
Embodying the Questions

Remembering, Celebrating, and Building Upon the Life and Teaching of the Rev. Dr. Gwen B. Sayler

Introduction to This Issue

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* is devoted to remembering, celebrating, and building upon the life and teaching of the Reverend Dr. Gwen B. Sayler. The Rev. Gwendolyn B. Sayler, PhD, was Professor of Bible at Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1991-2019. At the time of her death on November 11, 2019, she was the William A. and John E. Wagner Professor Emerita of Biblical Theology and Distinguished Professor Emerita of Bible. Dr. Sayler celebrated her vocation in ministry as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and a deaconess of the Lutheran Deaconess Association associated with Valparaiso University. As a native of North Dakota, she was deeply connected to her home state, family, and loved ones.

A committed scholar of Scripture, Dr. Sayler was admired and respected for her dedication to faithful reading and interpretation of the Bible as the written Word of God. Her passion for teaching, preaching, and advising was grounded in her unwavering conviction that her vocation was to help form her students so that they are centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gwen Sayler was a deeply influential member of the Bible division for nearly three decades at Wartburg Theological Seminary, and the first female, tenure-track Bible professor at the seminary. With expertise in apocalyptic literature, she was one of very few professors with the background and ability to teach courses in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Gwen became the third faculty member to inhabit the William A. and John E. Wagner Chair in Biblical Theology.



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With a keen sensitivity to people who have experienced marginalization and suffering at the hands of oppressive readings of Scripture, Gwen embodied a strong and outspoken commitment to reading Scripture ethically on the side of justice. She had a remarkable understanding of people and an ability to discern how they needed to be encouraged and challenged. Even among colleagues with whom she disagreed, Gwen was consistently fair, honest, and supportive. Gwen Sayler was a dear colleague to all faculty at Wartburg Theological Seminary, a mentor to newer Bible faculty colleagues, and a friend to all who worked with her.

Gwen was a fierce advocate for inclusion, with particular concern for women and those marginalized because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. She lived her courage and her witness to the wideness of God's mercy in everyday life and as a support to many students.

In 2016, she celebrated the forty-fifth anniversary of her consecration as deaconess in the Valparaiso Lutheran Diaconal Association (LDA) community. Gwen both generously supported and drew great strength from the deaconess community. In addition to her commitment to the LDA, she was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA and celebrated the thirty-fifth anniversary of her ordination in 2017.

The articles lovingly gathered in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* remember, celebrate, and build upon the life and teaching of Dr. Saylor. As she embodied the questions for others, we seek to embody the questions through our lives and commitments.

Karen Melang offers the sermon, "Stronger Than Death," on Romans 8:35-39 preached at the funeral of the Rev. Dr. Gwen Saylor for the Memorial Eucharist on November 16, 2019, in the Loehe Chapel of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. **Anita Mohr** offers the second sermon, "The Finite Holds the Infinite," on 1 Corinthians 12:4-12 also preached at the funeral of the Rev. Dr. Gwen Saylor on the same occasion. As did Gwen, both authors belong to the Lutheran Diaconal Association class of 1971.

Winston D. Persaud provides a theological-literary reflection on select hymns by Martin Luther which are interpreted in the genre of poetry. Pointing to the doctrine of justification as Luther's hermeneutical center, the article highlights primary Confessional non-negotiables grounded in Scripture. These include the incarnation of the eternal Word who graciously and humbly enters the world of sin to ransom sinful humanity and defeats the power of the devil by freely going the way of death on the cross. Luther's vision is grounded in the church's confession that God is eternally Triune. Justification and justice stand at the heart of the Gospel.

Leah D. Holloway-Nilsen explores how a Lutheran theology of vocation reframes a Christian understanding of economic justice in the case of rural America. The author combines the topics of vocation, economic justice, and rural America to explore the unique theological grounding that vocation brings to the pursuit of economic justice. A theology of vocation is transformational for how Christians understand their call to justice and provides a useful lens to discern how God is inviting them to live out their baptismal calling of loving and serving neighbors for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Troy M. Troftgruben insists that to be faithful to the Gospel, biblical interpretation must involve dialogue with the lived experiences of people today, especially those who suffer oppression and marginalization. This is neither merely a modern idea, nor is it the product of uncritical bias. In view of the many who experience harm from scriptural interpretations that endorse violence and oppression, the Gospel calls readers of Scripture to offer interpreta-

tions with a clear eye to their impact on the lives and livelihoods of people and their faith, so that the Word of God may truly be good news for all people today, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized in society.

