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“Always Being Reformed”

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July 12, 2009

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1; Ephesians 1:3-14

Gracious God, speak your word to us again today, that hearing, we may believe, and believing, we may follow Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Presbyterian is a denominational brand. It's a part of a heritage, a tradition we call the Reformed Tradition. It represents a variety of faith communities—all different shades of theology and different styles of worship. There are congregations in this country, in Europe; indeed, all around the globe. Many of you know that today there are more Presbyterians in Kenya than there are in the United States. If you seek to understand what it means to be Presbyterian, your reach takes you back to John Calvin, the reformer whose ideas have shaped not only the Presbyterian Church, but the modern world.

There was an advertisement for the soft drink Dr. Pepper that said it was so misunderstood. The same can be said for Calvin. This man, who has been reduced to a set of doctrines, is so much more complex and interesting than the caricatures of him. Last Friday marked his 500th birthday. He was born in France on July 10, 1509. To give you some context, it was the same year that Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel. He died in 1564, the same year that Shakespeare was born. He was a child of the Renaissance. He bridged the Middle Ages with the modern world.

In fifty-three short years, he produced an incredible body of work and opened doors in the church and society that ushered us into the modern world.

I have reproduced a very helpful article by Peter Steinfels that appeared in the *New York Times* last week called ‘Man of Contradictions, Shaper of Modernity. Age? 500 Next Week.’ There are copies available at the doors as you leave, and I invite you to pick them up, because I thought that article described Calvin as a person who shaped church and culture. He was active in the life of the community in Geneva with its political structures, and he was also active in shaping the life of the church until this present day. He was also a character. There was nothing perfect about John Calvin. He had his flaws, he made his mistakes. There’s a story I love about him. One of Calvin’s practices was to preach through books of the Bible. That was back before we had the Common Lectionary. So, at one point, he was preaching his sixteenth sermon on Leviticus. After church, he came home, and he said to his wife, “You know, honey, that was a big crowd in church today, and that was my sixteenth sermon on Leviticus.” She said, “John, it’s Christmas Eve.”

As we gather for worship today, on this week of his 500th birthday, I would like to lift up for you some of the things Calvin did for us. He gave us an expression of God’s presence that continued to influence and enrich us today. He painted for us a picture of God which is enlightening and helpful. Although Calvin would be very upset for me to imply that he painted that picture, he brought that picture to us from the words of Holy Scripture. The text for this Sunday, Ephesians 1:3–14, was a favorite of John Calvin’s because it captured at least three essential elements in the God we worship and serve. Calvin’s major emphasis was to proclaim the glory of God; a God who created Heaven and Earth. We are surrounded by the glory of God, who created a world beautiful beyond our imagining. Science continues to tell us new insights about the created order.

Calvin taught that for humans—“God’s essence is incomprehensible.” In other words, he believed it was impossible for us to comprehend the fullness, the height, and the breadth of God. Listen to what he writes in the Institutes: “Upon God’s individual works, God has engaged unmistakable marks of God’s glory so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folks cannot plead the excuse of innocence.” So there is no excuse for any of us to see the glory of God. But then Calvin goes on to say, “There is no spot in the universe where you cannot discern

at least some sparks of God's glory. However much the glory of God shines forth, scarcely one person in a hundred is a true spectator to it."

I thought about Calvin's enjoyment of the glory of God as it is seen all around us as I looked at the Crape Myrtles when I arrived at church today. I thought about the many ways in which God's glory is present to us, and how often we are blinded to it. I think Calvin's word to us today would be the word from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote to those people in exile, who'd given up on God being present to them, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary, and understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to those who have no power, he increases their strength." (Isaiah 40:2)

Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead* says, "Calvin's theology is compelled and enthralled by an overwhelming awareness of the grandeur of God." Calvin wanted us to see that we live in a world created by a God whose glory is all around us.

So, how do we get it? What opens our eyes to the grandeur and glory of God?

According to Calvin, what Scripture clearly teaches is that the primary guide for us to understand the glory of God, the majesty of God, is seeing in Jesus of Nazareth the awesome God who created this amazing world, as the Letter to the Ephesians put it, "God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing."

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The glory of God is most evident in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What Christ reveals to us is a generous and a gracious God: a God who loves us, and loves the world, and is at work recreating, reforming, and remaking this world in God's image.

Last week in the Sunday *New York Times*, I ran across a book review that got me upset. It was a book called *The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright. The writer says, "The warrior God, the God who slew nations and whose wrath was thrown against people—that God has now grown up. That God has become a kinder, gentler God "as we become more civilized." He went on to argue, "So does our

God.” Now, I’m sure you have heard this portrayal of God before, in which God evolves as we evolve.

Well, brothers and sisters, John Calvin would have none of it, and neither should we. From the very beginning, the God who created light out of darkness, the God who brought human beings into this world, this God is a gracious God: a God who loves us and cares for us.

One of the things that Calvin does in his works is he spends time listening to the cries of God’s people. In his commentary on Habakkuk, over and over again, there is the phrase, “How long, O Lord must we wait for your help? How long will the poor continue to be oppressed?”

Calvin noted that wherever and whenever human beings cry out for justice, a miracle occurs. Our cries become the very cries of God. What a remarkable image!

When we cry out for the suffering of the people next door or in our families, for the people down the street, for the people in Gaza or Iran or Kenya—God cries out with us. Calvin said, “God is known, not doctrines, not even in worship,” although he believed that also; “God is known where humanity is cared for.”

God’s grandeur and sovereignty has been yoked to the suffering of world.

Whenever we reach out in God’s name to offer a hand or to work for justice or to try to create “a more perfect union,” God is crying out with us and working with us.

We worship and serve a gracious God, and it is by grace alone that we have faith. And then in the Institutes, Calvin gives us a great definition of faith:

We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit. (*Institutes of The Christian Religion*, by John Calvin. p.475)

Founded on the truth of the free promises of Christ, that God so loved the world and us, He came and died for us to create a beloved community. That praise is not from John Calvin; it’s from Martin Luther King, but John Lewis said, whenever I use it, as a Christian, I think what Martin meant was a beloved community. The

work to create that community is the work for the Kingdom of God to come on earth.

God, in His grandeur, is recreating a world where all God's children will be respected and loved and cared for.

To praise God's glory, we must live out our redemption. Living a life of faith for Calvin was essential to having faith in God—it was not so much a set of beliefs as important as beliefs were, and no one would write the institutes of the Christian religion without believing that beliefs were important. However, for Calvin, it went beyond beliefs to a way of life, for the way life was shaped in Geneva where he lived, for the way life is shaped in Durham, and in our homes, and in our hearts.

Always being open to being reformed by God's gracious presence: that is the legacy of John Calvin. What we need to recapture and imitate is this reforming spirit. God cannot be captured in a system. God is continually working in the world and in our lives to create people and communities of hope and justice. We are to join God in that enterprise and engage with God in that work together.

“Always Being Reformed” is the spirit of John Calvin. He did not want to create Calvinists, people who just followed his teachings, but people who would do what he did: read scripture, and listen for what God is calling us to do, and be today in this time and in this place, even if it means believing and following God in new ways and in strange places.

It brings us today, as Calvin believed it should every Sunday, to this table. The glory of God is expressed in the presence of Christ whose love for us and the world strengthens us, empowers us, emboldens us, to go out and live for the glory of God. Let it be so among us, as it was, in the life and the ministry of John Calvin. Amen.