

Colleen Wessel-McCoy – Final Sermon
Preaching for Social Transformation
Spring 2006

One of the worst mistakes a seminarian can make is to try to preach in church on what she's learning in seminary. It just never goes over well. There's not much worse than someone trying to explain the significance of a Greek word she doesn't fully understand herself. So I decided against sharing with y'all today the finer points of the paper I just wrote on Martin Luther and poverty. But there's this one little part of a sermon Luther wrote that I brought with me to share. He said, "This is obvious: if anyone's foot hurts him, yes, even the little toe, the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this smaller member; again, once it is cared for all the other members are benefited." (Luther's Works 35:52)

When I was in high school back in Georgia, my youth group would go each summer on a 'mission trip' in rural North Georgia right near the Tennessee border. For five nights we'd stay at a camp and each day we'd go out to serve people who were hard up. We'd mow lawns for people who couldn't get around like they used to. We'd repair porch steps, underpin trailers to keep the critters out, tar roofs and build wheel chair ramps. We'd attempt to do whatever people couldn't afford to have done properly. Each morning we'd start out from camp with our set of directions that often included instructions like, "when the paved road turns to dirt go two more miles and turn left at the well" or "when you pass the house with all the tires out front—you'll know it when you see it—turn right and head up the mountain." These families lived in trailers and small old houses tucked into the Appalachians—all over the region—and they were all struggling to survive. Each day we'd go to a new assignment, down different roads, past more and more families living—trying to live—all far from our nation's sight, and consciousness.

One of those days, while clearing a patch of briars with a shuttle blade, a nest of yellow jackets convinced me to take a break. While cooling off under an old oak I met Sarah. She was 7 or 8 and lived there with her parents and her grandfather. We walked around and talked for a little while, and then she asked me, “wanna play princess?” I agreed and she led me inside her house to her ‘space.’ It wasn’t a room, just a mattress in the corner of the kitchen where I imagine a kitchen table used to be. And when I say mattress, I really mean just a mattress. There was no box-spring or frame. There weren’t even sheets—just a mattress on the floor next to the stove and cabinet. She scurried into the room past the kitchen and came back in lugging an old box fan which she plugged in and perched facing the mattress. Sarah told me to lie down on the mattress—on my tummy. I wasn’t sure what this had to do with playing princess, but I followed her instructions. She turned the fan on and adjusted it so it was blowing air right at me, she sat down next to me and she scratched my back. “This is what momma does,” she said, “this is how we play princess.” Her momma didn’t have much to offer her by way of material things, but she took time and she took care to show Sarah she was worthy and loved.

I remember that day for lots of reasons. I think about Sarah and her mother ‘playing princess’ whenever I see the assumption that poor women are bad mothers. I often think of Sarah when I hear statistics about the pervasiveness of poverty in the US. I remember Sarah and the way she carefully adjusted that fan to face me when I’m trying to understand God’s grace. And I thought of Sarah when I read Luther’s sermon about the little toe: if even the little toe hurts, “the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this small member; again, once it is cared for all the other members are benefited.” (LW 35:52)

So often when we use the body as a way of describing the Christian community we say ‘the right hand looks out for the left hand’ or ‘despite their different gifts, both the eyes and the ears are important.’ These are true and vital reminders of how we are at our best—how we all strive to be. But what I like about Luther’s version is that he talks about the little toe, a part of the body whose role isn’t as clear as an eye or a hand. When was the last time your little toe kept you from being hit by a car or helped make dinner? But when something injures your little toe, it hurts like any other part of the body. When you stub your pinky toe, you don’t say ‘oh, it’s okay that my toe hurts because it wasn’t doing much for me anyway.’ No, Luther’s right—when your toe is hurt your whole body goes to it and your whole body isn’t really well until your toe is doing well. That pain is on your mind until it’s gone.

There’s a lot of talk these days about rising tides lifting all boats and people doing well when business does well. As Christians we are challenged and called to make sure the entire body is cared for—even the little toes and the little Sarahs. As Christians we seek a world where even a little toe receives care. Having as much as 98% of the world doing well isn’t good enough when that 2% is not, just as our bodies are not satisfied if even a small part is in pain. Dissatisfaction is an important part of being a Christian community.

Although she had just met me, and I had done little to deserve it, Sarah reached out to me as if I were a little toe that deserved attention and comfort. Surely this is like the grace of God that we are called to share with each other.

Colleen Wessel-McCoy is a third year M. Div. student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, planning to pursue a Ph.D. in ethics, with the intention to teach. She is a native of Georgia.