

THE CHURCH CRACKED OPEN

Disruption, Decline,
and New Hope for
Beloved Community

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INTRODUCTION

On Being Cracked Open

It was Saturday, August 1, 2020. I know because my text log tells me so. That afternoon I wrote to a friend:

God is breaking open this church and pouring us out—pouring out privilege, pouring out empire, pouring out racism and human arrogance—in order to remake us and use us to serve God’s dream for the whole world. We are the broken jar. It hurts and it sucks . . . and I think it’s a gift.

At that moment, we were six months into a global pandemic and economic collapse. It had been half a year since faith communities could fully and physically gather for prayer, worship, service, and fellowship. Many churches were flooded with need, just as donations began to dry up and our most reliable volunteers were locked away for fear of COVID-19. For six months people had been dying, sometimes more than a thousand a day in America, a disproportionate number of them Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people, whose lives the nation had long ago deemed “expendable.”

We were two months from the horror of watching Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin pin his knee on George Floyd’s neck and squeeze the breath of life out of him. Two months into ongoing protest, truth-telling, reading groups, and deep grief for people of every race, but especially for my Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian siblings. Two months shouting to God: “How long, Lord? Will you

forget us forever? Must we have sorrow in our hearts all the day? How long shall our enemy be exalted over us?" (Psalm 13).

In the scope of human life, two months or even six months isn't that long. By the time you read these words, it may be a year or two (or ten) since these cataclysmic events. Other disasters might have eclipsed them entirely. I do not know. What I do know is that as this particular season wore on, something felt different. Others described the shift, too. Here is what we noticed:

First, loss and uncertainty were nothing new. America* and civic institutions and churches that once rested comfortably at her center had actually suffered disruption, decline, and displacement for decades before 2020.

Second, this was a new phase, a steeper drop, a more profound disruption and displacement. For more than a generation, people had been speaking of the churches' need to detach from our buildings, but now we were literally unable to congregate inside our sanctuaries in any significant numbers. Churches that once balked at a screen in the sanctuary were suddenly reconstructing church in cyberspace. People who had never before used words like "White supremacy" (more on this term and others later) were recognizing them as essential to understanding American identity and dominant American Christian culture.

Experts, scholars, and preachers agreed that this overall moment in American life was unlike anything most of us had previously faced. Leaders like Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard explained that past experiences of disruption could be likened to a winter storm or maybe even a blizzard, but we were now in something like an extended winter season, maybe even an ice age.¹ The usual

*I ask your forbearance in advance, because I will be using "America/n" chiefly to speak of the United States of America, the focus of my research and reflection. Even as I do so, I'm aware that America is "a continent, not a country," as Guillermo Gómez-Peña observed in his landmark 1985 essay, "The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Art Community."

institutional patterns and practices would not apply. It was time to act like a start-up.

Others compared the experience to wandering in the wilderness. Together with my wise colleague Dwight Zscheile, a professor of leadership and innovation at Luther Seminary, I hosted a summertime web series and podcast called “Wilderness Time” (find it at www.wildernesstime.org). For six weeks, we gathered practitioners, students, and thought leaders to explore life on the edge with God. Our trusty navigational devices would not work here, so we’d better learn to trust God to provide direction and sustenance, as the Israelites learned the hard way during their forty-year wilderness sojourn. Like our forebears, we would have to embrace uncertainty and loss, humbly recenter our lives with the margins, and fundamentally redefine what is holy, what is worship, and what makes a follower of Jesus.

Choose your metaphor: earthquake, blizzard, wilderness. This territory was unknown, and we weren’t likely to find our way any time soon. There was no denying the truth: we needed God desperately.

The Woman Who Broke the Alabaster Jar

Casting about, searching for God’s leading, my eye kept landing on one biblical image: a brazen woman with an alabaster jar full of costly, scented nard in her hands. The story shows up in all four gospels, but God kept drawing me to Mark’s simple, action-packed account: “While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head” (Mark 14:3).

Like most commentators and preachers, I thought I knew the story: here was a woman who loved Jesus and sacrificed something precious in order to witness to that love. The disciples stormed and complained at her for wasting the oil *and* at Jesus for allowing her to approach in the first place. I’ve always been fond of Jesus in this story. Not only did he refuse to shun her, he got sassy with them and

suggested they should be more like her. “Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9).

The more I dwelled with the story, the more shocking it appeared. Can you imagine the scandal, as she walks into a dinner gathering of men hosted by a Pharisee? This woman carries a precious, alabaster-tiled jar of perfumed oil worth a year’s wages. She is the essence of disruption, hijacking their senses of sight, smell, taste, and decency.

