

Vintage Jesus: Reformation and Dissent
John 2:1-22
Binkley BC, Chapel Hill, NC
October 27, 2019

“They have no wine,” his mother said to the Son of God, when the cabernet ran out, at the wedding, in Cana of Galilee, on the edge of the kingdom of God. But Jesus of Nazareth wasn’t getting involved in that nuptial catastrophe. “Woman,” he says to the Blessed Virgin Mary, “what do you and I have to do with this? My hour has not come.” Family dysfunction often bubbles up at weddings, even when you aren’t the one getting married and apparently, even when yours is THE Holy Family. “EM-ee,” perhaps he said to her, the Aramaic word for mama, “don’t bug me about this.” But Mother Mary, like all our EM-ees, refuses to take no for an answer, even from the Word of God made flesh. “Do whatever he tells you,” she says to the servants. And, whether his hour has come or not, Jesus is committed. How did she know he could do something about that particular social necessity? How many mom’s asked you to do things you didn’t want to do?

So, the one the Nicene Creed calls “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,” obeys his Jewish mother and sends the servants for six stone water jars—sizable containers, capacity 20 to 30 gallons. And he orders them filled “to the brim” with clear, potable water. And in a twinkling, something wondrous happens. “Draw some off,” Jesus tells them, and take it to the caterer” who, not knowing where the liquid came from, takes one small sip, and then perhaps a larger second, smiles broadly (I’m extrapolating here) and says:” Usually we serve the really good wine first and wait until the guests are a little drunk (Per the NRSV) and then serve the stuff we picked up at the convenient store” (Per me). Then he moves from spirits to spirituality, adding: “But you have saved the best until last.” That brief, powerful phrase carries us from familial prickliness through water into wine, to the Kingdom of God, God’s New

Day in the world. It is a story filled to the brim with grace and frivolity, irony and gospel, vintage Jesus all the way.

Mother Mary seems to know, even before her son does, that sometimes where grace is concerned you must improvise. To say that we are free, free to live by faith and grace alone, does not mean we fail to prepare, study, reflect, or struggle. It means we can never prepare enough. All the education in the world, all the committees, by-laws, and business meetings a congregation can muster, all the implicit doctrines, creeds or justice pursuits we pledge to follow, can never ensure that we won't sometimes have to improvise. For sometimes life and faith thrusts us into situations for which we could never prepare even if we knew in advance it was going to happen.

The Cana story concludes with John's comment: "This deed at Cana-in-Galilee is the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him." The disciples were surely pleased that they had chosen to follow such a hospitable messiah.

But John won't let the gospel rest on wine and wedding receptions. He turns immediately to Jesus, danger and dissent. "As it was near the time of the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. There he found in the temple the dealers in cattle, sheep, and pigeons, and the moneychangers, scattering their coins. Jesus made a whip of cords." Again, he improvises, the one who made water to wine, made a whip of cords and drove out the infamous "money changers." Once Jesus learned to improvise, he couldn't stop—life (and gospel) wouldn't let him.

John is the only one of the four gospels that puts the money changer story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, not at the end, as do the other three. But more significant, I think, is that John pairs the wedding feast with the cleansing of the temple. In the book *God and Empire*, John Dominic Crossan says that, "Jesus went to Jerusalem that one (or last time) time because it

was a *capital city* where *religion* and *violence*—conservative religion and imperial oppression—had become **serenely complicit**.”¹ Jesus’ message of liberation was a prophetic protest against “Jewish religious cooperation with Roman imperial control . . . a permanently valid protest demonstration against any capital city’s collusion between conservative religion and imperial violence at any time and in any place.”² Jesus says, “you must not turn my Father’s house into a market.” Maybe that’s when the disciples started having second thoughts.

“The first of Jesus’ miracles! Today we say it was the beginning of a Reformation. Today we speak of Reformations for several reasons: First, because *Ecclesia semper Reformanda*, the church is always reforming. Second, if the wedding at Cana marks God’s New Day in the world, then, we Protestants say, that Martin Luther’s posting of 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, marked yet another mark of God’s New Day, calling the church to rethink it’s identity, its foundation, its mission in the world. Third, five hundred two years after that landmark moment, we say that the church of the here and now, at least in the land of the free and the home of the violent, is desperate for Reformation before it is too late.

Reformation Sunday in the somewhat less than the year of our Lord 2019 comes a time of permanent transition in American cultural and religious life. These transitions include the fact that 1 in 5 Americans now claim no religious affiliation, 1 in 3 millennials, ages 18 to 30. The ripple effects of that transition are impacting every, and I mean every, congregation in this country. That means that today’s churches, including this congregation, live, like Jesus and Martin Luther, somewhere between celebration and dissent, between the wedding at Cana, and the moneychangers in the temple. Luther’s Reformation states with celebration: The just shall

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, then and now* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 131.

