

## ***Why Do Good?***

---

Luke 18:9-14

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent  
The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ  
October 23, 2016 – Reformation Sunday

### I.

It's Reformation Sunday.

Red is the traditional color for this occasion, so the vestments are read, and so are the paraments.

Halloween this year marks 499 years since an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther registered a protest against the Roman Catholic authorities by nailing a list known as the 95 theses to the door of The Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther's list was important not just for the church.

I was in important moment in the history of western civilization.

The Protestant Reformation helped inaugurate the birth of modern philosophy, literature, politics, and science.

We should probably refer to Reformations, in the plural, because this was a time of multiple reform that began before Luther and continued after him.

And it seems to me that Protestants would do well not to see today as an anti-Roman Catholic day, for Luther's protest was lodged not only against, but initially *within* the Roman Catholic Church.

(After all, protest means positive testimony, or witness.)

The wave of reformations that overtook the 16<sup>th</sup> century included what is called the Counter-Reformation which didn't just resist Protestant Reforms, but which reformed the Catholic church itself.

*This* church, The Community Church of Sebastopol, comes out of the congregational tradition which traces its Reformation roots to John Calvin who, in Geneva, sought to transform society into a spiritual community.

John Calvin is in many minds among the most unpopular of theologians.

To call oneself a "Calvinist," especially in a place like post-religious Sebastopol, is to risk paint oneself as ornery, rule-based and judgmental.

Sitting in a local coffee shop full of modern hipsters, I felt self-conscious pulling out my copy of Calvin's "The Institutes of the Christian Religion." Several ideas contained in that work, including the "predestination of the elect" are among the most despised of Christian doctrines.

But as so often happens, what begins as dislike ends in ignorance.

In other words, a lot of people criticize what they don't understand, dismiss texts they've never read, ignore ideas they haven't seriously considered.

As the Reformation-era theologian Bonaventure wrote: "The teachings of the Christian church are like stained glass windows. Their full beauty can only be seen from within the church."

Can we be open-minded enough to explore what Calvin might have been trying to say, assuming he might not have intended all the conclusions at which we've arrived?

Might we even find some beauty there?

## II.

I owe several of my reflections in this sermon to a talk given by my friend and fellow student at Harvard Divinity School, Rev. Matthew Myer Boulton, who now serves as President of the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

According to Matt, we would do better to view John Calvin first and foremost as a pastor rather than as an academic, and to read Calvin's theology through the lens of his pastoral concerns.

For example, the doctrine of predestination. (Yes, we're going there.)

The word itself, predestination, is redundant, isn't it?

For something to be destined is the same thing as being pre-destined.

According to the doctrine of predestination, God in God's own power, wisdom, and love has already destined the salvation of people.

The eternal destination of every soul has already been determined, even before time began.

This doctrine offends our modern sensibilities on several levels.

First, it seems to take away any value from human effort, ingenuity, and initiative.

Even acts of great kindness and compassion have no bearing because whether you do them makes no difference for you – your ultimate destination has already been settled.

In other words, Calvin's doctrine is contrary to the western notion of the autonomous individual who chooses her or his own destiny and works out his or her own salvation.

This doctrine is also offensive because it seems just plain mean, if not dastardly and violent.

The God of predestination seems petty, vindictive, and unmerciful.

A God who predetermines an elect few for salvation seems like a stingy God indeed, and one not worth believing in.

Finally, this doctrine is the polar opposite of the modern theology du jour known as process theology which holds that all of creation, including God, is in process, evolving over time, and therefore not eternal.

But what if these lines of thinking are beside Calvin's point entirely.

Calvin did not invent the idea of predestination, but when he explored it, he did so less from a metaphysical point of view and more from a pastoral point of view.

The primary question he was trying to answer was "Why Do Good?"

If I am in charge of my own destiny, then I will do good in order to earn from God my own salvation.

Or maybe less cosmic than that, I will do good to secure others' esteem of me.

I might think that if I do enough good things, I will build up enough merit with God, and enough esteem in the eyes of others, that I will conclude for myself that I am good, and will assure myself of my own salvation, either in heaven or in the minds and memories of others.

For Calvin, these lines of thinking spelled death, death to the individual, death to communities, and death to civilization.

If our self-worth and our salvation are things we determine, then we are giving to ourselves the glory that belongs to God alone.