Does she offer the jar to the host or to Jesus? Maybe pour some nard into her hand and anoint Jesus? No, she breaks the alabaster jar. In a culture where women are seen but not heard and have so little public agency, she walks in unannounced and uninvited and breaks a jar. The crack and crash must have felt like lightning and thunder. That’s OK. She has every intention of profoundly disrupting and decentering the proceedings. So she takes something precious and breaks it.

Then she pours the nard onto Jesus’s head. It flows down and down, until it drenches his hair, beard, and shoulders. Our sister has no interest in a stingy drip-drip from the jar’s small opening. She wants the healing nard to flow onto Jesus like rivers, like power, and there is only one way to get that kind of free flow. Crack it open.

Already, you can see why the Gospel of Luke assumes she’s a sinner and later scholars painted her as a prostitute. What other type of woman would be wealthy enough to possess a jar of perfumed ointment and bold enough to walk into a room full of men? What kind of woman would initiate such a dramatic and sensuous (in the truest sense of the word) gesture? A woman of means. A woman with her own ideas. A woman to be reckoned with.

While everyone else freaks out, Jesus receives her offering and thanks her for preparing his body for death and burial, and he promises that her extravagant, prodigal tribute will be remembered and retold for generations to come.

What did Jesus notice and admire so much in her? He didn’t see waste. He understood that she was literally giving up the best of what she had—the alabaster jar *and* the nard—because he mattered that

much to her. He was the holy one, the center of her world, and she had reoriented her life around him as her focus.

He must have valued her ability to discern what's important. Some disciples obsessed over the container, but what good is an exquisite jar if the ointment it holds can't get out? Others were anxious about losing the expensive nard, but what good is life-giving ointment if you don't share it with people in their time of need? She broke the jar. She poured out the oil. God blesses her for it.

Finally, I imagine Jesus was relieved to see someone else finally operating outside the bounds of moderation, rationalism, and business-as-usual. He was about to be killed by the powers and principalities of this world. Unlike his other followers, she grasped the urgency of the moment, took a risk, and leapt to meet him in it.

I want to sit at the feet of this sister and tell her about today, about decline, pandemic, reckonings, loss, and disruption. I want to confide in her: "So much has cracked open. *We* have been cracked open. We don't know how to embrace the disruption, make the sacrifice, stop worshiping the beauty of the jar, and instead break it open so the healing substance inside can work its way into a world that so desperately needs it. We're tempted to scramble around and gather the pieces and reassemble the jar and scoop up the lost oil. And we're really terrified we might *be* the jar, broken open by God, for love of the world. Maybe that's what God wants, but it's not what most American church folks signed on for."

How might she respond? In my prayer, I hear her speaking these wise words, calming the storm even as she stirs the waters.

You and your church, you are holding a beautiful jar. You are used to grasping it with both hands, tilting and pouring the contents with moderation through the carefully crafted spout. Someday, you will have to break it open so the contents flow free, or God will do it for you.

You and your church, you think loving a thing means protecting and maintaining it exactly as it was handed to you. Someday,

you will understand what it means to love something enough to let it crack apart and just sit with the pieces, notice what needs to be removed for good, and then faithfully piece together what matters most to make something more whole, something more like what God intended all along. Someday, you will lose your life and gain real life.

Oh child, this could be one of those times.

It's Our Time

What if we are indeed at that point where the most faithful act is to accept the cracked reality of the things we loved most? Maybe you are called to be the one to break it open. Perhaps you and your church are the thing being *broken*, and your life, identity, and understanding of reality are being poured out, all so that God's love might become the true center of your life.

If any of that is true, we're going to need some help and we're going to need each other.

That's where this book comes in. I've spent nearly thirty years studying religion and society, covering religion as a newspaper journalist, developing and editing books for a church publishing house, and serving as an ordained priest at the congregational, diocesan, and now denominational levels. My greatest joy through it all has been listening to people and discovering the connections and movements of God's Spirit in the spaces between us. That's what I've tried to present in this book: collected wisdom, distilled by one whose heart is full of love and who is certain we stand at a historic crossroads. Be warned, this book attempts to share hard stories and challenging questions with tenderness and hope. I'm sure I've failed at times, but I trust nothing separates us from God's amazing grace, even when we've been utterly, irrevocably cracked open.

