Reformation from the Margins (2/4)

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I pointed out earlier this morning that most probably when Luther nailed his now famous theses nobody in Wittenberg was paying much attention. There were much more important and urgent matters to occupy people's minds. The same was true, in a much larger scale, of the rest of Europe.

In Italy, Pope Leo X, whose original name was Giovanni di Lorenzo de Medici, was involved in a war to establish a nephew — another Medici— as Duke of Urbino. Since his family already owned the prosperous city of Florence, he was close to his goal —and that of several of his predecessors— to become master of all of Italy. Since the Ottoman Turks were threatening Western Europe, he proclaimed against them a great crusade for which he sought funds from every conceivable source —funds that he then used for the beautification of Rome. Just a few months before Luther's theses, a plot was discovered among the cardinals to poison Leo, and his vengeance was swift and cruel. Amidst all of this, Leo is said to have spent much of his time in masquerades, pageantry, hunting, and following the progress of artists whom he sponsored

artists such as Michaelangelo who was producing his now famous paintings in the Vatican. All of these were important pursuits. How could he have time or energy to pay much attention to what was happening in far-away Wittenberg? The only reason for his concern was that Luther's protest might hamper the flow of funds he needed for his grand projects.

In Spain, King Charles was involved in a bitter rivalry with Francis I of France —a rivalry that would soon lead to open warfare, and in which Charles would be the victor, first by being elected as Emperor Charles V, and then by defeating and capturing Francis in the battle of Pavia. He was beginning to organize both the church and the civil government in the New World —an enterprise that at that time seemed ever more expensive with little financial reward. Shortly after Luther's 95 theses, when Emperor Maximilian died, Charles set his sights on the imperial throne. Little did he care what happened in the small town of Wittenberg.

In France, King Francis felt besieged by the growing power of the Hapsburgs, whose lands were surrounding him. His concern was such that he was negotiating an alliance with Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent against Charles and the house of Hapsburg. He had no reason to be

particularly interested in what was going on in Saxony until much later, when Luther proved to be a thorn in the flesh for his archenemy Charles.

In England VIII was becoming increasingly concerned because the children he had from his wife Catherine of Aragon were either stillborn or died very young. Only Mary had survived, and at that point she was barely a year old. Furthermore, at the same time that Henry was concerned over the succession to the throne he was also busy trying to make good his claim to the throne of France, a failed enterprise in which he invested much of his financial and political capital. Therefore, Europe had little reason to be seriously interested in what was taking place in Wittenberg.

We are often told that Luther was a prestigious professor at the University of Wittenberg. What we often forget is that from the point of view of the important academic circles the University of Wittenberg did not amount to much. This university had been founded in 1502, and Frederick the Wise had made great efforts seeking to attract leading scholars to it. But universities such as those of Paris and Oxford still commanded unrivaled respect. For

generations, when important theological issues had to be determined, they were often referred to long-standing universities such as Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, and Salamanca. For centuries, those universities had held carefully structured debates about all sorts of questions on the nature of the Trinity, the omniscience of Jesus, the authority of the Pope, the validity of the mendicant orders, and such abstract and high-falutin technical issues as the univocity of being and the hylomorphic composition of rational beings. What did they care what an unknown professor in an upstart university had to say about the sale of indulgences? Actually, some of their own professors had questioned the practice, and not much had happened.

A radical reform in the church was not expected to come out of Luther's theses. For well over a century there had been a strong movement that sought reform by putting it in the hands of bishops and other church leaders. For a time, they seemed to be on the way to success. When the first of a series of councils met, there were two popes, and policies of the councils restored the unity of the papacy. But then the council itself split. Now that there was only one pope, there were two councils! Where an entire council of the church had failed, what could an obscure university professor do?

Even so, there were a scattered number of scholars that sought reformation of the church. They were well aware that through the centuries the church had wandered away from the gospel as it appears in Scripture, and were trying to lead the church back to its sources. They too, when they heard of it, did not expect Luther's protest to lead very far. Erasmus, who at first viewed Luther with a measure of sympathy, eventually broke with him in order to pursue his own form of reformation —which did not have much success.

