

He Is Able – Faith and Freedom

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Psalm 46

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

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Stewardship Dedication, Reformation, 121st Anniversary Sunday

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“The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning.” Job 42:12

“Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Hebrews 7:25

“”Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.” Mark 10:52

Bartimaeus, a poor blind beggar, calls out to Jesus in faith that he will be heard. Jesus responds, calls for him, converses with him, hears this man who longs to see again and trusts Jesus has the power. Immediately at Jesus’ word “Go, your faith has made you well,” the man regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way as a disciple.

All three Scripture lessons today demonstrate the freedom that comes through faith. Both Job and Bartimaeus recover what had been lost, Job his fortune and his family, Bartimaeus his sight, through their faith in this One who is able to save. As the Letter to the Hebrews states, “He is able. He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

I

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day that commemorates the great awakening of faith and freedom that took place in the 16th Century led by people like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox, and Thomas Cranmer among others. For South Highland Presbyterian Church it is our 121st birthday as we come to the end of a very special 120th year-long celebration of “serving with the Passion of Christ.” Significantly this congregation of Reformed and Presbyterian Faith was founded on Reformation Sunday, what some call Halloween, October 31, 1888.

Today as we lift up those great Protestant watchwords “Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide” - “Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone” we have tangible opportunity to express these as we present our pledge commitments for 2010. We can give, as Fred Esleck reminded us last Sunday, speaking about the country farm breakfast of eggs and bacon, like the chicken or like the pig. Like the chicken we can offer a contribution. Like the pig we can offer total commitment. You know which God calls for because you know which God gave.

Today also brings to a climax the year long grand celebration of the 500th anniversary of John Calvin, our great Presbyterian and Reformed leader. It is ironic that so much attention has been focused here and around the world on this scholarly introvert who lived to study and write, and study some more. Who at his request was buried in an

unmarked grave lest attention be turned to him rather than the Lord Jesus Christ whom he trusted in life and in death. This modest man lived at a pivotal turning point in history, as the medieval world was breaking apart, and Western Christendom was left in bewilderment. He was a key shaper of the modern church and society that emerged. “A man of order and peace, Calvin was born into a world of conflict. A conservative by nature, by upbringing, by conviction, his ideas became among the most revolutionary in Europe.”ⁱ

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communistic regime that divided Germany between a free democratic West and a grim tightly controlled totalitarian East. Those of you over twenty doubtless remember that jubilant day, November 9, 1989, when the status quo that seemed unchangeable since the end of World War Two, after Stalin’s forces sealed off Eastern Europe into a closed totalitarian dictatorship, the reality many of us grew up with constant fear of nuclear annihilation between the Communist East and the Democratic West, complete with air raid drills in school, and bomb shelters built in our back yards and basements, all of it evaporated. Overnight the closed grey communist society vanished, through the power of faith and freedom.

In April of 1989, leading up to that November 9 collapse, churches across East Germany began what might be called second Protestant Reformation. A peaceful revolution as thousands gathered for nightly prayer meetings in the few churches that were allowed to remain open, those few that had not either been destroyed or turned into museums, libraries, or warehouses. Traveling in formerly communist Serbia a few years ago with fellow ministers, I visited a massive, majestic Serbian Orthodox Cathedral in the capital city of Belgrade that was still being restored. During the Communist regime, this beautiful Church had been turned into a garage where the city’s buses were parked.

In April of 1989, courageous Christians in East Germany did the unthinkable, the inconceivable; they demanded their God-given right to their faith and their freedom. After special evening prayer services that grew and grew, hundreds, then thousands in Leipzig, Germany at the huge Nikolai Kirche lighted candles and marched through the streets. The crowd filled the town square and grew so large that they stretched all along the ring road around the city, holding their lighted candles. A member of the politburo, Horst Snidermann later said, “We were prepared for everything, but not for candles and prayers.”ⁱⁱ

II

What I want to underline on Reformation Sunday is this: There is a direct line between what happened 20 years ago in Germany and what happened 500 years in Geneva, when John Calvin put pen to paper and voice to pulpit, proclaiming faith and freedom. Calvin loved order, and at first glance, with his penchant for order and obeying the authorities would have been horrified by the chaos of 20 years ago in Germany. Yet

upon further consideration, he would have seen how this demand for faith and freedom was a direct result of the ideas he propounded.

