

Grace and Gratitude

A meditation given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 20, 2022

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? ...

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)

Our hymns series rolls along! Having mined the riches of "Simple Gifts" and "Hyfrydol," this Sunday we dig deep into the Genevan Reformation roots of "Old Hundredth," the tune behind our most familiar form of the Doxology and the hymn *du jour* "All People that on Earth Do Dwell." With its strong connections to our Reformed heritage, it should be no surprise that I am naturally drawn to it. 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 – musically expressed in such a classic tune – 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 influence was incalculable, and his mark on all subsequent Western history undeniable. And this influence and mark are very personal too.

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. (OK, I'll grant you – 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 glory ... a vision of the Divine in which there are no accidents ... there is no chance or coincidence. For Calvin, even our *own* 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 maybe, most *infamous*.

This legacy is a mixed one. His vision of a holy, sovereign God has been a source of tremendous comfort to generations of Christians, and yet, raises all kinds of questions about human freedom and why terrible things happen and much more. In his own lifetime and beyond, Calvin and Calvinism 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.

You see, an all-embracing divine sovereignty has its shadow side too. It's from this space that my own questions arose. What about senseless tragedies? What about the suffering of children ... families ripped apart in Ukraine and elsewhere? Is God pulling all those strings too? Is God finally responsible for it all – the good *and* the bad ... the terrific *and* the horrific? And what does this say about the God we say we believe in? These are questions which stayed with this cradle Presbyterian for a long time.

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 sometimes-forbidding conclusion.

But I haven't always been able to follow him there. Since I was young, 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 ... stared into the darkness too many times ... cried with those whose losses were not deserved in any just arrangement of the world. At the end of the day, 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 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 mystery 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.

Do you remember the book of Job? Recall that Job's friends believe in the sovereignty of God and so, seek to see in Job's sufferings the moral order of the world working itself out through the sufferings Job experienced ... that Job somehow deserved it or that it was God's perfect plan that Job should just accept. *But God himself would have none of it!* The revelation of divine glory which humbles Job and silences his angry questions, is the *same* which *defends* Job's own anger and brings to nothing the confident explanations of his God-defending friends.

This mystery 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 all this, and indeed Paul is the one who gives us the clue: that it is in *Jesus Christ* that this divine sovereignty, 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 his 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, as we work for the justice and love of God in all of life! 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, through scripture, message, prayer, and yes, transcendent music, we celebrate the truth that God's sovereign *rule* is known to us in God's *grace*, and that God's infinite majesty is revealed to us as the majesty 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.