



The Church as a Place of Lament and Love: A Theological Reflection on Lenny Duncan's *Dear Church*

ANTHONY BATEZA

It has been over thirty years since the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Over this time much has changed, but one constant remains: the fact that the Lutheran church is one of the whitest denominations in the country. Many sociological and theological explanations have been offered to explain this church's failure to become a more racially and ethnically diverse and inclusive body. With passion and precision, Pastor Lenny Duncan focuses his gaze on the history and effects of white supremacy and racism, drawing deeply from the Lutheran tradition and his own autobiography.

I offer here my own engagement with Rev. Duncan's powerful new book, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.*¹ Instead of offering a simple review of the book, I will draw out important connections between Duncan's project, other black autobiographers and essayists, and the theology of Martin Luther. Duncan, I believe, can teach the church about

¹ Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019).

In the midst of the narratives of decline and the issues in the church around race, Lenny Duncan's book, Dear Church, and Martin Luther's thoughts about the nature of church serve as springboards from which to explore the idea of a church that is more faithful to its God and its community.

the value of autobiography and how narrating our stories for others can function as a form of cathartic social criticism. On my reading, Duncan introduces important themes in sacramentology and ecclesiology, and I will dive deeper into Martin Luther's theology to extend and supplement Duncan's insights.² Ultimately, the theme of love ties many of Duncan's points together, and the richly Lutheran vision that is on offer does not shy away from the pain and lament that often attend our fragile and broken loves.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CONFESSION AND CRITICISM

There are different genres and techniques one might choose when looking to confront racism in our church and society. Duncan embraces the mode of autobiographical essay framed as personal letters, following in the rich tradition of other African American social critics such as James Baldwin or, more recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates.³ Whereas Baldwin and Coates wrote to members of their families, to a nephew and a son respectively, Duncan writes to his church family, fellow members of the ELCA. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has said that no literary genre has played as central a role in the African American tradition as autobiography has. This writing worked to forge a black self "in language, as a testimony at once to the supposed integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African Americans."⁴

This genre serves Duncan well as it allows him to write out of his own context in ways that are powerful and personal, giving his observations depth while maintaining the important connection between his lived experience and broader social and historical forces. There are dangers with the autobiography, as one can risk sliding into a questionable romanticism in which one believes that greater truth and authenticity are captured than in other genres, and in which the one narrating the story is cast in the role of heroic protagonist. But, as the Italian philosopher and literary critic Adriana Cavarero observes, autobiography can also reveal something important about the human condition and our desires. She describes the ways autobiography can reveal our desire to have our stories told and, more importantly, to invite others into our stories. Autobiography, done well, reveals "the necessary aspect of an identity which, from beginning to end, is intertwined with other lives."⁵

Upon perceiving the resonance between Duncan's recounting of his story with God and God's people, one cannot help but call to mind St. Augustine of

² To be clear, this supplement is offered not because Duncan's account is not theologically robust on its own, but rather to extend the conversation that he begins.

³ Here I am thinking specifically of Baldwin's individual essays and collected volumes. See Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1963), and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

⁴ Henry Louis Gates, *Bearing Witness: Selections from 150 years of African-American Autobiography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 4.

⁵ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 88.

Hippo's famous work of autobiographical apologetics, *The Confessions*. Looking back on life is not merely a recalling of past events; rather, it becomes an opportunity to retell one's story and, in so doing, to pull out or include moments when God's presence and absence are palpable. In various moments Duncan accomplishes this by reflecting on the journey that has brought him through life's joys and struggles: on the streets, in prison, working his way through seminary, and standing up behind the pulpit of his Brooklyn congregation, Jehu's Table. Looking back on his childhood, he invites us to see how he came to understand himself as black or, better put, how his own sense of his identity became caught up in the racialized gaze of others.

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Duncan invites his readers to walk a careful line with him, rejecting our oppressive ways while calling us to recognize how often oppressors are themselves trapped in systems beyond their understanding or control. One place where this is clear is in his discussions of his parents, and especially his father. While he is clear about the ways his father's physical violence and toxic views about masculinity and sexuality must be denounced, he also invites his readers to see how his father was himself a product of the violence and toxicity that too often breaks black and brown men. As he puts it, because his father was "plagued with mental illness, alcoholism, and addiction, he clung to whatever vestiges of 'manhood' he could find. In his worldview, that meant that he had to dominate the family, and we were often the victims of his repressed rage at the injustices foisted upon him by a cruel system of white supremacy."⁶

There is a messiness to Duncan's account that is a feature of both his life and, I would argue, his perspective on life in general. It involves what Alexis Shotwell describes as an embodied approach to ethics that recognizes the syncretism of life, the myriad ways in which we are entangled in relationships and interdependent with human and nonhuman life on this planet. She describes this approach as being "against purity," which "is to start from an understanding of our implication in this compromised world, to recognize the quite vast injustices informing everyday lives, and from that understanding to act on our *wish that it were not so*."⁷

The vulnerability required to put one's story on display in the way that Duncan has offers a valuable lesson to those who speak of the ways their stories and

⁶ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 92.