² *Ibid*, 132.

live by faith; the priesthood of all believers; the end of clerical celibacy—Remember: Martin Luther was an ex-priest who married Katherine von Bora, an ex-nun and together they had 6 children, and that if nothing else is Reformation!

But celebration soon turns to dissent. If Jesus turned on the money-changers, Luther turned on the indulgence sellers, hucksters selling documents by which normal sinners could purchase grace drawn on the storehouse of merit—good works generated by the saints who didn't need all that holiness for salvation, so it could be transferred to those who needed a little more to get them or their relatives out of purgatory. One of Luther's theses declared, "the saints have no extra credits."

In a wonderful little book called *Dissent in American Religion*, the late historian and Baptist Edwin S. Gaustad, writes that, "Dissent cannot be understood simply in terms of WHINES against oppression, resistance to organizational corruption, demurrers against the affirmations of others." Dissenters, Gaustad insisted, are much more than "merely noisy nay-sayers." Instead, "the dissenter is a powerful if unpredictable engine in the service of a cause."³

Today, let us say that at their best, and often at their messiest, dissenters are both a prophetic witness to the insensitivities in church and culture, and agents of celebration for the possibilities of reformation. Gaustad admits that "history hones dissent to a fine edge: sharp, severe, and unyielding."

That's an extremely important point. At its best, dissent is concerned for change, to right the wrong, to correct the injustice. But that may not happen, at least not at once. The moneychangers and indulgence sellers were kept hawking their wares long after Jesus and

³ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 4.

Luther had their say. The point here is that at its heart, dissent for the sake of justice doesn't usually begin with change, it begins with witness, a dissenter consumed with a "zeal for God's house," the breaking of God's New Day in the world." Sometimes the most we can do is "give a witness" with our dissent and hope for Reformation with the help of others who get the gospel point, longing for social and spiritual transformation.

They come, inevitably, those moments, in some dark night or early morning when you are all alone and called to respond to situations even your mother couldn't have warned you about, and neither Donald Trump or Barak Obama, Sean Hannity or Rachel Maddow, Franklin Graham or Aretha Franklin can tell you what to do. There you are in an emergency room full of imminent pain and instant chaos and there's no time to ORGANIZE a response or your thoughts—only time to improvise beyond phone texts or proof texts, long-range plans or short-term expedience. And from somewhere deep as darkness you hear the word, "Fear not," and you act by *sola fide*, faith alone. You improvise the most love and care you can muster.

What if the wedding at Cana was the first time Jesus of Nazareth learned to improvise? And once he did, he couldn't seem to stop. Indeed, whatever else we learn from the gospel stories they illustrate Jesus' amazing capacity for improvising grace. And doing so got him into endless trouble with all kinds of people. Remember the blind man in his path begging for sight so Jesus makes a paste of dust and spit and by grace heals him. Good news! But he did it on the Sabbath and the religious crowd could not believe that grace could come outside the prescribed ecclesiastical regulations. Improvising grace may sometimes seem a bit irreligious.

Martin Luther broke ecclesiastical regulations to the max. The pope denounced him in a document that began: "Arise O Lord and judge they cause; a wild boar is loose in the vineyard. Called to recant or face excommunication, Luther declared: "My conscience is captive to the Word

of God. I cannot and will not recant for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. Others followed, and he had a church on his hands. So, he improvised, and the Lutheran church was born. To improvise grace is to take a chance, to risk everything on faith. You gamble, with only moments to spare, that something will be right, and it won't hurt more than it helps.

Does that mean the gospel is relative? No, it means life, even Christian life, is unpredictable. And the wisdom to know when to stand on unshakable convictions and when to grab for all the ambiguity you can get is what Holy Spirit is about. It is also to know moments of abject terror, for sometimes even in our best efforts to help and care nothing seems to change, and grace seems a long time coming.

Where will God's New Day take this church as it explores old/new ways of ministering with each other, in this community, in this terribly divided state, nation, dangerous world? When the rhetoric of the public square nurtures bigotry, cynicism and downright meanness, can you imagine the new wine of grace, care, and conscience?

It takes courage to follow the Spirit, then and now. The first disciples learned that the hard way. Great fun, turning water into wine, but surely the incident with the moneychangers sobered them up considerably. In the end, however, panic got the best of them, and they all ran away, except for the women who stayed with Jesus to the bitter end. Like those women we need courage, not simply to accept Christ, but to profess Christ on the way, when the wine is new and heady, and when we must drink it to the dregs. On this Sunday, some of us are celebrating, some of us are enduring. But whatever our sober condition, we can remember days when water turned to wine, when the Spirit fell like fire, days when the church seemed drunk with the Divine explosion. So, in times of light or darkness we hold on to the God who saves the best until last, and who saves even the last one best. Alleluia!