All of this is to say that when Luther nailed his famous theses practically no one paid much attention. They had no reason to do so. What did an upstart monk in what just a few years ago was a hick town know about conditions in the real world? Even if he was right, what power did he have to make his views known, much less to have the church heed his call? And even if the church did hear what he was saying, this had to do only with the sale and the value of indulgences. What then about all the other corrupt practices that had to be abandoned? What about simony, the practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical positions? What about a papacy that was more concerned with embellishing Rome than with its religious obligations? What about ten-year olds becoming bishops simply because they had the right patronage?

In one word, if I had lived in Europe during this time, and even if I had longed for a reformation of the church, I would not have set much store by what was taking place at Wittenberg on that October 31st. I would have expected changes to come from the promptings of distinguished and world-famous scholars such as Erasmus of Rotterdam. Perhaps, had I been overly optimistic, I would have hoped that some influential bishops would get together and try to revive the conciliar movement. Or perhaps I would hope that a powerful ruler such as Henry VIII of England or Francis I of France would decide that enough is enough, and order the reformation of the church within his kingdom, much as Isabella had sought to do in Spain decades earlier. No matter on which of these I would lay my trust, it certainly would not be on the actions of that monk with a hammer in Wittenberg!

I would obviously have been wrong. I would have been wrong because, much as it may surprise us, reformation, new insights and new vitality usually comes from the margins not the center of the church.

This is no coincidence. On the contrary, it's a pattern repeated throughout the times. In the

biblical times, there were many in Israel who felt things had to change. From where would that change come? Most certainly from Judea, or perhaps even from Rome. Those were the centers of power, from which all change radiated. At any rate, if any change would come, it certainly would not be from Galilee, that corrupt and semi-pagan land that good Judeans called "Galilee of the Gentiles." After all, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Had I been living in the first-century Roman Empire, I would have hoped that change and redress from all evil and injustice would come from Rome. If I had been a Jew, perhaps I would have looked to Jerusalem and to its Temple for guidance and reformation. In either case, I certainly would not have looked at an uprooted child being born to an unwed mother in that small town of Bethlehem, a town that in spite of its earlier connection with David had fallen from its earlier glory. I would not have looked to a preacher coming from a small town called Nazareth from which not even the subjugated Jews expected much.

Then the church was born. It was born in Jerusalem, the site of the crucifixion and the resurrection, the site of Pentecost. As one reads the first chapters of Acts, one would expect

Jerusalem to be forever the center of the church, and for the Twelve to be the leaders carrying the gospel to other lands. But that is not what happens. First of all, in Jerusalem itself new leadership from a different group begins to emerge. There is in the city a social and religious division between those who call themselves "Hebrews" because they were raised in the land of Israel, and because they spoke what they called "Hebrew" —which in fact was no longer the Hebrew of the Bible, but Aramaic. Then there were those others who grew up in the Diaspora, who spoke Greek better than "Hebrew"; those whom the good, supposedly real Hebrews called "Hellenists"; those who did not have the same customs nor eat the same food, and therefore were not as pure and as faithful as good, real Hebrews.

As so often happens, such tensions and injustices in society seep into the church. When there is murmuring about it, the Twelve decide that seven should be appointed to manage the distribution while they, the Twelve, reserve for themselves the all-important task of preaching. And, much to its credit, the church elects seven people who are probably Hellenists, for all have Greek names. And one of them is not even a Jew, but a Gentile who had converted into Judaism.

But no matter what the Twelve had decided, that they would be the preachers of the Word, the Spirit had other plans. Immediately after their election, Acts tells us that Stephen, one of the Seven, began preaching —actually, he preaches the longest sermon in the entire book of Acts! And then again, in the next chapter, the center of the action is not one of the Twelve, but Philip, another of the Seven, who is supposed to be in Jerusalem managing the distribution to the widows, and not traipsing all over, first to Samaria and the to the road to Gaza. And, as if that were not enough, by chapter 9 attention begins to shift, not to one of the Twelve, nor even to one of the Seven, but to a total outsider who most probably was among the conspirers who plotted for the death of Stephen, and whom we know as Paul.