If being good is determined by *our* choosing to do good, we are all in very big trouble because humans are notorious for calling things "good" that are in fact harmful, and for blocking out the unseemly aspects of our own existence.

Calvin offers another answer to the question "Why Do Good?":

Because God is good, and because everything you have and are came from God.

We want to take the credit for our good acts, but every action is predicated upon a prior gift of God.

Nothing you do can be credited to your own autonomous initiative, but to God who created you, provided for you, cared for you, and loved you, from before time and for time immemorial.

As my friend, Matt, puts it, "Seen in this light, a disciple's entire life may be recast not as an act of achieving and acquiring over against God, but rather as a hospitable act of receiving from God, responding with God, and so living in God."

### III.

We can read today's Gospel through this same lens.

The Gospel writer Luke lets us know that Jesus told a parable to some who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous *and* regarded others with contempt. "

That word "and" is very important – it people who think that they are in the right *and*, believing themselves to be in the right, are contemptuous of others.

Calvin says that the inner assurance that one is held in God's loving embrace should not express itself in a judgment toward others.

In fact, the presence of judgment negates the assurance.

I remember a friend in college who identified herself as a Christian. One day she told me that I was an existentialist and that she would pray for my soul. I imagine her prayer to be like that of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable: "God, I thank you that I am saved and not lost like this existentialist; Christian and not pagan like this environmentalist; Enlightened and not deluded like this feminist; a literalist and not going to hell like this relativist." Despite Jesus' warnings, many strong Christian believers think and pray this way. It may surprise you that Calvin resists this way of thinking and praying. He encourages his Geneva congregation to enjoy the assurance of their destiny in God, and he warns them to assume that same destiny for others.

The writer Kathleen Norris, struggling with the doctrine of predestination, says what she *does* like about it: "It means that anyone might be saved – the drug addict, the terrorist, the politician – not just the people that I find acceptable."

In Jesus' parable, it is the tax collector whose prayer is justified. Despised by the general public, tax collectors were thought of as colluders with the Romans and swindlers of the poor. The tax collector in Jesus' parable can't even bring himself to look up to God, beats his breast, and prays only for mercy. He has done evil and he knows it. He points the finger at no one but himself and his prayer depends upon no one else but God alone. The Pharisee, on the other hand, depends not upon God, but upon being seen as better than others. One of these prayers, Jesus says, is justified, and the other is not. And then Jesus repeats a familiar theme of the Gospel: Better to humble yourself and be exalted than to exalt yourself and be humbled.

#### IV.

I'm not sure I've convinced you that the doctrine of predestination is worth another look. I doubt many of you will bring it up at your next dinner party. Perhaps there are better ways to talk about these ideas than to dredge up a centuries-old dour doctrine. Besides, you might argue, doesn't Calvin say that only a small remnant of people is destined for salvation, and the vast majority for perdition? He does, but we can disagree with him on that point, even on Calvin's own logic. He is the one who says we really don't ultimately know.

God is a mystery and God's ways are a mystery and humans will never penetrate that mystery, not even Calvin himself.

So, if we can't know, then we don't know whether there really is anyone who is not saved.

Of course, we also can't know if everyone is saved, but we should pray for it nonetheless,

pray for the salvation of all people, of all sentient beings,  
pray for the salvation of the earth itself.

Why pray like that?

Because look at this life we've been given. Look at it. It's amazing.

And yet we mope around like the outcome of the election is what determines our salvation. No!

Our salvation and the salvation of all belongs to God and God alone.

Look at the abundance of gifts. Look at the earth.

Look at the relationships in your life that you cherish.

Look at the communities that sustain you, your congregation.

Look at your clothes, the place you live, the food you eat.

Look at the blessings, the benefits, the opportunities even the challenges.

All of it is gift,

a gift you did not create,

nor earn,

nor deserve any more than any other person.

While there is much in this life that God, in God's wisdom and mercy and grace, allows you to do, none of it will buy your salvation, none of it will move you one inch closer to communion with God.

That gift of salvation was already given before you were born,

a gift expressed in and through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It is the gift that illuminates all the other gifts in your life,

in our common life as the church,

and in the life of the world,

the world which God so loved and through Christ came to save,

a world destined to receive God's goodness and mercy.

Amen.