⁷ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 204.

God's story have become intertwined in the life of the church. Vulnerability from the pulpit, for example, requires no small dose of hubris and can risk having one's story misconstrued or mistreated by others. Duncan observes that many Christians, when hearing about his struggles, have jumped to force his story into a testimony about conversion where the emphasis falls on leaving behind many aspects of his identity that he sees as blessings worth holding onto tightly. There is also the reality that we often ask for vulnerability from those who are already made vulnerable in many ways in our communities—those marginalized by others because of their class, abilities, gender, sexual or ethnic or racial identity. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore claims, we might even view racism itself as exposure to greater vulnerability, as a structural feature of our society that trades in the “exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁸ Gilmore's approach adds to the valuable reflections on racism that highlight its structural nature, while also making us aware of how dangerous invitations to vulnerability might be.

SACRAMENTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY FROM LENNY AND LUTHER

Throughout his autobiographical reflections and social commentary, Duncan expresses his commitment to the church by drawing on a particular vision of sacramentology and ecclesiology. Given the genre in which he is writing, Duncan's explicit theological or doctrinal positions are not always fleshed out. This seems appropriate in light of the epistolary format he embraces. That said, there are a number of important lines of theological inquiry we can explore—lines that, I believe, connect Duncan's powerful insights with Luther's theology.

Duncan describes being gathered at the communion table as a central theme in his story and his vision of what it means to be the church. “I shouldn't have to apologize for or tone down the fierce declaration you made to me when I fell in love with you, ELCA: ‘Jesus made no restrictions on this table, so neither do we.’”⁹ This commitment to radical hospitality takes seriously the words of invitation that are offered before the Lord's Supper. It is undoubtedly the case that pastors are tempted to mouth these invitations with little reflection, to say nothing of how these words might fall flat for those in the pews who have grown dull to the edginess of table fellowship. Duncan dares to wake the church from the stultifying repetition of sacramental welcome. The church is the place where this invitation is offered and embodied.

There is, I would argue, a connection between Duncan's sacramentology and ecclesiology that calls to mind Luther's own views on these two important loci. In his 1519 sermon “On the Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ,” Luther makes clear how seriously he takes the signs, symbols, and significance of the sacrament for how the Christian church should understand itself. Luther affirms his

⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

⁹ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 5.

belief that Christ is present in the elements of bread and wine, but in addition to this, he emphasizes the symbolic importance of this heavenly food for our earthly relationships:

For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union than the union of the food with him who is fed. For the food enters into and is assimilated by his very nature and becomes one substance with the person who is fed. Other unions, achieved by such things as nails, glue, cords, and the like, do not make one indivisible substance of the objects joined together. Thus in the sacrament we too become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts in our behalf. . . . Likewise by the same love we are to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us.¹⁰

The union Luther describes moves out from the table, entering through the mouths of the faithful but settling in their hearts and emerging through their actions. “For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others. . . . And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common.”¹¹ While we might be tempted to think of the sharing Luther describes as focused on our positive gifts, Luther warns us about the desire to “gladly share in the profits but not in the costs” of Christian fellowship.¹² Luther’s theology makes clear that there is to be an exchange of both our blessings and our burdens. “You must take to heart the infirmities and needs of others, as if they were your own.”¹³

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When Christians focus on this image of union as the guiding model for ecclesiological reflection, there is a temptation to idealize or romanticize Christian communities. In her writing on ecclesiology, Cheryl Peterson warns that theologies of communion where unity becomes the central focus tend to emphasize institutional and hierarchal polities as necessary to maintain and enforce this unity. As she notes, a theologian like Robert Jenson, who she offers as a representative of this ecclesiological approach, “seems to be more concerned with the body

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods (1519),” *Luther’s Works* 35, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 59. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

¹¹ *LW* 35:58.

¹² *LW* 35:57.

¹³ *LW* 35:61.

of Christ in worship than out in the world.”¹⁴ Leaving to one side whether or not this is a complete portrayal of Jenson’s thought, I would offer that Duncan and Luther show that an ecclesiology centered on union need not become self-centered on the inner life of congregants and congregations. Duncan’s use of narrative is especially important here. His attention to the pains and difficulties of racism, heteronormativity, and other forms of social injustice makes concrete the kind of shared infirmities that Luther described. To be a church gathered at the table as the body of Christ is to be a church that bears the genuine pains carried by black and brown bodies in our neighborhoods and society.

DECLINING THE NARRATIVE

In addition to his use of sacraments, Duncan offers the church a serious rebuke for the stories we tend to tell about the church’s present realities and challenges. This rebuke is particularly forceful when it comes to narratives of decline that have proliferated among mainliners today.

