

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 12, 2009
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ephesians 1:1-14

It's All About Grace

It seems that the summer of 2009 is the season for putting a renewed face on John Calvin. John Calvin, the father of the Reformed tradition, the church leader and theologian, city administrator and pastor of the 16th century, would have been 500 years old last Friday, if he'd lived that long. John Calvin—you know, the man with the pointy face and funny hat and the cold, judgmental theology to match?

It is definitely time to renew Calvin's image. The caricature which has come down to us, which blames Puritan legalism, the excesses of the Protestant work ethic, and the doctrine of double predestination solely on John Calvin is just that, a caricature. John Calvin was a complex man with a brilliant mind who lived in an exceptional time in history, and he rose to the challenge of that exceptional time. And, much to the surprise of those who only know the caricature, at the center of his theology was a heartfelt understanding of the grace of God. Not the judgment of God, as some would assume. John Calvin knew, and taught, that the gospel, that is, the good news of Jesus Christ, is ALL ABOUT GRACE.

Now I wanted to show you that in addition to a sharp mind there was a heart to Calvin, so I found this quotation:

*There is not one blade of grass,
there is no color in this world,
that is not intended to make us rejoice.*

Isn't that beautiful? There's also evidence that Calvin had a sense of humor. Just Google "funny quotes Calvin," and you'll find this:

What's the point of wearing your favorite rocketship underpants if nobody ever asks to see 'em?

(Oh yeah, that's Calvin of Calvin and Hobbes, the 6-yr-old with the tiger friend of the comics!)

Well maybe his sense of humor didn't actually survive in print form, but there are pages and pages of evidence that Calvin understood and was grateful for God's grace. He wrote,

*However many blessings we expect from God,
His infinite liberality will always exceed all our wishes and our thoughts.*

Calvin would not be happy if I stayed focused on his expression of faith, however. He would remind me, "Sola scriptura!" Scripture alone. So with Calvin, we read the opening to the letter to the Ephesians, and hear words which sound like a hymn, singing,

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world
to be holy and blameless before him in love."

We owe everything to God's grace. God's infinite liberality always exceeds all we might ask or expect. The number one question pondered by both Martin Luther and John Calvin was this: *How can a sinful human being come into the presence of a holy God?* (Wm. Stacy Johnson, 2009, *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 23) And the answer which both Reformers reached was the same—we sinful humans can come before God because of the grace of God, which we know in Christ. It is God's choice to see us as holy and blameless. It is God's forgiving nature to look past our wrongs, our imperfections, our rebelliousness. It is God's eternal desire to love us that draws us near to God. God's unmerited favor bestowed upon humanity in Christ is the means by which we are saved. That is the testimony of the New Testament, the starting place of the witness of the apostle Paul (who begins all his letters with "Grace and peace to you") and it is the foundation which the Reformers rediscovered in the 16th century. The gospel of Jesus Christ is ALL ABOUT GRACE.

Calvin observed that the first three chapters of Ephesians were "chiefly occupied in commending the grace of God." The writer of Ephesians, who most scholars today judge was a student of Paul's, tells us that this plan of God wasn't a last-minute decision, a late-in-the-game strategy to recover the ball lost when humans sinned. No, this was God's goal from the beginning. From the foundation of the world. It is, and always was, our DESTINY, to be welcomed and adopted as members of God's family through Jesus Christ. This is God's plan for the fullness of time.

Okay, those of you with sharp ears. You may have heard in these words the doctrine for which Calvin is most famous, or infamous. Did you hear in these words of Ephesians the concept of "predestination?" It's not a popular notion these days. I remember debates about it in high school, when well-meaning social studies teachers attempted to explain the ferment of the Reformation period, and there were absolutely no teenagers I knew who were willing to give up their "free will" and accept predestination. But that high school debate oversimplified the thoughts of the Reformers and the scriptures which were the basis of the more highly developed doctrine. Predestination is not predeterminism. Understood biblically, to be chosen by God is to be given a purpose, a reason for living, a future we can count on because we are part of God's promised plan. To be chosen by God is to be chosen for service, not for elevation. To be elected is a wonderful gift, and says everything about God's grace, not about limitations on our freedom. According to Ephesians, our purpose is to be gathered up with all things in God, and then to lead all things in heaven and on earth in the praise of God's glory. I hear in these verses of Ephesians an expansive view of who it is that God has elected for this purpose. And so on this portion of the doctrine of predestination I part company with John Calvin and join numerous others in the Reformed tradition, including Karl Barth in the 20th century. Double predestination has some biblical justification, but that pales in the light of the cosmic image of God's election in Ephesians. God's choosing is rooted in God's good pleasure, which is peace on earth, goodwill to all. Our destiny in Christ is ALL ABOUT GOD'S GRACE.

Which is revealed to us IN CHRIST. It really doesn't matter much which side of the predestination debate is the winning side. We won't know until the fullness of time, until God's kingdom comes in all its fullness. But in this "not there yet" time, by God's grace we have been given signs of grace to help us have faith and accept God's gift. In this

meantime, we who are “in Christ” are sealed to him, stamped with his sign in our baptism. The waters of baptism are a sign of God’s grace in Christ, a living illustration, a glimpse of God’s love and rule in our lives. For baptism marks us as Christ’s own people. Baptism, like grace, is a gift. We do not deserve it and we cannot earn it. All we can do is receive it.

And this is where faith comes in. Amid all the lavish language of the first chapter of Ephesians, all the praise of God’s glory and the awe at God’s gracious plan, one might wonder whether any human response is necessary at all. What do I do? How do I say thank you for this gift? The answer is that all God really wants is for us to accept the gift. And we do that by faith. Which may be a gift in and of itself!

My friends, sometimes when we listen to scripture it is clear what we are to do and who we are to be in response. Sometimes an action plan is practically spelled out for us, even if it’s an action plan to make an action plan. And indeed, as you read on in Ephesians you will find a call to recognize that in Christ there are no strangers and aliens—so we’d better not live divided from one another. You will hear instructions on how to be the church, how to affirm the diversity of spiritual gifts and live in unity. And you will hear wisdom regarding soundness of doctrine and household orders and putting on the armor of God for facing life in a world that can be hostile to the gospel. But in this opening section, the only imperative for listeners is to join the praise of God’s glory and grace. This is a call to worship, to praise, to wonder. Wow, look what God has done in Christ! Wow, God has done this for us! Wow, God planned this long before we ever were! Wow, we are covered with blessings and sealed by the Spirit, so we are part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world!

Because we are in Christ. May we who are baptized in his name and sealed by the Spirit, witness to God’s grace in our life, now and forever. For it’s ALL ABOUT GRACE.