

“Celebrating Calvin” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
(with thanks to Rev. John Buchanan for his sermon series on Calvin, 2009)  
October 25, 2009 Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

Text: Mark 10:46-52 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

From John Calvin:

A true church exists when the Word of God is rightly preached  
and the sacraments rightly administered.

The Word of God is not to teach us to prattle, not to make us eloquent and subtle, but to reform our lives.

*Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your lively presence, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

WHY a sermon about John Calvin?

Well, for starters, today is Reformation Sunday, a day to honor our heritage. We owe far more to the Reformed Tradition, and to our theological ancestor, John Calvin, than we realize— And since this year marks the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth, and since our summer survey results indicate that few of us know much about the Reformed Tradition or Calvin himself, and since John Calvin is one of the most important personalities and thinkers standing between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, it seems appropriate to start with Calvin!

He was a brilliant man. One of his biographers says Calvin felt as if he had never met his intellectual equal and was probably right. His thinking and writing have profoundly influenced the way Western civilization has come to think about human rights, and the basic political idea that human beings are created free and responsible for their own destinies. Political scientists acknowledge the direct philosophic line from John Calvin on political liberty to the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution.

He was also stubborn, opinionated, sometimes arrogant, and when challenged, capable of passionate conflict with opponents, conflict bordering on hatred. He was, in fact, complicit in the death at the stake of Spanish reformer Michael Servinus (whose theology we would today call Unitarian); and he was expelled from Geneva for several years because of over-zealous meddling in local politics. He has a deserved reputation for grim, rigid piety. But he also enjoyed wine, music, and well-appointed women and lived with a long list of devastating physical ailments characteristic of his age.

But mostly, he loved God. On the edge of the Renaissance, he was excited about the world of learning that was not found in tired old authorities of inherited ecclesiastical doctrine. He sought and expected a fresh word from God, founded not on what institutions like the church declared to be true, but on what we could discern of God's word in Scripture.

He asked, as did Bartimaeus in the Gospel story, "Rabbi I want to see." He opened his eyes and just as Bartimaeus, he followed that call of Jesus Christ. Because Calvin looked for the surprise in God's word, he wasn't wedded to the established ways of interpreting the faith. He rejected the notion that any of us had the truth of God neatly wrapped up in his or her back pocket.

And he had a vision for a new church – not a church like Luther's, which was established in protest; not a church that stood against something, but a church that moved toward something; a church for the people, a church governed by its own members and pastors; a church with no hierarchy, no bishops; an educated ministry charged with conveying and teaching an intellectually viable gospel; a laity that is literate, invited to bring their minds as well as hearts to worship, and that fully participates in the life and worship of their church.

"Rabbi, I want to see." And Jesus answered, "Your faith has made you whole."

Born in Noyon, France, John Calvin attended the University of Paris to study theology, changed his mind and moved to Orleans to study law. He was first and foremost a classical humanist -- but he was also attracted to the reforming ideas coming from Germany, especially the writings of Martin Luther.

When those ideas fell out of favor with the king of France – there was an unfortunate incident where placards making fun of the Catholic mass made their way to the king's very own bedroom doorknob -- scholars and reform-minded clergy began to be persecuted and killed -- Calvin fled. He ended up in Geneva, Switzerland. Now, Geneva, by act of its city council, had recently decided to side with the Reformation. Roman Catholic churches became Reformed-Protestant churches overnight. The several hundred priests attached to Geneva's seven parish churches, including the huge Cathedral of St. Pierre in the old city, were invited to become Protestant ministers or leave. Most left. The church was leaderless. When officials learned that a brilliant Reformed scholar and lawyer was in the city, a refugee, they invited him to stay and to create a new, Reformed church.

"You can almost hear the stirring: "Rabbi. I want to see." Geneva's offer was one Calvin could not resist. He spent the rest of his life studying, lecturing, writing, and inventing a new organizational model of the church, one based not on the authority of the hierarchy but on the God-given rights to the individual.

Along the way he wrote a scholarly, masterful, and prodigious exposition of Christianity called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as well as extensive biblical commentaries, letters, sermons, notebooks. Book publishers loved Calvin because he wrote so much that everyone wanted to read.

Bartimaeus has the roots of a good Calvinist. Calvin believed:

- That Jesus Christ is Lord of all—individuals and communities and social arrangements— so Christian life is to be lived not merely inside the church or in the safety of the monastery but in the city streets and marketplaces and courtrooms. Spirituality, for Calvin, was worldly and had public and political implications. Bartimaeus dared to approach Jesus when those around hushed him. He did not wait for a perfect Temple moment.
- That those in authority are accountable to the people and that people have the God-given right to choose those who will have authority, Bartimaeus recognized and gave his trust to Jesus, and Jesus was accountable to that faith.
- That a society, a city, a nation can be good and that its goodness is always measured by the way it supports and extends a helping hand to its poorest, most vulnerable. Bartimaeus was among the most vulnerable.

For Calvin, the poorest and most vulnerable were the literally thousands of refugees fleeing religious persecution in France, Scotland, Holland, Poland—all over Europe—who came to Geneva as a refuge of freedom and compassion. Calvin established the office of deacon in the church for the express purpose of helping the hungry, homeless refugees and created a civic fund to provide loans to help people get back on their feet.

That single idea has timeless importance: a society is good to the degree that it cares for its own poor, an idea that surfaces again and again in our own society. I don't think Calvin would favor one health care reform bill over another, Republican or Democratic. But I am certain that the availability of adequate health care for every American, as a right not a privilege for those who can afford it, would be a priority for him.

What does a Calvinist church look like in 2009, 500 years later? The popular stereotype would be a group of rigid, moralistic, unbending, humorless pietists. Calvinists have been that, to be sure. But a true church of John Calvin would be—

- A church where the gospel of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ is regularly proclaimed and celebrated.
- A church where the sovereignty of God is so revered that no creed or church structure, no individual, is granted absolute ultimate authority. That because we are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ, we are free from religious legalism to live responsible lives in the world. Calvin strengthened Luther's revolutionary idea that we don't earn God's favor by doing good things: we have God's favor and do good out of our profound and joyful gratitude.
- A church where Scripture is taken seriously but none of us has the full understanding of God's word. Calvin once speculated, "Doubtless God wanted to keep us all humble and in communications. So we should recognize that we need one another, and we should seek to make responsible progress in understanding God's word, while recognizing that we will never perfectly agree."
- A church where every individual is welcomed and affirmed as a child of God, loved by God with an everlasting love; a church where no one is excluded; a

- church where the children are a priority, nurtured and taught and valued and loved,
- A church that advocates in the world for the poor and that in its own life lives thoroughly in the world, extends a helping, healing hand in the name of Jesus Christ to everyone and anyone who is hungry, cold, alone, frightened, anyone who is in need.

Above all, Calvin would say, concentrate on God through Jesus Christ. “All my living, teaching, preaching and care was to glorify God the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.”

I’m not neutral about this—I am firmly in the Reformed Tradition, and the Presbyterian interpretation of that tradition. And I don’t think you are neutral about this either. I think I can see in this congregation a faithful church in the tradition of John Calvin. Isn’t nice to know where it comes from?