Where do we even begin such a journey? I suggest we get grounded in this present moment, and that is the task of chapter 1, "The Reality of Disruption and Decline." The contemporary

experience of being decentered, disrupted, and displaced is nothing new for Christianity. As America has grown more multicultural and secular, the so-called “Euro-tribal” *churches* (more on this concept in the next chapter) have fallen to the margins. While that loss of privilege could inspire fear and handwringing, it could also prime us for a dramatic reorientation. Decades of disruption and decline—culminating in the crises of pandemic, economic collapse, and racial reckoning—might be the shove we need to recenter away from empire and onto God and God’s dream.

In chapter 2, “New Hope for Beloved Community,” we together imagine this better world, one where human beings release our grip on safety and prosperity, sacrifice for the sake of each other’s flourishing, share one another’s burdens, and live more like children made in the image of our unselfishly, extravagantly loving God. Think of this chapter as planting your feet, breathing deeply, and getting rooted in the hope for beloved community that Jesus and generations of theologians and prophets hold to this day. Let it be the bright star by which you set your course during the trek that follows.

So chapter 1 maps the overall picture of where we are, and chapter 2 points with initial hope to where we long ultimately to go. After that, you get the “come-to-Jesus” chapters, where we admit just how far America and her dominant Christian communities have wandered from God’s dream.

Chapter 3, “The Origins of the Nightmare,” explores the original sin of self-centeredness, or more precisely what I call “*self-centrism*,” that is, organizing the world so that it rotates around you or your group. We will see how this selfish orientation has metastasized into empire, oppression, and White domination, and how these forces have shaped and contorted America.

In chapter 4, “The Church of Empire,” I narrow the scope to examine my own Episcopal Church, that peculiar child of British Empire and American exceptionalism. Because of our unique history and privilege, we have often functioned as faithful chaplain to empire, upholding a tasteful banner to cover the sins of genocide, slavery,

greed, segregation, and oppression. Every faith community has a story of choosing idols, ego, and sin over God. This is my church's.

Thanks be to God, these failures are neither the whole story nor the end of it. In chapter 5, "Shards of Light," we gather up stories of resistance, those holy moments when the Spirit has moved Episcopalians from self-centrism and privilege to embrace decentering and sacrifice, and to recenter with the persecuted and rejected. If a church like this one can reckon and be converted, there's hope for everyone.

Chapter 6, "Lose Your Life—Kenosis," looks more deeply still at what it takes to allow our hearts and structures to crack open in deep love for God and one another. In particular, we will explore the power of *kenosis*, the dramatic and voluntary pattern of release, non-clinging, and self-giving that marks Jesus's whole life. As his followers, we do not seek primarily to sustain the institutions we've built or the jars we've fashioned. Like the wise woman with the alabaster jar, we seek to triumph over fear and muster the courage to break the jar . . . or let God break and disrupt us.

After the cracking and decentering, do we race back to the center? Do we reassemble the pieces so they resemble the precious original? Or do we choose solidarity and recenter ourselves with Jesus, who so clearly cast his lot with the most vulnerable peoples? That's the topic of chapter 7, "Gain Your Life—Solidarity," which invites Christian communities once identified with the powers of empire and establishment to walk humbly with the oppressed, not only to relieve the suffering of the other, but because salvation and holiness await us all at the margins of empire.

Jesus gave us this dream. He also laid out a path for those who seek to follow him, release our grip on privilege, recenter on God, and live as beloved community. In the final chapter, "Walk in Love—Discipleship," I invite you to adapt the Way of Love, a rule of life Episcopalians and our friends use to walk together in the pattern of Jesus. I've tried to discern practical steps individuals, congregations, and ultimately a whole church can take to break from empire and self-centrism and reorient our lives around God, who is love. It's the

only way I know that the oppressed and the oppressor can together experience freedom and abundant life.

I hope this book inspires more than deeper reflection. My fervent prayer is that you will examine your life and the life of your church, and the systems and assumptions that shape both. I hope you will become less anxious about how you and your community are cracking open, and more curious about how God might remake you as a true community of love. To help with that project, I have provided “*The Church Cracked Open: Reflection & Action Guide*” at www.churchcrackedopen.org (also available at the publisher’s site, www.churchpublishing.org/churchcrackedopen). This free online tool includes even more original sources, reflection questions, and resources for further action. At various points throughout the book, I’ll call out opportunities to use the guide to go deeper.

For now, our wise sister is reaching out, one hand filled with pieces of broken alabaster, the other hand open and gesturing to us. She says it’s time to begin.