

**TO GLORIFY AND ENJOY GOD FOREVER; PSALM 8; 8-2-09;
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No doubt more than a few of you recognize the title of the sermon as the answer to the last question of the Westminster Catechism. “What is the chief end of humankind?”

It is difficult to believe that such an inspired vision of human purpose came out of one of the great political train wrecks of history – 17th century England when ear-croppings were as commonplace as parking tickets for disrespecting the crown and beheadings the fate of dissenters and finally kings.

It is a vision of human purpose so compelling it has lured generations of candidates for ministry into service of the church and believers ever since to embrace their calling in life with vigor and joy.

The catechism that vision comes from was drafted in the 1640s by the Westminster Assembly and conceived as a theological tall ship for the stormy waters of the time.

The building materials those leaders chose out of which to construct this spiritual ark designed to save society from the political floods and social turmoil of a power hungry king and archbishop came exclusively from John Calvin.

Calvin, you may recall, was, with Luther, the pre-eminent reformer of a church and society breaking free of the dark ages into a new era of light and reason. His 500th anniversary occurred just a few weeks ago and has been celebrated this year with a spate of new research and tributes.

One, from Bruce Gordon, Yale professor of history, refers to Calvin’s theological masterpiece saying, “How this beautifully crafted expression and interpretation of God’s loving power appeared from the hand of a 25 year old exile who had never formally studied theology cannot be adequately explained by historical circumstances.”

It may seem odd, if not ironic to invoke the name of Calvin on a glorious summer day in this beautiful corner of creation called Western New York; or to expect Calvin to have anything relevant or positive at all to say to us in the 21st century.

If he is imagined, he is imagined says Peter Steinfels, *Times* religion writer, “as the implacable snoop who enforced a prudish morality on the citizens of Geneva, a steely spinner of harsh theological doctrines about a depraved humanity and fierce God predestining people to heaven or hell.”

But like many historical figures Calvin is consistently and fundamentally misread. What we remember are the bastardized and distorted condensations of his message rather than its soaring and elegant principles for living.

Calvin was the product of Renaissance humanism, master of the classics, and writer of exceptional grace and clarity in Latin and French. His legacy is traced everywhere from marriage and science to government and capitalism. He stands over the centuries as a towering shaper of the modern world.

In essence, what Calvin did was to refocus God's transforming power and the journey to new life from the cloistered, inner spirituality of the middle ages to a purposeful way of living in the challenge and change of modern times. His vision for such living – and this is where we often misread him – is grounded in a realistic and hard scrutiny of human nature.

Sometimes I wonder how different our modern world is from the time Galileo was under house arrest and William Laud plotted against the Puritans. Yes, the pace and mobility of life, the impact of technology on daily existence, and the volume and speed of information we contend with is new.

But as a species we still act much the way we did when Adam and Eve, against their better judgment, reached for the forbidden fruit. Whether that fruit is power, fortune or fame the daily news is filled with contemporary Adams and Eves grabbing at life in disobedience to the voice of truth within them that cautions and forbids such unrestrained indulgence.

For example, our obsession with Michael Jackson's life of fantasy and opulence over real world responsibility and consequence; 5,000 bank executives who received million dollar bonuses during the recent bailout of their employers; a growing list of baseball heroes who used dope to win World Series championships and boost personal statistics.

Bob Herbert notes that from the 1980s to the present all kinds of restraints were coming off in American society, as if the adults had gone into hiding. The economic panacea of deregulation was applied to the culture as a whole.

Jobs were shipped overseas, staggering debt accumulated as crack cocaine took a chilling toll in many urban neighborhoods. And as young criminals armed themselves with more powerful weapons clothes designers had the audacity to use prison garb to start new fashion trends.

It makes eating an apple look tame but that is what the Eden myth stands for: humans rebelling against values and behavior that leads to their very fulfillment and joy. All of this while few if any asked, "What's wrong with this picture? What's wrong with us?"

But the question should not be confined to the present or the 1640s. It is, as Calvin said, a question for the ages.

This is precisely where he did not mince words and said that humans are simply flawed creatures: broken, self-absorbed, greedy and insidiously impervious to their own self-judgment and criticism. If we are to claim God's gift of clarity of thought, warm and forgiving relationships, and richly rewarding passion in life then Calvin counsels honest self-examination, repentance and surrender to a God who desires our personal allegiance and transformation more than we can imagine. We know that Christianity minus cross and confession fills pews but does not change lives.

Clearly the author of the 8th Psalm has undergone such self-examination, discovered the gift of life and the sovereign of life.

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? You have made them little lower than God, crowned them with glory and honor...how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

I think we go about our lives bumping into this glory and honor; realizing in glimpses our status slightly lower than God but not always connecting the dots back to God.

Summer in Western New York is as fine a time as any to connect the dots of daily living back to God. Partly by slowing down and opening our eyes to the present moment.

But I'm not talking only about a more relaxed schedule or the grandeur of nature when even on a mediocre day if we look we see that the residue of blessing is everywhere. Such things are good in and of themselves. And to the Psalmist's and Calvin's point they are opportunities to connect our lives to the Sovereign of life.

But by itself that knowledge will not inspire our rigorous, even sacrificial obedience to God and unlock the transforming power of God's purpose for our lives.

Calvin and the writer of Psalm 8 suggest we can grasp a deeper knowledge of God. Did you detect his humility and utter surrender when, after acknowledging God's power placing the moon and stars in their courses with his fingers, the Psalmist segues with gratitude from his own blessings – knowing they came from this all powerful Sovereign of life – to awe-struck contemplation of the God who has blessed him?

He then realizes this Creator who has blessed him has done so despite the man's own shortcomings and it raises for him a new sense of wonder about the possibilities of a God-directed life. “*What is man* that thou art mindful, that thou carest, that thou doest not hold his wrongs against him but still extends the blessings of life to him?”

You see the writer has connected not just the beauty of the earth but his very living and breathing, his freedom to choose, the choices he makes and the profound sense of abundance that comes from his best choices.

“What is man?” Humans, the Psalmist and Calvin are trying to tell us, not through metaphysics but through the sounding board of truth in our own hearts, humans are God's beloved, forgiven and incredibly marvelous creations.

What we're talking about this morning is releasing the image of God within us. The image in which we are made. Releasing that image from judgmental guilt; fear and despair; worry and anxiety.

We are talking about tapping into an endless source of renewal from life's toll and our own familiar brokenness. We are talking about a grace that dissolves our fear and melts our hardness of heart so that we can be reshaped. The result is we choose a new life of obedience not to our impulses or fragile egos but the one who gives us life.

In a way it turns Madison Avenue's vision for our lives on its head. Every moment of life is an opportunity not to glorify ourselves, as the advertisers would have it, but an opportunity to glorify God.

I say every moment of life is an opportunity for this kind of holy obedience and joy. Not just summer. Every moment.

Do you find yourself in the grip of anxiety or fear for yourself or a loved one today? Now is the moment to surrender to God. Are you crushed under the despair of a broken dream or relationship? This is the time to let go and let God.

None of us performs that act of holy surrender and obedience perfectly, and if we stumble in one moment, as inevitably we will, the next moment is soon to follow. That is the grace, the new beginning God places before us.

What impresses me about a gathering such as this – precisely when we might say it's summer, time to take a Sunday off – is that each of you decided this morning to be here, to enter this sanctuary, to expose your lives to God's spirit and leading.

That decision, says Calvin, is at the core of a spiritually faithful and disciplined life. Here in the company of others, opening ourselves to God's summons to know and glorify and delight in him forever. Amen.