

July 5, 2009

## HUMAN CAPACITY

Five days from now, as I alluded to in my children's sermon, the world will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. When I say "the world" I don't mean to suggest that the global population as a whole will very much be aware of this milestone. Billions more will be mourning Michael Jackson than will be remembering John Calvin – though of course the latter has had, and will continue to have, a much more profound impact upon the human community. Some would say that that is spoken like a true Presbyterian. And that would be partly true. But the truth is it was the thought of John Calvin that for the last 475 years has pushed the Christian community – and even the larger spiritual community --to think seriously and deeply about God and who God is. It has been said that history is the record of what man thinks of God so it has been the great giants of the theistic community – Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Augustine, Mohammed, Barth, Gandhi – these giant thinkers have helped to guide the peoples of the world in the way by which we make history. What Hitler thought of God, for example, or what he didn't think of God, led the world down a very certain path. The same could be said about Martin Luther King, Jr. The same could be said about you and me. What

we think of God – governs to a large extent the path of our lives and the ways by which we affect the world.

John Calvin thought a lot about God. He was a sixteenth century Swiss church reformer whose life overlapped the life of Martin Luther – and both of these men, along with a host of others, brought about a great revolution in the Church because they believed that the human view of God was to be seen entirely and exclusively through the lens of Jesus Christ – and that our view of Jesus Christ was to be seen entirely and exclusively through the lens of scripture. Scripture, through the great Reformation, was placed directly into the hands of the people – and it was through Scripture alone – sola scriptura – that God spoke authoritatively about himself. If you want to know about God – John Calvin would say – you must immerse yourself in this book. It's why for Presbyterians the exposition of Scripture – the preaching of Scripture – is the central act of worship and the governing act of the Church. John Knox, a student of Calvin's, took this understanding with him back to Scotland and began the Reformation in Scotland – and it was the Scot Presbyterians who brought these ideas of what we call the Reformed Tradition – over the pond to the colonies and later to places like Sarasota.

Calvin was really the first systematic theologian – and by that I mean that he was the first to say not only did he believe in “the God of the Bible” – lots of people say that. But he spent

much of his time seeking to systematically draw out of scripture what that meant. Who is the God of the Bible? What does the Bible really say about God? Not ... what does this verse or that verse say about God. But what does the whole thing say about God.

One of the glimpses of God that Calvin is most noted for – is a theme that comes out of our text this morning from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 1: 3-14.

On this Independence Day weekend as we celebrate our freedom it would seem an appropriate question to ask: With the freedom we've been given, how far can we go? What is the capacity of a human being? There has probably been no question that has been asked, either consciously or unconsciously, over the past 233 years of our independence and as the modern era has produced amazing inventions of technology and science ... than the question, "How far can human beings go?" How much can human beings do? What do they have the capacity to do? Significant moments in history have pushed this question to the fore. When Henry Ford rolled his first car out of assembly ... the question was ... what more can human beings do? When the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk lifted off the ground and flew for 12 seconds – the question was ... what more can human beings do? When Thomas Edison invented the light bulb – what more can human beings do? When Albert Sabin discovered a vaccine for polio – what more can human beings do? When Neil Armstrong took his first step on the moon – what

more can human beings do? We human beings have great potential, don't we? We have great capacity. But the list continues: when Hitler exterminated 6 million Jews ... what more can human beings do? When Stalin victimized 12 million – what more can human beings do? When the Killing Fields of Pot Pol destroyed 20% of the Cambodian population ... what more can human beings do? When airliners flew into the World Trade Center towers – what can more human beings do? When Bernie Madoff was caught in his Ponzi scheme – what more can human beings do? So the truth is our capacity is extraordinary. It is extraordinarily large and it is extraordinarily small. We can come up with a vaccine for measles and mumps, but not one for the common cold. We can send a man to the moon, but we cannot feed the planet. We can text and twitter, but we cannot keep from killing ourselves in wars. Even watching this whole Michael Jackson thing unfold – what we saw in that far too brief of a life – was the capacity to do extraordinary things on the stage. He was an amazing entertainer. But at the same time a very fragile person.

What are we capable of?

Robert E. Lee when he was riding through the Shenandoah Valley during the throws of the Civil War amidst canon fire and burning plantations and dying soldiers, remembered back to a ride he took through that same valley 20 years before with his wife. He wrote to her and

said: “If anyone had then told me that the next time I travelled that road I would have been on my present errand, I should have supposed him insane ... The valleys so beautiful, the scenery so peaceful. What a glorious world Almighty God has given us. How thankless and ungrateful we are, and how we labor to mar His gifts.”