Clearly, by the end of the book of Acts, although the church in Jerusalem still holds much respect, vitality has passed to Antioch, and from there it has begun to expand elsewhere.

Have you ever stopped to consider how much of the New Testament was actually written in Jerusalem? Most probably none of it. The New Testament certainly witnesses to events that took place in Judea. But it was not written in Judea. It was written in those places where believers had been scattered to live in new conditions, to discover what those events in Judea

meant for people who were not part of the original center.

It was not an easy process. Today we often read the New Testament glossing over the struggles connected with its formation. It is simply an inspiring book, telling us about the early church and its spread. We read it as if nothing had happened to the preaching and the life of the church as it moved from Judea to the rest of the world. But that is not the case. The church as we know it is not only the church as it emerged in Jerusalem, but also the church as it was shaped in the crucible of moving from Jerusalem and a totally Jewish environment to a more cosmopolitan, challenging, and even dangerous environment.

The same pattern appears in the Reformation. Today we read the story of the Reformation, and we forget that it was born in what was not a center of power and influence, and was led by a professor in an upstart university. But the truth is that in that sixteenth century reformation came unexpectedly from the margins, as it often comes.

All of this leads us back to the question that was posed for our first session, and which I then

did not even begin to answer, namely, what lessons can we learn from the Reformation that may be of value for us today?

Obviously, there are many such lessons. I have already referred to the parallelism between the invention of the printing press and the current explosion in cybernetic communications. The Reformation should also teach us about the dangers of relating faith and nation too closely and uncritically. Several of the basic theological principles of the Reformation merit revisiting and discussing today, and will be found to be particularly significant: the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, the connection between Word and Sacrament, the notion that a believer is at the same time justified and a sinner, and many more. But the crucial lesson from the Reformation for our day is precisely this point: that the Reformation did not come from the center, but from the margins.

This is particularly pertinent for us today, where in many ways that very point may perplex us and even discourage us.

The map of Christianity has shifted many times before. Just to give a few examples: from a map centered in Syria and Asia Minor in the second century, by the fourth it had shifted to a map centered in the Mediterranean basin; then by the eight all the south and eastern shores of the Mediterranean had been overrun by Islam, and the center of Western Christianity was a line running north to south from the British Isles through the Carolingian Empire and to Rome.

Similar changes are taking place today. When many of us were growing up, the map of Protestant Christianity centered on the North Atlantic, particularly on a line running from London to New York. The great missionary centers were precisely New York and London. The centers of theological reflection were also in the North Atlantic, mostly in German, British, and North American schools. The churches in the North Atlantic were flourishing, and they seemed to be the churches that all others should imitate.

Now things have changed. The old missionary enterprise of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has to be revised, not because it failed, but rather because it succeeded to such an extent that today there are strong, self-supporting churches throughout the world. Again, just to give a couple of examples, there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States.

Brazil, Korea, the Philippines, Kenya, and India have become centers sending out missionaries throughout the world. In the fields of theology and Biblical hermeneutics, although the resources are still mostly in the North Atlantic, creativity seems to have been shifting south.

The map is shifting, and this can be frightening for those who grew up in the old centers, understanding their mission in a way that is not quite what is needed today.

And to make matters worse —or perhaps better, I don't know— the map is changing not only geographically, but also demographically. For a long time, in some cases for centuries, there has been a plethora of wealth and resources from the south to the north — first from colonies to colonial powers, and then from neo colonial dependencies to neocolonial centers. Now the people in those former colonies, or in those present-day neocolonies, are following that wealth. People from Kenya, Ghana, and India are moving into Britain. People from Cameroon, Madagascar, and Congo are flocking to France and Belgium. People from Angola and Mozambique are coming to Portugal. And, as we all know and many of our neighbors resent, people from Latin America and the Philippines are coming to the United States.

