

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

July 5, 2009
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Commemorating the 500th Anniversary of John Calvin's Birth

A Return to the Table

This coming Friday, July 10, is the 500th birthday of John Calvin. Presbyterian and Reformed churches around the world are marking this occasion in a whole host of ways. Many congregations will be having special worship services this week and next to celebrate this significant milestone. While some churches have been observing this birthday throughout the year of 2009 with a series of events across the months, our congregation begins its celebration today with our morning services. And as was announced earlier, this evening's vesper service at Rockhaven will be the first of a two-part series on the life and work of Calvin, the second part, two weeks from today, on July 19. Then in the fall an adult Sunday School class will focus on Calvin, with our celebrations culminating on Reformation Sunday on October 25.

Calvin himself would be extremely uncomfortable with all this attention and would surely discourage us from making so much hoopla over this. So concerned that he not become the focus of his work, as opposed to the theology that he developed, that he insisted that he be buried in an unmarked grave after he died.

But so influential was Calvin on the course of church history that we simply must mark this special anniversary. John Calvin was born in France and it was there as well as in Switzerland that he made his contribution to the Protestant Reformation. Calvin was only 8 years old when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, and in so doing started the Reformation. So by the time Calvin grew into adulthood the Reformation was well underway.

Emerging from these turbulent times was the Lutheran church, named for Luther. What became known as Reformed churches came into being influenced primarily by John Calvin. And from that Reformed church movement that was taken to the Netherlands came what we know in this country today as the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied under Calvin, took the Reformed theology to Scotland, which eventually made its way to America and is now manifested in the variety of Presbyterian churches in this country, the largest of which is our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

So if you run into neighbors and friends this week who are in other Presbyterian churches or who live in Amsterdam, Churchill and Manhattan, and who are part of the Christian Reformed Church, be sure to wish them a happy Calvin Birthday celebration. They'll be pleased to know that you're in the know! And if they don't know what you're talking about, you can elucidate them!

Much is being written about Calvin this year to help us better understand this forebear, analyzing his theology and measuring his influence on us even today. One such article begins this way.

Admit it. A certain, not necessarily flattering, image comes to mind when you think of John Calvin.

Don't worry. This is pervasive. Thinking about one of the major founders of the Reformed faith, people tend to picture a dour man with a slight stoop and a pointed beard. They think of a minister who never laughed but scolded, abhorred, and preached about the sins of the flesh and of a clergyman who ran about the town of Geneva in self-absorbed hurry, with rarely a kind word or nod to anyone. (Chris Meehan, "John Calvin We Hardly Knew Ye," *The Banner*, Jan. 2009, p. 19)

But this particular article in the Christian Reformed Church's denominational magazine, goes on to debunk these stereotypes and caricatures about this man and presents a picture of someone much more approachable and warm. Perhaps it was Calvin's keen mind and intellect that led to some of these myths about him. You may have heard it said that while Martin Luther was the heart of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin was its mind.

Because there is so much that could be said about Calvin, and because today is not going to be our sole opportunity to ponder him, I want to turn my focus this morning on one particular aspect of Calvin's theology that has had a lasting effect on one particular practice within the Presbyterian church.

This idea came to me as I was thinking about how we might begin our Calvin celebration today, July 5th, a first-Sunday-of-the-month when in this congregation we've chosen to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Now for you regulars, by now you have surely noticed that there is something different about the sanctuary this morning. And even you who are visiting here for the first time may see something that looks a bit odd. I'm referring, of course, to the fact that the furniture has been re-arranged. What serves us as our communion table has been moved up against the wall, beneath the organ pipes. It is in a location where it may be found in many churches to this day. However it would be extremely rare to find a Presbyterian church with this particular placement.

I have moved it into this position as a visual aid to what I'd like to talk about—Calvin's theology or understanding of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This location of the communion table is where it would have been found in the Christian churches of Calvin's time. In the development of the Christian church over the ages, this particular piece of furniture became firmly attached to the back wall of the chancel of church buildings by medieval times. And as it became firmly ensconced there, it became known as the altar.

Now an altar is a structure upon which sacrifices are made. Altars can be found as central features of many religions. Altars are mentioned throughout the Old Testament. And the altar was a central feature of the Jewish Temple. For it was here that the faithful offered to God the first fruits of their labor—whether it be in the form of animals or crops. It was on the altar that these offerings were burned as an act of devotion in which God's favor was being sought. The symbolism is that the fragrant smoke rising from the burnt offering

would rise to heaven where God would smell it and be convinced of the peoples' devotion and commitment to warrant God's continued favor and blessing.

In the development of the worship life of the Christian church through the ages, the regular worship service evolved into what was known as the Mass. And in the Mass itself, the highpoint was the sacrament that uses bread and wine, that was instituted by Jesus at the last supper that he had with his disciples before he was arrested, was sentenced to die and was crucified on the cross. What began as an observance around the meal table shared by disciples of Jesus evolved into what became understood as a re-enactment of the sacrifice that Jesus made for the world when he died on the cross. With this change in understanding, one can begin to understand how what had been a table could come to be understood as an altar—an altar on which the sacrifice of Jesus is remembered as it is dramatized by the priest in the Mass. The placement of the altar at the head of the sanctuary with the priest presiding with his back to the people, would be understood to be offering the sacrifice to God on behalf of the gathered congregation.

Calvin and others in the Reformed movement were very troubled by this change in understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's supper. Perhaps the most critical and therefore central concern was that what had originally been a celebration of what Jesus has done for us, had become a act done by the priest on behalf the people for God. No longer was the sacrament a celebration of God's action in the gift of Jesus. It had become a human action done to please or appease God. The grace of God—the most central of all the Reformation themes—had become obscured in the very sacrament that was intended to reinforce in the people a profound sense of gratitude for God's action in Jesus.

So to clearly communicate this radical change in the understanding of the sacrament—actually a reclaiming or restoring its original meaning—Calvin pulled the altar from the wall. He detached it and changed its placement so that the people could gather around it—just as a family gathers around a meal table to share in a common eating experience. And in the worship setting, no longer would the pastor or minister presiding at the sacrament stand facing away from the people, but rather turn around and stand behind the table to clearly show that we were communing, eating together, as if a family around the dining room table.

Now there is more—much more actually—that could be said, and should be said about Calvin's understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Supper and of the table around which we gather. For one, Calvin wanted the table to look like a table—with legs and an open space underneath that made for seating. He also wanted to visibly show that there was nothing under the table, since another practice that had developed over the ages was for the relics—that is the bones—of saints being reposed inside church altars.

In the coming events around this 500th birthday we will cover more of this in our ongoing featuring of Calvin this year. But for today, in our celebration of this sacramental meal, when we gather around this table, and we eat the bread that has been prepared, and when we drink of the cup that will be shared, we will experience God's amazing, mysterious and profound grace—grace which was so freely given to us by Jesus in his death on the cross, and in the resurrection that left behind the empty cross. This is why we regularly refer to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a celebration. It is not a sad, ominous and mournful occasion when we wonder and ponder whether God will be gracious

to us. Rather it is a celebration of the truth and certainty of the grace that was given once and for all.

John D. Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship has written of Calvin and his protégés, “The Lord’s Supper, they said, is an occasion at which God does something for us, not one in which we do something for God. It is not too strong to say that the heart of the Calvinist Reformation lies in the intentional move from altar to table.”

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And so it is around this table that we will gather shortly for our celebration of God’s grace.

Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20,21)