Dear Church, we are cowards. We have allowed the narrative of death that has fallen over the Protestant church in America to become our new lectionary. We bemoan the old times in the first reading. We then sing a Psalm of endowment lament. We take to social media to write epistles at each other that are more weapon than correction, after which we pour the stagnant waters of respectability we keep hidden in the narthex over the Holy Spirit fire of the gospel. We are in a lectionary cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy and death spiral of our own making.¹⁵

Duncan’s critique of this narrative is brilliant and multifaceted. The church has simply accepted a story about our own irrelevance in the work for justice and freedom in the world today. Our best moments are behind us and most people have moved on. Duncan notices how this story is leveraged to support further withdrawal. One example of this is the story that connects declining membership in the ELCA with the church’s 2009 decision to move toward greater inclusion of LGBTQIA persons. “They never mention that the trend was decades in the making or that the entire Christian church is experiencing the same decline in membership—or that we need to redefine what it means to be a member of a Christian community to match the emerging spirituality of the new generations joining us.”¹⁶

Just because Duncan is opposed to the narrative of decline, this does not mean that the story the church tells itself should be all roses and perfume. To deny that the church’s story is one of loss is not to deny the importance of lament

¹⁴ Cheryl M. Peterson, *Who Is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 75.

¹⁵ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 5–6.

¹⁶ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 78.

and repentance. The reality that Dylann Roof represents lays this bare. Roof is the avowed white supremacist who, on June 17, 2015, got up during a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and shot and killed nine people. Roof is also a young man who was brought up and cared for by the members of St. Paul's Lutheran Church (ELCA). Instead of treating him as an anomaly or an aberration, Duncan says that "we failed him, Church. White Lutheranism never confronted Dylann's white-supremacist beliefs, and we need to examine our church structure, theology, and communities to understand why."¹⁷ One of the lessons Duncan draws from the life and actions of Roof is that the church has failed to equip its members to name and resist radical evil. "Dear Church, it's time we wage peace. We are it. This is the front line. Our Sunday schools and pulpits are the tools we have to wage peace on this world."¹⁸

This treatment of the narrative of decline within the church, and of the need to forcefully challenge evil in our midst, also raises important questions about what happens to the society at large as the church retreats. Duncan draws a direct connection between the church's decreasing faith in itself in the United States and the increasing worship offered up to the nation. "The country believes that God is dead. Nationalism is an attempt to keep the liberating Easter dawn from arriving, to deny the rising of the sun and resurrection."¹⁹ While powerful, there are deeper questions Duncan's argument here raises, questions that have important ramifications for how we might understand the church.

We can easily imagine someone following the basic structure of Duncan's argument but arriving at a conclusion he would likely reject. For example, one might argue that a decrease in the church's influence in society has fueled moral and sexual license, encouraging nontraditional relationships and undermining social mores. I do not think Duncan's argument can rule out this approach at face value, but I believe this is a strength of his position rather than a weakness. His writing strongly suggests that mainline Christians are more tempted by stultifying quietism than by extreme activism. If we follow H. Richard Niebuhr's classic typology, a church that lives within the motif of "Christ and culture in paradox" will necessarily find it particularly challenging to articulate clear criteria for how and when to engage the world.²⁰ What Duncan is left with is a passionate argument about how and when *he* believes the church should be active in the world. Other arguments can and will be offered, other visions of what it means to be united to Christ and working among Christ's people. It seems that Duncan's approach asks us to risk difficult conversations about those visions, rather than shutting our eyes and closing ourselves up behind walls of respectability and fear.

¹⁷ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 52–53.

¹⁸ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 59–60.

¹⁹ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 107.

²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

GROUNDED IN LOVE

Besides sacramentology and ecclesiology, there are obviously any number of theological loci one might choose in order to do the kind of deep, reflective work Duncan is advocating. There are lessons to be drawn about justification by grace, the communion of saints, the theology of the cross, and lives that are *simul justus et peccator*. But in, with, and under Duncan's story, the focus remains on the manifold ways of love.