He was born on July 10, 1509 in Noyon, France. As a young student of first philosophy and theology, then law in Paris, Calvin, became part of a band of fellow students in Paris who were reading the tracts of Martin Luther, the German priest and theologian at Wittenberg. The University of Paris had become a hotbed of Reformation ideas, so much so that Calvin and his friends had to flee for their lives when the initially sympathetic King of France decided enough was enough. It seems one night signs were posted around Paris, including on the door of the King's bedchamber ridiculing the Roman Catholic Mass. The King was not amused. He had several suspects arrested, imprisoned and burned at the stake.

Calvin fled to Geneva in 1536. He intended only to spend the night. But William Farel, local leader of the Protestant Movement, knowing of Calvin's growing reputation as a scholar of renown and leader of ability, visited him and told him God would send him straight to Hell unless he stayed in Geneva to lead the Reforming of the Church there as its principal pastor and teacher. Calvin took it as God's will and stayed there until his death 28 years later, with a brief intermission when the Genevans ran him out of town, only to then plead for him to return. This he did in style, like Jacob and his family returning to his long lost son, Joseph, in Egypt.

Calvin became the intellectual engine of the Reformation. If Luther was its heart, Calvin was its brain. He wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, beginning with Romans. He preached two or three times a week in St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva. He organized the Pastors into an early form of our Presbyteries, called "The Company of the Pastors." He wrote worship liturgies that simplified the mass, established congregational singing of the Psalms, set up a participatory system of church government with elders and pastors without bishops or pope. Most significantly, he wrote his life's work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in 1536. Revised 8 times over his lifetime and called the Summa of Reformed Christianity, running 1,521 pages and characterized, he liked to repeat, by brevity and simplicity, the *Institutes* became a comprehensive systematic summary of the Reformed Faith. They said of the *Institutes*, "what began as a tract, became a cathedral."

Calvin's transformation of Geneva was comprehensive as well. Oh, there was plenty in him to find fault with. He could be arrogant. He thought no man his intellectual equal, and on this, he was probably correct. He could be stern and rigid. Most glaringly he permitted the burning of a heretic in Geneva named Servetus. Yet his ideas, arising out of the rediscovery of the Bible and study of it, (he was "the creator of genuine exegesis" and "opened the Scriptures as the Scriptures never had been opened before,)"ⁱⁱⁱ his ideas led to the attempt to establish not only an experientially comprehensive Christian Church, but also an experientially comprehensive Christian Society. His ideas spread rapidly across Europe, west to France and England Scotland and Holland, east to Hungary and Poland, then across the Atlantic to Brazil, then, through dissident Puritans and Pilgrims, and some Anglicans, to the American Colonies. Here Calvin's ideas of

church and civil society under girded and shaped the formation of our American Revolution, and the principles etched in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution. England's King George called the colonial revolution "A Presbyterian Parson's Rebellion."

You see, after Calvin fled France, over time he changed his mind about authority from believing the King was always the ruler anointed by God who must be obeyed. He wrote in his commentary on Daniel, where Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow to king's gods or worship the golden statue, and are thrown into the fiery furnace, he came to believe that "there are occasions when you don't have to obey the king and, in fact, it is your duty, your religious duty, to resist."^{iv} He dedicated that commentary to the persecuted French Huguenots, 100,000 of whom would be slaughtered in 1572 on St. Bartholomew's Day.

Thus, the conservative scholar, with the penchant for order, almost in spite of himself, began a movement that runs straight down through the Boston Tea Party, down through Presbyterian Pastor, President of Princeton, and Signer of the Declaration of Independence John Witherspoon, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and the other signers, through Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to candle carrying, hymn singing Christians in East Germany in 1898. These all decided it is their religious and their patriotic duty to resist authority of Church and State, when that authority is not in accord with God's Higher Authority.