Christians in the old centers are seeing many people now coming to them from abroad bringing with their own forms of Christianity. This is generally the Christianity they learned from missionaries coming from the former centers, but now modified in various ways that reflect the cultural and other circumstances of the various places from which these immigrants come. Thus, right here in the United States, the white population is no longer as numerically dominant as it once was, and churches that were once dominant find themselves surrounded by new churches and expressions of Christianity that may seem somewhat strange to them.

It is at this point that I would suggest that the experience of the Reformation of the 16th century may be of help today in our so-called mainline churches in the US— churches that are perplexed by those changes. Just as that Reformation came from the edge, could it not be that the reformation of our churches today will come from today's edges? If so, as we deal with the enormous demographic changes that we are witnessing, perhaps the question we should be asking is not, how do we help these various peoples become United Methodists, but rather, what may God be telling us, the United Methodist Church, through them.

Obviously, the two are not mutually exclusive. Certainly both mission and advocacy are needed. They are particularly needed in these days when racism and nativism and xenophobia seem to be the order of the day, and are being fomented by the highest echelons of our national government. We must continue insisting that no human being is illegal, and that countries, just as people, do not become great by being the big bully in the block, but rather by serving those whom others are bullying. We must provide protection for those to whom all protection is denied. We must remember, and insist, and insist once again, that God's law of love is far above any human law of exclusion.

And we, the United Methodist Church, we must do some profound soul searching to try to explain how it is that many of those sections of the country where our church has had the greatest influence for generations, and the greatest chance to influence public opinion, are some of the areas where racism and xenophobia are relevant. What kind of a gospel have we been preaching? Have we forgotten that the founder of Methodism insisted that these thirteen colonies had no right to claim freedom as long as they denied it to slaves? Have we forgotten that he took the lead in criticizing his nation's colonial policies in India? Have we been content

with a passing nod to that element in Methodist heritage, and quickly moved on to matters that are less controversial?

But repentance and advocacy are not enough. If it is true that reformation and new insight come from the margins, our United Methodist Church must also see in the present changing situation a God-given opportunity to learn more about its faith, to read Scripture in a new way, to experience new dimensions of Christian living, and to gain new vitality.

It is under this light that we must see the National Plan for Latino/Latina Ministry not only a challenge, but also an opportunity. The goal is not only to bring Latinos and Latinas into the Methodist Church, but also to invite Latinas and Latinos to bring new life and new insight to the Methodist Church. We must begin to think of the National Plan for Latino/Latina Ministry not only as a way for the United Methodist Church to minister to Latinos and Latinas, but also as a way for Latinas and Latinos to minister to the United Methodist Church.

What this will bring about can only be discovered as it happens. That is the beauty of it! God

will reward us far beyond our expectations and in ways that we would never have dreamt. But, just as a suggestion of some of the things that might happen, allow me to give you some examples that I have already seen.

We all know that Scripture refers to us as the family of God. But, do we really know what this means? For the Latino community of faith, this is crucial. This has much to do with the traditional Latino understanding of family. For us, "family" is not just a couple of parents and some children. It is also aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, in-laws, and even people related by baptism —whom we call *compadres* and *comadres*, co-fathers and co-mothers. Thus, if I ask you how many in your family, your answer might be "four"; but if you ask me the same question, I will not know what to say. Where do I stop counting?

This is one of the many factors that make life difficult for Latino immigrants. It is not just a matter of having to learn a new language, of developing new skills, and of adjusting to a new culture. It is even not just a matter of having to live in hiding and in constant fear of deportation. It is also a matter of being wrenched away from the extended family in which we

were formed and which is a fundamental part of our identity. It is a matter of no longer being able to gather with a vast number of relatives to celebrate our common memories, to mourn our common losses, or just for the sheer joy of being together.

Even if you are fortunate enough to have been able to immigrate with your nuclear family — your spouse and your children — you will still miss your family. When sitting quietly with your spouse and children in front of a television set you will be yearning for those bygone boisterous evenings when your extended family gathered, and you shared stories, and you argued about sports or about politics, and perhaps even all of you spoke at the same time.

