

## **PUBLIC CHURCH For the Life of the World**

Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004),

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According to Moe-Lobeda, "Morality" and "ethics" often are used synonymously. While this is understandable – "ethics" comes from the Greek, and "morality" comes from the word used by Cicero to translate the Greek to Latin – there is an important distinction. Morality is a dimension of life –not a separate pursuit, but a dimension of any pursuit. It is the dimension that asks, consciously or not, whether a way of doing or being is good, right, and fitting in a given circumstance. Moral consciousness is awareness of the distinction between "what is" and "what ought and could be." Ethics refers to the disciplined inquiry into morality. One could say ethics is the art-science of bringing self-consciousness, method, intentionality, and sensitivity to the tasks of (1) discerning what is good and right for any given situation and context, (2) finding the moral-spiritual power to act on that discernment, and (3) discovering what forms individuals and society toward the good and what malforms them away from it (Moe-Lobeda P. 1).

She also adds that moral agency is the power to live toward the flourishing of the *oikos* (the entirety of God's created household). To do so is to live in ways that promote social and ecological well-being, prioritizing the concerns of the most vulnerable and Earth's regenerative health. It is to move toward lifestyles, relationships, policies, and structures that build communities characterized by compassion, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Moral agency, then, is the power to live in ways that serve not only the needs of self and family, but also the ongoing well-being of the larger Earth community, and in ways that do not contribute to unnecessary suffering and do not threaten Earth's capacity to sustain life for generations to come (Moe Lobeda P. 46)

Moe-Lobeda would argue that the citizenship of the U.S. on the whole, is increasingly oriented more around the private good (the good for me and those close to me) than the public good. The morality of individual lives garners more serious scrutiny than the moral condition of society. The turn is toward a "privatized view of the good life," and toward privatized morality itself. She further claims that this "eclipse of the common good" betrays understanding of morality stemming from Aristotle and from commonly accepted historical Christian teaching. To secure the good for the people in common, Aristotle asserts, "is nobler and more divine" than to attain it for oneself." One of Aristotle's most significant contributions," notes Jesuit ethicist David Hollenbach, "was that a good life is oriented to goods shared with others – the common good of the larger society" (Moe-Lobeda P. 11-12).

According to Moe-Lobeda, in Lutheran tradition, the call to serve all people and to strive for justice and peace are understood as expressions of the call to "love neighbors as self." This understanding, deeply rooted in Scripture, is elaborated in Lutheran theological terms by Luther, and eloquently so. Luther identifies "two principles of Christian doctrine." The first principle is that Christ gave himself that we may be saved,

and we are saved by no effort of our own. The second “is love –as he gives himself for us .. so we too are to give ourselves with might and main for our neighbor.” Luther insists on the inseparability of the two: they are “inscribed together as one a tablet which always before our eyes and which we use daily.” He preaches, “God makes love to our neighbor an obligation equal to love to himself” (Moe-Lobeda P. 23).

Moe-Lobeda further emphasizes that the implications of “neighbor-love” for the life of the public church depend upon what is meant by the term. Biblical “neighbor-love” implies active commitment to the well-being of who or what is loved. Next, where systemic injustice causes suffering, seeking the well-being or good of those who suffer entails challenging that injustice. The challenge includes seeing systemic evil for what it is and acknowledge it, resisting it, and pioneering more just alternatives. In short, the norm of neighbor-love *includes* the norm of justice. Thirdly, the biblical command of neighbor-love is constructed brilliantly to presuppose the normativity of self-love: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Moe-Lobeda P. 24).

According to Luther, neighbor-love, as the norm for public life, has at least three dimensions: 1) Love manifest in service to neighbor, even if it may bring great danger to self and family. 2) Love manifest in disclosing and theologically denouncing oppression or exploitation of those who are vulnerable, where it is perceived; and 3) love manifest in ways of living that counter prevailing cultural norms where those norms exploit the vulnerable or defy God in some other way. Loving in these forms, “we become hands and feet of Christ, for the healing of the world” (Moe-Lobeda P. 24).