Martin J. Lohrmann discusses how Martin Luther, in a poorly documented Table Talk, is reported to have said that he would prefer a dead son to a wayward one. This article questions the authenticity of that saying, ponders the impact that such words have on later generations regardless of authenticity, and proposes ways that contemporary Lutherans might shape more compassionate and edifying views of parenting and childhood.

Yung Suk Kim asserts that the suffering of Job is unspeakable, and that his friends fail to minister to him, attempting to persuade him with words of empty theology. God, however, acknowledges Job and his case while also not giving an answer about why he suffers. Overall, God's testing of Job seems too cruel for any lesson. On Job's part, he needs to move away from the traditional theology of reward and punishment and seek God's presence and comfort. Theologizing every human experience may prove hollow.

Craig L. Nesson provides two Bible studies on the biblical creation stories. The first, on Genesis 1:24-31, contends that loving one's place is crucial to the practice of ministry and uncovers the fissure between person and place in the first creation story. The second, on Genesis 2:4b-15 and Revelation 22:1-5, argues that Eden is not a historical place lost in the past but rather the call toward an ecologically responsible future. Discussion questions are provided for personal and group study. An appendix provides 63 practices that congregations can enact in the pursuit of ecojustice and imagining Eden.

The April issue includes two **Currents Focus** feature articles. First, **Javier Alanís** shares a devotional text originally delivered at the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The Gospel text on the Emmaus experience is juxtaposed with the borderland experience, which is described as a "third space" of liminal encounter. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus are like many of the immigrants who walk to the U.S.-Mexico border, seeking freedom from oppressive conditions. When the church of the border encounters and serves the immigrant through its ministry of accompaniment, the church is transformed, renewed, and converted by embodied resurrection hope.

In the second article in this section, **Paul John Isaak** focuses on Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. as models of preaching, spirituality, and social activism. Luther declared in his Large Catechism (1530): "I am both a doctor and a preacher." Likewise, King observed: "In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher." According to the Augsburg Confession, Article 4, the doctrine of justification has implications for socio-political-economic justice. It means justified sinners are actively engaged in the pursuit of peace and justice on earth.

This issue of **Preaching Helps** includes two of the great festivals of the church year: Easter and Pentecost. We'll journey from Palm/Passion Sunday to the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, from Spring to Summer, from festival days to Ordinary Time.

As we engage the biblical texts for preaching, we give thanks for teachers like Gwen Saylor who excited seminarians with a passion for scripture.

To conclude this introduction of our issue devoted to the remembrance of the Rev. Dr. Gwen B. Saylor, we offer this tribute from Deaconess **Ruth Dyer**, who was a student in her classes at Valparaiso University from 1974-1976. Deaconess Dyer recalls Gwen as a brilliant and entertaining instructor, as well as a most dedicated and caring teacher: “I will always remember her emphasis on the Genesis passage where God says to Abraham, ‘Be a blessing to others as I have blessed you.’ Gwen was that blessing to me almost fifty years ago and still is today.”

true wanderer,
biblical nomad,
an Abe in the land of Ur,
following the stormy sandy
winds of God through many deserts,
understanding Moabites, as well as Israelites—
traveling the ancestry lineage of doubts and promises.
Belief and unbelief, she knew them well.

She lived the exodus story—
pleading for justice,
a present-day Micah-Moses
Crossing a Red Sea,
experiencing firsthand
the waters of injustice,
parting wave by wave,
as women like herself swirled
in the same sea and found the path to ordination.

Leading like Moses, climbing the church’s
Mt. Sinai—receiving God’s Word to preach life
to the oppressed—
her voice prophetic, honest, visionary...
spokesperson for inclusiveness,
proclaiming liberation,
helping to unearth feminist theology—
redeeming lost fragments of obscure scriptures
piecing together voices in their context
and hearing their screams to be heard,
she was the church’s cheer leader as it moved
and crossed boundaries
accepting gays and lesbians.

Gwen not only glimpsed the promised land,
she lived there—inhabited it,
extending hospitality to all.
A voracious appetite for scripture,
she embodied the prophetic desert voices
from within which sought to liberate.

We give God profound thanks for the life of Gwen Saylor,
whose witness to justification and justice continues to resound in
our lives as we embody the questions.

Craig L. Nesson, Issue Editor

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