

Grace and Gratitude

A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 17, 2020
Presbyterian Heritage Sunday @ Friendship Presbyterian Church

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:18-39, NRSV)

Today, in addition to being the 6th of the Easter season, is also Presbyterian Heritage Sunday – a day that has been set aside each year by the General Assembly to celebrate, reflect upon, and learn more about the long and rich history of the Presbyterian movement in America. It falls on

the Sunday closest to May 21, the date of the opening of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1789.

It should be no surprise to most of you that I am naturally drawn to observing such a day. But it's not just because I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Presby (though I am) or because I think Presbyterianism is the "only" or "best" way of being Christian (I most certainly don't). It's because I believe our history and our theological tradition are deeply relevant to our lives today, and so they are worth exploring again.

Of course, the Presbyterian tradition was born out of the Reformed branch of the Protestant Reformation and the seminal thought and career of John Calvin (1509-1564). His ideas have left their mark to this day. They spread from Geneva throughout Europe, but took particular root in the Netherlands; in Hungary; in England, in the form of the Puritans; and most of all, in Scotland, where – under the leadership of John Knox – the Presbyterian Church became its national church. And from these diverse places, so on to the New World. And on to us ... and to me.

His vision of what life is finally about, haunts me to this day, as it has haunted me as long as I can remember. The first choir of any kind I ever heard of – in my home church in Montgomery – was the *Calvin* Ringers. The answers I was given to the great questions of my youngest days concerning God all finally derived from *his* ideas, from his read of scripture, from his faith in a majestic, sovereign God, who has ordered all things to his glory.

After a childhood of good Presbyterian tutelage, I dug deeper as a teenager, when I first started to wrestle with the idea of a call on my life. I wanted to understand what Christian faith was all about, and so I used to run off with my Dad's *Book of Confessions* and read juicy passages from the Westminster Confession. (Granted, I probably needed to get out more!). The Westminster Confession was written in 1646, a hundred years after Calvin, but is widely regarded to this day as the fullest and most faithful confessional statement of Calvinist theology.

With this kind of exposure, I came early to appreciate Calvinism's key, distinctive themes, such as the centrality of scripture ... the Christian life not as a private, personal affair, but as a transformative engagement with the world ... the life of the *mind* as a God-honoring pursuit. In *these* respects, I always felt very at home in the Reformed family and could scarcely imagine being elsewhere.

And then, of course, there was the most important theme of all – the sun around which all the others revolved: the *sovereignty* of God ... that grand vision of a God who has ordered all things and events according to the secret counsel of his own will and for his own glory ... a vision of the Divine in which there are no accidents ... there is no chance or coincidence. For Calvin, even our own human choices, "free" from our own standpoint, have their origin in the foreordaining will of God. It's his vision of God's all-encompassing providence and that famous other "P" word, predestination – which strictly pertains to God's sovereignty in the matter of salvation – it's these for which he is most famous, or perhaps, most *infamous*.

This legacy is a mixed bag. This vision of a holy, sovereign God has been a source of tremendous comfort to generations of Christians, and yet, raises all sorts of questions about human freedom and why terrible things happen and much more. In his own lifetime and beyond, Calvin and his thought have inspired both committed devotion and passionate dissent. I know, because I feel both deep in my soul. Perhaps some of you know what I mean.

To Calvin's credit, he didn't shy away from passages in the Bible which seem to suggest truths about God which are hard to swallow. He was a relentlessly *biblical* theologian who never sought the easy, most comfortable way out. Like the lawyer he was trained to be, he was willing to carry his rigorous logic to its sometime forbidding conclusion.

But I'll be honest: I haven't always been able to follow him there. Since my teens, I have wanted to ride the Calvinist train for as long as I can, but for me, the ride *does* have an end. I've seen too much in my life ... stared into the darkness too many times ... cried with those whose suffering and losses were not deserved in any just arrangement of the world. There are things which happen in the world, to *real* people, that I *can't* somehow pin on God ... and that I'd rather have a *good* God of questionable power than a powerful God of questionable goodness.

Calvin's way of understanding and articulating God's sovereign, providential rule of the world is not one I can follow all the way. But just as I have been haunted, troubled, by Calvin's vision, so also, I have been enchanted by its power to *point* to something so much grander, so much more *majestic*, than even *he* had the power to describe. Perhaps the *reality* of the divine sovereignty, with which Calvin forces us to wrestle, is not something to try to understand in the abstract, to try to grasp on the basis of what sense we can make of what happens, still less as a dogma which can just as easily oppress as comfort.

Remember the story of Job and his friends? Recall how Job's friends came to him, at first, to support him, but as Job insisted that his suffering was undeserved, they turned on him, accusing him of sins that he *must* have committed. Job's friends certainly believed in the sovereignty of God and so, discerned the moral order of the world working itself out through the sufferings Job experienced. *But remember how God would have none of it?!* The revelation of divine glory which humbles Job and silences his defiant questions, is the same which brings to nothing the confident explanations of his God-defending friends.

This revelation of glory is far, far above our capacity to express and yet more intimately close to us than we could imagine. Calvin was enough of a disciple of the Apostle Paul to know that there was more to the mystery, and indeed Paul is the one who gives us the clue: that it is in *Jesus Christ* that this divine glory, at once so incomprehensible and majestic, is revealed – as God *for* us.

In Christ, God's sovereign *rule* is revealed as sovereign *grace* towards *us*: God adopting us as God's own beloved children, for whom the Spirit is continually interceding with sighs too deep for words ... for whom God is working all things together for good! In Christ, we are called

according to God's purpose ... foreknown and, yes, *predestined* to be conformed to the image of Christ himself! And nothing will ever change that, for as Paul puts it in a rhapsodic conclusion,

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, NRSV)

What then are we to say to these things? What is there to express, but the deepest thanks? What is there to do, but praise? Today we celebrate the truth that God's sovereign *rule* is known to us in God's *grace*, and that God's infinite majesty and glory is revealed to us as the majesty and glory of *Love*. And if we can joyfully raise our voices in praise for *that*, then the stern John Calvin would *smile* with satisfaction, and even *he*, laugh in gladness and raise his voice with ours – to the glory of God! Amen.