

**“Dirty Dishes” Lutherans Reform! Conference
September 28, 2008 Jonathan Jenkins**

I’ve been invited to review the *ELCA Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality*. The first letter of each word spells “DSSHS,” so I refer to it as “Dishes” One of my household chores – my wife cooks - is to wash the dirty dishes. The sexuality statement reminds me of “dirty dishes.” It will be a chore to clean up.

SPECIFIC POSITIONS

What does it say? About the most controversial issue, it reports that Lutherans are divided over homosexuality. Of course, everything about “Dishes” whispers approval of gay sex. “Dishes” justifies traditional marriage on strictly secular, functional grounds that leave other options open: “...*This church has taught (not teaches!) that the greatest physical intimacies, such as intercourse, should be matched with and sheltered by the highest level of binding commitment, such as found in marriage” (Such as where else? – 970.) Almost everything it says about marriage could be said of any sort of “couple.” “*All sexual relationship is about companionship*” (478) and “*the need to share our lives*” (481).*

The *Draft Statement on Human Sexuality* (“Dishes” I call it) takes fornication for granted among teenagers and single adults. “*For this reason, this church teaches that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of affection and commitment*” (968). Isn’t that a bit idealistic? And it certainly lays down the law on promiscuity: “*While this church does not encourage such relationships, it insists that every sexual relationship entails responsibility. All sexually active people have the responsibility to protect the other person from emotional as well as physical harm.*” (989). There’s nothing in “Dishes” that Planned Parenthood would find disagreeable.

WHERE'S THE BIBLE?

“Dishes” refuses to place moral authority under the divine commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Things are not “discerned” as bad, wrong, or evil because they are forbidden by the Law of God. Nowhere do we read a passage like 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 – *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sisters in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority, but God who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.”* “Dishes” rejects this by ignoring it.

The draft pays lip service to the Bible as *“the primary source for distinctively Christian insight is Scripture”* (390). The Bible is not a “source” of “insight” to Lutherans: it is the same Word of God that creates and commands our very bodies. It’s astonishing that a church statement has so little use for the Bible. “Dishes” does not even mention the Ten Commandments! Aren’t the Ten Commandments a “source of insight,” or is this an oversight? Most of the Old Testament is passed over. Mary and Joseph aren’t mentioned either, as models of marital fidelity and sexual integrity. The virginity of Mary has nothing to say to us. There’s nothing relevant to our social statement in the severe warnings of Jude, 2 Peter, or Romans 1. Not to mention the fact that Jesus himself proscribed homosexual practice when Jesus condemned not only “fornication” (*porneia*) and “adultery” (*moicheia*), but also the “licentiousness” (*aselgeia*) that elsewhere includes homosexual relations (see Mark 7:21-22; cf. 2 Peter 2:7). These and many more passages of Scripture aren’t worth the bother. Is it incompetence or unfaithfulness? Is it a deliberate attempt to silence Scripture? Or a basic inability to come to terms with Scripture?

The ELCA can say what it wants without dragging the Bible into it. Indeed, it is forced to, because, as Robert Benne observes, marriage is the “gold standard.” From the first page of Scripture to the last, marriage is the “gold standard” – the reality principle by which all “human sexuality” is evaluated. Biblical prohibitions against fornication, incest, pedophilia, bestiality, adultery, lust, divorce, and homosexuality are made from the standpoint of marriage. The covenant of God and man is figured as husband and wife.

ANDROGENY

“Dishes” has little to say about husbands and wives - or men and women, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. “Dishes” has a fishy way of talking about life partners, couples, persons, and gendered bodies. The word for it is “androgynous.” The definition of “androgynous” is: *“Having both female and male characteristics; hermaphroditic; being neither distinguishably masculine or feminine, as in dress, appearance, or behavior; also in feminist writing, the absence of socially reinforced differences of behavior supposedly characteristic of gender.”* Like a certain species of fish, “Dishes” is androgynous. So it looks at us as partners, couples, and gendered bodies, instead of husbands and wives, sons and daughters.

The ELCA statement gives no weight to the reality that God created marriage in the very act of creating us! *“In the accounts of creation, Genesis 1-2 testifies to God’s regard for humankind, male and female (Genesis 1:27-31)”* (440). “Regard” is scarcely the word:

So God created man (adam – in Hebrew) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

“Dishes” discerns nothing of importance in “male and female.” Genesis, however, underscores the significance: *“Male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...’”*

The draft statement mutes “male and female” by a preference for speaking of “*gendered bodies*” (442). That’s androgyny, and it’s not scriptural. God does not first create them “male and female” and later on decide that these two could marry. But for “Dishes,” God might have created us male or female. Could Genesis 2 be any more explicit in its praise of marriage? But this Scripture is another of the unmentionables. The LORD God made the woman from the rib of the man “and brought her to him” like the proud father of the bride (Gen. 2:18-25). “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother, and they become one flesh.” “One flesh.” One flesh in creation, one flesh in sexual union, one flesh in babies – the one flesh that is human history, from generation to generation.

ANTI-INCARNATIONAL

According to “Dishes,” the incarnation of God is foundational, but the ELCA statement is anti-incarnational. It is of no significance that the promise to Abraham and his “seed” is a blessing to all nations that depends on marriage and children (Genesis 12). And that the blessing is challenged and endangered by sexual misconduct. And that there is no incarnation without the generations of Israel (Luke 3:23-28). “Dishes” is not bound to the body of Israel. It is not bound to the body of Jesus. The statement departs from ecumenical teaching on sexual ethics, so it is not bound to the ecclesial body of Christ, the church. It disconnects sexuality from procreation, so it is not bound to the world. “Dishes” has nothing to do with the incarnation. Least of all Ephesians, chapter 5: “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” “Dishes” doesn’t. It’s “Docetic” - anti-incarnational.

Who we are and what our bodies are for is clear in Scripture, in nature, and in history. Marriage is and is intended to be a living

image, an icon, of the one-body union of Christ and his bride, the church. Marriage prefigures the final consummation – “*I saw the the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride prepared for her husband*” (Revelation 21:2).

WHAT I APPRECIATE

What I like best about “Dishes” is the manifest desire to be realistic about the complicated realities of sex in a fallen world. But I believe people are better served by being reminded to live lives worthy of the high calling to which we are called.

As a fine example, I conclude with a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, a letter written to a newly married couple. Bonhoeffer understands what “Dishes” refuses to see:

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God’s holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race until the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal – it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.

Now that is a Lutheran statement on “human sexuality.”