

(Em)Bracing Chaos
20th Sunday After Pentecost
Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Deuteronomy 34.1-12;
Psalm 90.1-6, 13-17;
I Thessalonians 2.1-8;
Matthew 22.34-46

I know that some people thrive on chaos. Me? I'm not a big fan. I love order of all kinds. I like my spaces to be organized. I like my theology to be coherent. I like my schedule to be orchestrated. And I am sucker for a theorist who will take seemingly disconnected and incoherent trends and can find the pattern buried in the morass. With some beautiful, grand theory order emerges and what was complicated and messy suddenly makes all the sense in the world.

I'm fully aware that in our post-modern age such grand unifying theories are quickly becoming a thing of the past. That is probably a good thing. But nonetheless as we stand on the edge of a rather significant anniversary – October 31st will mark the 500th anniversary of the day that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral launching what we now the Great Reformation – my mind circled back to the work of Phyllis Tickle in her 2008 book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*.

In it, Tickle sketches a pattern she, and others, have observed in the tumultuous history of the church. Every 500 years or so, we seem to find ourselves on the cusp of some great seismic change. And we, my friends, have the lovely privilege of living smack dab in the midst of one. 500 years ago it was the Great Reformation when Protestant Christianity emerged in the midst of conflicts of both theology and practice. 500 years before that was the Great Schism when Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western Roman Catholic Christianity parted ways. 500 years before that Gregory the Great helped to establish the monastic movement which became conservator of Western Christianity during the dark ages. And obviously 500 years before that was the birth of Christianity itself.

In the introduction, Tickle refers to a metaphor first utilized by the Right Reverend Mark Dyer who in reference to this 500 year pattern of tumultuous change as a time when the church undergoes “a giant rummage sale” when the structures of the church of that day “must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”¹ The good news is that what emerges on the other side of that seismic change, is an expanded version of Christianity both in terms of depth and in terms of its reach. The Great Reformation brought tremendous growth to the Christian church as both Protestantism and a refurbished Catholicism made its way all around the world.² The painful piece of this reality is that the process is inevitably chaotic; especially because the tumultuous change is not just within the church itself but is happening on all levels of culture and politics, economy, and religion. By the way – these epochs of time and change go beyond the history of the church or even Christianity but can be traced back through the life Israel and beyond.

In fact, we have before us in our texts today two such moments as the Hebrew people stand on the edge of the promised land and as the leaders of Israel contend with the person of Jesus and the kingdom of heaven he came to proclaim. What emerges from these two stories is a question: how will we face the chaos that is inevitable when we stand on the edge of something new that is emerging but is not yet here? Watching these exchanges between Jesus and the temple leaders over these past weeks is a study in resistance and subterfuge. First the chief priests and elders challenge his authority. Then the Pharisees try to trap him in a political ploy. Then Sadducees try to trip him up with an obscure theological question about marriage only to be silenced by his brilliant response. Today the Pharisees take another run at him.

This time asking a question that goes to the very heart of the Torah: What is the greatest commandment. As they double down from within their tradition and try to poke holes from every angle, he continues this fascinating two fold move of diving deeper into the very traditions they purport to uphold while at the same time expanding the expression of it in new and uncharted territory. They want to talk Torah? What is the greatest commandment? Love....love the Lord your God with all of your

¹ Tickle, Phyllis *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 17.

² Ibid, 17.

heart, and with all of your soul, and all of your mind. But he doesn't stop with their question. He expounds upon it. He connects the Shema to a passage from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Where they hoped to trick him, he exposed the bankruptcy of their supposed purity. Their proclaimed love for God's law is exposed as the fraudulent ruse that is. You cannot claim to love God if you do not love what God loves or who God loves. Where Jesus opens up the law to ever expanding dimensions of love and faithfulness, they see impending chaos as their tightly wound system of control and power begins to unravel in these winds of change. Their way of bracing for that chaos is to plot for his destruction hoping they can stave it off and hold back the winds.

As we travel back time to an earlier moment in the life of God's people, they stand poised to quite literally enter into new territory. Moses is standing on the edge of the promised land. God gives to him one last gift. As they stand together at the edge, right at the brink and cusp of this new day - this long awaited promise about to be received - God gives to Moses the chance to see where they will go without him. Did you notice the way the land is described? Not as it was in that present moment as the land of Canaanites, the Hittites, the Jebusites. No it is described and envisioned as it will one day be as the land of Israel. Those names of Dan, and Naphtali, Judah; these are the names of the twelve tribes. What God shows to him on the cusp of it all is that the Spirit goes ahead of them into this territory they have not yet entered.

Here's my prayer as we come into this commemoration of the Reformation this week - as we consider whether we might be on the cusp of some Great Emergence that we cannot yet see - that we will learn to trust the Spirit of God who goes ahead of us. I pray that we will resist that anxiety and fear that leads us to brace for the chaos by resorting to violence. Settling of the promised land was a bloody endeavor. The sorting out of the reformation included a very similar clash of power. History reveals that both the visionaries -the initial reformers who forge the new ground - and the ones remaining within the tradition undergo great change.

The gathering tonight is intentionally called a commemoration and not a celebration. Acknowledging the gifts of reformation and change for all parts of the Christian church and they will acknowledge the grief of the violence and the splintering that occurred within the Body of Christ.

There is no question that these are unsettling times. I, have not been gifted with the vision of foresight that God gave to Moses before his death. I don't know exactly where this is all leading. But I do know this: I want to embrace the chaos. I want to lean into it with a curious mind and open heart. We have been this way before and if history is any guide we will go this way again. As much as I love to know and to prepare and to plan....I want to embrace the chaos as it unfolds because I trust the One who goes before and behind and within and beside us.

For this Reformation day, I chose a confession of faith from Our Song of Hope because it lifts up so beautifully this call to trust that God's Spirit speaks in this world. Not just in ancient times. Not just at the time of the reformation. But still speaks in every time and place. God has not been left without a witness. So, if it seems that the Spirit is speaking from places beyond where the church has ever gone before that is because the Word has entered where we have failed to go.

So we will speak this confession: "Come, Lord Jesus: We are open to your Spirit."

We will sing in our closing hymn "Speak, O Lord and renew our minds; help us grasp the heights of your plans for us. Truths unchanged from the dawn of time echo down through eternity. And by grace we'll stand on your promises, and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us. Speak, O Lord, till your church is built, and the earth is filled with your glory."

Amen.