almost exclusively. I had reassured myself that it was just a phase, but it was evident that my husband and I were in over our heads. We enlisted professional help so that we could navigate this steep learning curve. My husband and I met with a pediatric therapist who specializes in gender identity. She encouraged us to continue celebrating Khenna's gender journey because gender identity in children is often fluid until age 8 or 9. Since Khenna was only 6, we continued to embrace Khenna and shower our little one with love.

I realized that I had not fully embraced Khenna. Sure, we encouraged freedom of expression and we focused on Khenna's happiness. But what I was actually doing was biding my time, tolerating this detour of sorts—waiting for my little boy to come home. I still want the baby boy I brought home from the hospital. Where is he? I don't want to say goodbye to him. I do not want to walk that road. While I publically applauded Khenna's individuality, privately I lamented the loss of my son. I know the pain of losing a child. Our first child was stillborn. How could God expect me to walk that road again?

Intellectually, I understand that Khenna's gender identity is not about me. But that knowledge does little to soothe my heartache. More recently, Khenna asked us to use feminine pronouns to reference her. Challenging as it is for us, anything less is just tolerating her and toleration is a lousy substitute for unconditional love.

When I think of Khenna, I'm reminded of the biblical narrative of the humble young sheep herder who was anointed King over Israel (1 Samuel 16:4-13). God sent Samuel the prophet to Jesse's house. Jesse called his seven sons to come before Samuel. One by one they came. But God did not choose any of them. Samuel asked Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" Jesse told him that the youngest was outside tending the sheep. Even though David was the youngest and certainly the smelliest, Samuel wanted to see him because God had already cautioned, "Do not look on his appearance . . . for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the

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heart." I guess the fine art of judging a book by its cover has withstood the winds of change.

When I am overwhelmed by the daunting responsibility of raising a transgender child, I remind myself about what is important to God. The psalmist declares, "LORD, you have searched me and known me. . . . You formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:1, 13-14).

I don't have to have all of the answers. What parent does?

God's promises are not contingent upon chromosomes, genitalia or gender. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if I understand or if our church community understands. What matters most is that God understands. Khenna's story, like all our stories, is intimately connected to the divine narrative—that God loves us to death and beyond, and there is nothing we can do about it.

As Reformation people, every journey that we embark upon by definition offers a chance for rebirth. As Reformation people, we know that what seems like the end is often the beginning.

As Reformation people, we believe that death gives way to new life. Regardless of how unfamiliar the terrain, regardless of how difficult the journey, we are Reformation people, and every step on our journey brings us closer to who God has called us to be.

Ultimately, the only change that matters has already happened – at the font. At Khenna's baptism, I spoke these words, "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14,16).

Discussion questions:

1. Is God male, female, both, neither, or beyond gender?
2. If reformation, that is, change, is part of our spiritual DNA, why is change so challenging?
3. Describe a time in your life when you resisted change.

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Closing prayer:

Dear God,

In the midst of changes that we cannot understand, help us remember your promise that nothing can separate us from your love that is lavished on us through Jesus Christ. Give us hope in times of transition, and strength to face each metamorphosis trusting in your never-failing presence. Amen.

The Rev. Angela T. Khabeb is a pastor at Ascension Lutheran Church in Waukesha, Wisc. She enjoys an active home life with her amazing husband, Benhi, and their three wonderful children Konami, Khenna, and Khonni.

This article first appeared in the October 2017 issue. <https://www.boldcafe.org/change-keeps-changing/>

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