III

Time magazine in a cover article earlier this year on the "Ten Ideas Changing the World Right Now," listed as number three, "the resurgence of a New Calvinism in America." While one might take issue with some of the specifics of the *Time* writer's interpretation of Calvinism, his main point is that in a world filled with chaos, there is a hunger for a Sovereign God who has us under his rule and in his care, who has given "The power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."^v

You see, the linchpin of Reformed Faith, as set forth by Calvin, lies ultimately in the Sovereignty of God. It is this: Because God is so big, so immense, "a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth, as the Westminster Catechism puts it, and because Sovereign, Jesus Christ is Lord, in and over all, we cannot grant ultimate authority to any other, be it Pope, King, Creed or Church Structure. It follows then that Christian faith is a covenant relationship to be lived out daily, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and renewed regularly through worship within a congregation of fellow believers who themselves are not passivists, but activists in governing and up building their community, and activists in their public life.

Calvin's reforms in Geneva can extended far beyond the doors of St. Pierre's and the other churches to include improving the city sanitation system, (I guess he too got involved in sewers) creating the office of Deacon to provide for the poor, many of them hungry homeless refugees, who swarmed upon Geneva in such numbers that three

quarters of the city's population were refugees. He established primary schools, a seminary and a university believing that all the citizens needed to be educated in order to read and understand the Bible. Calvin understood finance, and supported modern business practices like the charging of reasonable interest rates for the use of money. What became known as the Protestant work ethic transformed the Feudal Age and brought in the industrial revolution.

IV

500 years ago John Calvin gave us a pattern for reforming church and society that has literally changed the face of the world. Beginning as a young firebrand, his faith in the immensity of God's sovereign grace changed the Church in Geneva and as far away as Brazil, where he sent missionaries. His concepts of participatory democratic government were built upon, expanded, and came to their political expression 233 years ago in the founding of the United States of America, and 20 years ago in the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

So, now that we have cheered Calvin's legacy, and mentioned a few of his quirks, where do we go from here? Certainly not back to a Church or a Society that looks like, sounds like, dresses like, worships like Geneva in the mid 1500's. Instead, we go about building upon the Lordship of Jesus Christ, under the authority of Holy Scripture, confident of the sovereignty of God, as we offer God our lives afresh.

Calvin's personal crest was a burning heart held in an open hand. His motto was, "My heart I offer as though slain in sacrifice to God."^{vi} He calls us followers to respond to God with "a burning affection", to be 'set on fire' with praise for God, to be "inflamed with desire" for the living and all powerful sovereign God.^{vii} Calvin's thrust, while appreciating the heritage of the Early Church and the tradition of the Church through the ages, was always forward, always on the future not the past. Today we have opportunity to invest in God's work for the future.

A Church following Calvin's pattern is a Church who trusts that Jesus Christ is able. It is a Church focused on the gospel of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ for every person. It is a Church where God is sovereign, and so no secondary leader, church structure or creed can be. It is a Church intent on growing disciples, providing a school of Christian learning from infancy to old age, where children are a priority and all of every age are dynamically growing into the fullness of Christ. It is a church that is biased, as God is biased, toward the poor and hurting, and always seeking ways to reach out with healing and with help. It is a Church that is about changing the world, not withdrawing from it, a church that believes that the world can be made better by the power of the Gospel. It is, let me say, a Church that is "serving with the Passion of Christ." I think I know such a Church. It looks a lot like you.^{viii}

Blind Bartimaeus called out in faith to Jesus and was freed of his blindness. With eyes wide open, faith led him to freedom. Light poured in that showed him the good and the bad, he followed after the Master. And so can we. God be praised!^{ix} Amen.

ⁱ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, p.9.

ⁱⁱ “The Presbyterian Outlook, June 1, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ B. B. Warfield, quoting Diestel, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 9.

^{iv} John M. Buchanan, in a sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, September 20, 2009, “The First (One of the First, At Least) Christian Revolutionary: Religion and Politics.”

^v Romans 1:16.

^{vi} Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, p.117.

^{vii} William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, p.175.

^{viii} I am indebted to John M. Buchanan in his sermon “The First (one of the First, at least) Christian Revolutionary: Religion and Politics for many of the specifics about John Calvin mentioned in this sermon, and their application to the church of today

^{ix} “God be praised” is the concluding statement at the end of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Volume 2, p. 1521.