What potential do we human beings have?

It is one of the questions that John Calvin wrestled with when he began to immerse himself in scripture and what Calvin concluded was that as talented and as brilliant and as capable as human beings can be – the truth of the matter is that fundamentally, deep down – human beings are depraved. He called it total depravity. We are foundationally sinful. We are tainted by the original sin of Adam and Eve. We are broken at the core.

We can't help ourselves but to sin.

My grandfather used to say that if you ever want the best illustration of original sin – put two two year olds in a room with one toy – and you will see before your eyes original sin.

We are depraved.

And because we are depraved, said Calvin, we cannot on our own choose God. We don't have the capacity to choose God. There is enough bad in us ... to make us resist the good in God. It could never be our choice alone to choose God. In fact, said Calvin, the truth is it is not us who choose God, but rather it is God who chooses us. If we have given our lives to Christ – it is only because Christ created in us the desire to do so. Left to our own devices we would have done something different.

In other words ... it was not our good idea the day that we chose to love God. It was God's good idea the day he chose to love us.

It was in the early centuries of the Church that great debate and conflict arose over this matter. A leader by the name of Pelagius put forth the idea that human beings in their freedom have the capacity to choose God – but it was the early church through the voice of Augustine that dove into Scripture and said, “No, it appears that what we humans have the capacity to do

is to strap Jesus on the cross and crucify the Messiah – we do not have the capacity to love God. Only God can put that in us.

So when we read in Ephesians from the apostle Paul that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” That “he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.” That “in Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will ...” Those words take on a whole other measure for us if we agree with Calvin and Scripture that the truth about us human beings is that because of our depravity we have not the capacity to bring ourselves into right relationship with God. There is no amount of good things we can do that get us in God’s good graces. We have to be chosen.

You see the apostle Paul knew this – because when he looked back upon his own life he knew that he did not have the capacity to choose Christ. He was persecuting the church. He was seeing to the execution of Christians. If left to himself he could not choose Christ. But on the road to Damascus – Christ chose him. Knocked him off his horse and chose him.

Do you see how life becomes a very different thing – when you realize that this relationship with God we have ... this capacity that we have to love God ... is not something we could have manufactured on our own. It is something God engendered in us. We were dead to our trespasses, writes Paul, but it was the grace of Christ that awakened us. And when we realize that ... we are humbled ... and we understand that our lives are lived in response to the one who awakened us.

So I look back upon my own life – and I see that I was born into a family of Presbyterian ministers – into a loving home with a great mother and father who took me to church every Sunday and prayed with me when I went to bed. But still it wasn't until I was in college and in a Bible Study led by another student that I finally realized what Christ had done for me. Now I would like to say that I was just smart enough to figure that all out, smart enough to choose God – but it's not the truth. What I have to believe – knowing my own brokenness -- was that in every moment of every day God was choosing me.

And what about you? Do you see the good news that has happened in your story? That despite yourself ... despite your sin and your brokenness and your tendency make life about you – can you see what happened in your own story. That along the way ... from the very beginning ... God was choosing you. God had his eye on you. That even though you may have

given him every good reason not to choose you ... as I have given him every good reason not to choose me ... he has nevertheless made his choice.

Friends, that's the good news we get to celebrate, ironically, on this Independence weekend – that though we were not free to choose God – God was free to choose us.

I love that story that Richard Foster tells about a friend of his who was shopping with his little two-year old son at the mall. The little boy was not in a very good mood and was really being cantankerous. Pouting. Throwing tantrums. Screaming when he did not get what he wanted. Everything the father tried to do wouldn't work. The kid was in the business of making his life miserable. Finally, as a last resort before he seriously considered leaving the child behind at the mall, the father picked up the little boy and held him tightly to his chest and began to sing. He began singing a song he made up along the way. "I love you. I am so glad you are my son. I think you are very special" -- the boy continuing to fuss and scream -- "I like how you laugh. You have beautiful blue eyes. You're the most wonderful boy on the planet!" And on and on the father would go, holding the boy to his chest. And he kept singing and singing. And the boy grew quieter and quieter. When they got to the car and the father buckled his son in the car seat, the little boy said, "Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing your song to me again."

I wonder if your life and mine hasn't been a little bit like that. We've given every reason for God to leave us behind – but God can't. He elects to love us. And by his grace he's enwrapped us and he has sung his song to us. He's chosen us. And he won't let us go ... until we finally say – Sing the song again. Sing the song again.