While love is not often a central topic of discussion when asking about the Reformation's legacy, some scholars have sought to draw our attention to love's importance for Luther and others. While the conversation about his views on ontology and deification remains lively, Tuomo Mannermaa's work, and that of his students, encourages deeper attention to Luther's views on the role of love in the divine life and in God's work of justification and sanctification.²¹ Carter Lindberg, from his dissertation to his more recent work on the history of love in the Christian West, has argued for a connection between a theology of love and the imperative to be active in service to the world that Luther's theology demands. "Luther understood his task as theologian and preacher [was] to provide a clear critique of existing social structures, and to call the community to work in the different 'estates' for the [well-being] of the neighbor and the common good."²²

Birgit Stolt dedicated much of her career to the role of emotions, rhetoric, and the heart in Luther's thought. She sees Luther moving through the quotidian experiences of his life—experiences as a husband, father, and friend—to make weighty theological points about God's ways. For example, in his *Table Talks*, Stolt notices Luther's attention to maternal love as an apt metaphor for divine love. While a child might wander into the house covered in dirt and scabs, a mother's love has a stronger hold on the child than any mud or muck ever could. "Here [Luther's] theological thinking draws on the everyday experience of deeply felt, patient, parental love shown in its concrete manifestations; in this case an instance of a less attractive duty."²³

²¹ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). While not explicitly relying on Mannermaa's work, Else Marie Wiberg Pederson also argues for a reappraisal of love in Luther's theology that challenges Anders Nygren's classic dichotomy of *agape* and *eros*, and instead places the Reformer's thought into closer proximity with Bernard of Clairvaux's *theologia caritatis*. Pederson rightly emphasizes how the gift of love "is not an end in itself. The goal is that of renewing and unifying humans with God in this love to a *caritas Christiana*." See "This Is Not about Sex? A Discussion of the Understanding of Love and Grace in Bernard of Clairvaux's and Martin Luther's Theologies," in *Dialog* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 22.

²² Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History through Western Christianity* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 131.

²³ Birgit Stolt, "Joy, love and trust basic ingredients in Martin Luther's theology of the faith of the heart," *Seminary Ridge Review*, Spring 2002, 42. We should be cautious with Luther's use, and Stolt's reproduction, of female gendered language of "mothers" to describe this way of love. The goal is to accurately reflect Luther's position and to, hopefully, note important moments when Luther moved slightly beyond the endemic patriarchy of his time to learn from and praise maternal images. Reinforcing gendered stereotypes about essences or natural roles should not be the lesson that is drawn, with the expectation that we continue to work to undo this kind of thinking and the injustices it creates, particularly with respect to the work and care needed to sustain families and homes.

Duncan, I would contend, has a similar view of God's love and embodies this stance in his own love of the church. In thesis 28 of his Heidelberg Disputation, Luther made a stark contrast between the ways of God's love and the ways of human love. "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it. . . . Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good."²⁴ It might be tempting to think of these two ways of loving in diametrical terms, but it would better represent Luther's theology, and Duncan's expression of Christian love, to consider this love that finds and the love that creates as dialectically related in this life. The larger church that Duncan proudly serves is the same church that has a sordid history, one that involves repeated acts of exclusion and marginalization of pastors of color, not to mention the ongoing complacency toward and collusion with the forces of white privilege and supremacy. And yet, instead of walking away from this community, Duncan writes extravagantly of his love for it. This love is not distant well-wishing but passionate commitment to helping the church to see its flaws in the present and find a way forward.

This loving embrace of the church is not without its dangers. From Duncan's position as a lover of the church, there is a real and critical potential for self-deception, if not self-delusion. In wanting to see and make the church more lovable than it is in practice, either at the corporate or local level, Duncan could underestimate the harm experienced by many and encourage the kind of patient endurance or active embrace of suffering that scholars like Delores Williams have warned us about.²⁵ From the position of the larger and, in this case, predominantly white church, there are different temptations at play.

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On the one hand, some will reject Duncan's criticisms out of hand, seeing in them another black jeremiad that is too angry, a cousin of the Black Power and #BlackLivesMatter movements. While there will be some who, of course, will simply be unable to hear Duncan's words, it can be hoped that the marriage of autobiography and pastoral insight will at least encourage such dissenters to give Duncan a fair hearing. The greater danger, I would argue, comes from those progressive souls who are already inclined to agree with Duncan's position.

²⁴ LW 31:57.

²⁵ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

The power that whiteness holds could pervert the challenging and prophetic love that Duncan presents into something more palatable and affirming. Duncan, for some, could easily become that “black friend” who proves that *I* understand the problem and *I* am neither the source of pain nor a stumbling block to progress. But here we can see the temptation of human love to seek out and find only what is pleasing to it.²⁶ By contrast, the divine love that Lenny Duncan and Martin Luther write about struggles; it moves people from where they are, to be just a little bit closer to where God would have us be. The love that creates what is beautiful is experienced in present moments while being eschatologically driven toward a future yet to come. As Luther puts it, “This union makes all things common, until at last Christ completely destroys sin in us and makes us like himself, at the Last Day. Likewise by the same love we are to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us.”²⁷ ⊕

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²⁶ As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen warns, the gift of love is like all gifts: “Rather than being received with a grateful heart as gifts from God, they may become instruments of selfish pleasure-seeking or ways of fooling oneself in that even when loving God the human being is seeking one’s own good.” “‘The Christian as Christ to the Neighbour’: On Luther’s Theology of Love,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (April 2004): 115.

²⁷ LW 35:59.