

LOVING REFORM

John 2: 1-11

(Augsburg University Chapel, 28 October 2022)

On this next Monday, those of us in the Lutheran Christian faith tradition will mark the 505th anniversary of the day when our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, is purported to have nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, launching what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

I will spare you a history lesson today, but suffice to say that the Lutheran tradition, launched more than five centuries ago, is deeply relevant to the sort of education we seek to offer here at Augsburg. Theological concepts like vocation, faith alone, *simul justus et peccator*, service to neighbor, and so many others, are the moorings for our mission and work as a university. Today I want to reflect on another of these theological ideas, the concept of *semper reformanda*, the contention of 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.

This idea of always reforming seems especially relevant for this moment in Augsburg's history, in this time when all of higher education is being challenged with how to "reset" itself in light of the various pandemics we are experiencing – the COVID virus, economic disruptions, climate catastrophes, abiding wars, racial reckoning - and on and on I could go in naming the challenges that provoke fear and anxiety and uncertainty for all of us..

But of course, even with the emotions that come with these pandemics and challenges, there also is fear and anxiety about what it means to respond, to reset ourselves, in part because at the heart of imagining a new 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 university..

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 University 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.

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, 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.

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.