

LOVING REFORM

John 2: 1-11

(Augsburg College Chapel, 25 January 2013, Epiphany 2, Board of Regents Weekend)

This morning I continue with the fourth of five chapel homilies dedicated to the charisms (or gifts) of the Lutheran theological tradition that help to shape the identity and character of our college. Last semester, we explored the Lutheran concept of vocation, offering a nuanced understanding of the arc of human experience in the world. We also pondered our commitment to humble and critical inquiry, the freedom to ask our critical questions with the understanding that human knowledge is ever evolving and never complete. And then we considered our tradition's embrace of otherness and difference – the rich diversity of God's creation – and how our experience of otherness leads us to see the stranger as neighbor.

Today I point to the concept of *semper reformanda*, the underlying contention of our Lutheran heritage that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

Our exploration of *semper reformanda* seems especially fitting on this day when our Board of Regents have gathered for their winter meetings and when they have invited into an historic conversation almost 60 of us – faculty, staff and students – a conversation about the future of Augsburg College.

There is genuine enthusiasm and anxiety about these conversations, in part because at the heart of planning for the future we must face the difficult, complex and challenging questions that portend change – change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change – within our academic community and in the wider society – we here at Augsburg have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world – a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work as a college.

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My title for this homily, "Loving Reform," might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy president and

perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that – we must love change for change’s sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg College is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform.

Martin Luther wrote in perhaps his most well-known treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520, M. Tranvik, trans.) these famous lines:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything...

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all

Here is the creative tension at the heart of Luther’s vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to be of service, to follow our calls to be God’s co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God’s people and do God’s work. Luther’s vision of reform was pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God’s faithful people. And the passage from John’s gospel, assigned for the 2nd Sunday in Epiphany, may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar – sometimes referred to as Jesus’ first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus’ mother says to him, “They have no wine,” to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come.” Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future – Jesus can’t be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn't allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more important things on his mind. She reminds us that we too are called – as she was – to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, “Do whatever he tells you.”

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. “Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief stewards,” he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle – the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity – but the fact is that they participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God's abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God's way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God's loving intentions for all of creation. “Do whatever he tells you,” Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Our friend and colleague, Christensen professor Marty Stortz, recently reminded me of a 2010 *New York Times* opinion piece by columnist David Brooks entitled “The Summoned Self.” In the column, Brooks outlines two ways of thinking about our lives. Coincidentally the first way he suggests is based on a commencement speech by Clayton

Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, whose book, *The Innovative University*, is the beginning point for our planning conversations this afternoon. Brooks labels Christensen's way of thinking about life as "The Well-Planned Life." In the well-planned life, you spend time when young finding a clear purpose for your life and then you dedicate and discipline yourself to live with that purpose clearly in mind – granted, with a few tweaks and refinements along the way, but ultimately leading to a well-rounded fruition.

Brooks then describes a second way of thinking about life, which he calls "The Summoned Life." In the summoned life, you do not live as an unfolding project to be completed, but rather as an unknowable landscape to be explored. In this mode of living, you focus on the important commitments that precede choices you make – commitments to faith, family, nation or some other cause – and you tend to be skeptical about applying so-called business concepts, with their focus on utility, to other realms of life.

The well-planned life emphasizes individual agency and is widely admired in our American context as we lift up the entrepreneur, the pioneer, the lone free agent who blazes new trails and creates new worlds. The summoned life focuses on context and circumstances, observes the world carefully and asks questions about how we can be most useful in this time and place.

We might recognize the summoned life as a fairly close description of what we describe as "the called life," and I would contend that at our best as a college, we keep this vocational focus firmly in mind as a way of understanding our roles in the world. It is counter-cultural and deeply rooted in our faith tradition. I couldn't be more proud of our commitments to the summoned life.

At the same time – as Brooks concludes in his column – if we choose only one of these two options for looking at life, we may miss important guidance for what he names as a third option, "the well-considered life." Looking only at context and circumstance without a longer horizon of naming our life's purpose can lead to passivity. On the other hand, focusing only on achieving long-term goals by planning out well in advance the steps we will follow, may well lead to rigidity and disappointment.

I would argue that our Lutheran heritage actually leads us to embrace the well-considered life. We believe that we are called to serve our neighbor. We are freed for service in the context of our daily lives in the world. At the same time, we also believe that God has a plan for all of creation and that the best is yet to come. There is a clear purpose for our lives in the world.

Loving reform – *semper reformanda* – is the challenge to live at the intersections of God's call and God's plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts – gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith – to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our

midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.