The Latino/a church is the place where many have and experienced similar to that of an extended family. When they call you "brother" or "sister" that is not a title of respect, as when in other churches people address someone as "sister Jane." No! Here in this church when people call you "sister" they really mean it. This does not necessarily mean that they like you. One does not have to like someone to be their relative. It does not mean that you will not argue with them, or even fight. We all have arguments and sometimes even feuds within our families.

It means that they see in you someone whom God has placed along their path to be their family. As in any family, they will be interested in you, in your dreams and achievements, in your hopes and pains, in your comings and goings. To one not used to this, it might seem as if such people just love gossip. But you will know that this is part of being family.

This is part of what is meant when Scripture calls the church the "family of God." We are joined to one another by God's action —as in a family. We do not have to like one another. But we are still family. And, when push comes to shove, we can really depend on one another.

Some time ago I was asking a United Methodist pastor about his church. He told me that he had "about twenty families." That is the language I often hear. What would happen if, instead of thinking about the church as a conglomeration of families, we came to think of the church as the family of God? Frankly, I don't know. But I think it is worth exploring. And I am convinced that in this exploration we would be helped by our immigrant sisters and brothers, people who have been raised by extended families, and who now find such a family in the church. Again, we are not talking only of a National Plan for the United Methodist Church to minister to Latinos

and Latinas; we are also talking of a National Plan for Latinas and Latinos to minister to the United Methodist Church.

Allow me to offer another example. As I visit churches in various parts of the country, I find numerous cases in which the problem does not seem to be that people do not know the Bible. The problem is that we know it too well. Someone begins reading, "A man was descending from Jerusalem to Jericho," and we know what comes next and what the parable means. And we stop listening, if not literally, at least figuratively, because we do not really expect to hear a new word from God. Some time ago, I was visiting a Latino church of a rather conservative denomination in an impoverished community in New York, When the pastor declared that he was preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, and that this day he was going to preach on the Sabbath, I decided I had already heard enough of that, and that I could expect one more moralistic sermon about what we should or should not do on Sunday. I had begun to tune the pastor off when he said: "How many among you would like to work an entire week?" Most hands went up. Then he said; "How many of you who have raised your hands found a full week's work this last week?" More than half of the hands that had been raised went down. He

then pointed at the Bible and said: "Why is it that we live in an order in which we cannot obey the commandment of God, that says that we should work six days of the week?" And from that point he moved on to discuss ways in which the church could act to see that any who were looking for work could find it.

I was surprised. I had long known of the support of the Methodist Church for the rights of laborers, among them the right to rest from their labors. To me, as to most United Methodists, the commandment meant simply that one should not work too much. This is why we have long supported labor unions and the rights of workers to organize. This made sense to me, who had never found myself unemployed. But this pastor, who had spent the week trying to help people cope with unemployment, saw that the commandment is not just about rest. The commandment is about a rhythm of work and rest. In order to obey the commandment, you must rest periodically. But in order to obey the commandment you must also work. And so, I began to wonder, how would this affect our preaching, our teaching, and our advocacy? Again, I do not know, but it is worth pondering.

This is just one more example of what happens when new voices are heard and new experiences are shared. It is just one example of the many things that will occur as our church becomes more diverse and therefore more obedient to the will of God.

Many of us who truly love the United Methodist Church, who in fact owe to the United Methodist Church much of who we are, long for a reformation that will make our church the vital and expanding movement it once was, a church that will be known for its zeal in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, a church where Scripture will come alive every day, a church where we are truly sisters and brothers. And it may well be that God is answering our prayers through the growing presence in our midst of people whom many in society despise, whom our human laws reject, but who are one more of God's many gifts to the church. After all, ours is a God who responded to the yearnings of Israel in One who was exiled from his native land, despised by the religious establishment, and crucified by the existing legal system.

May this God bless this United Methodist Church with a mighty reformation leading it into the future. Amen.