



“Where Calvin Got It Right”

Text: Acts 14L8-18

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One of the things I have discovered over my 33 years of ordained ministry is that when someone finds out that I am a Presbyterian minister, I am too often called upon to defend John Calvin. Now, if you're new to the Presbyterian tradition, John Calvin was a French-born, Roman Catholic, classically trained lawyer, who fell under the influence of the Reformation that was sweeping across Europe. In 1536, he published his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and was off and running as the mind, if not the father, of the Reformed branch of Protestant Christianity.

When most people hear the name “John Calvin” what do you suppose comes to mind? Predestination. Everyone thinks they know what Calvin had to say about predestination, which is funny, because - ultimately - Calvin wasn't all that sure what he had to say about predestination. Calvin believed that God chose who would be saved. But then, that seemed to imply that God chose who wouldn't be saved. That became the argument for “double predestination.” But it doesn't make much sense. What Calvin did get right is that we aren't in charge of deciding. God invites us into relationship with God. God makes the first move. God makes the first choice. God opens the door. How we answer, whether we answer, whether we walk through the door is up to us. Our life of faith is a response to God's invitation. That's where Calvin got it right.

Still, in all honesty, as important as that idea is, there is another of Calvin's ideas that is even more important. It is the idea that this sermon is all about.

In our story from the Acts of the Apostles, we are told of the time when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra and healed a man who had been lame from birth. When the man stood up and began to walk around, the people of Lystra cried out, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" The priest of the Greek temple brought oxen and garlands of flowers to offer sacrifice to and to worship Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas responded by tearing their clothes - a sign of mourning in ancient and modern Judaism - and strongly told the people: "We are mortals just like you, and we bring you the good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who make the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."

The people of Lystra - not unlike the people of here-and-now - experienced something wondrous and responded by attempting to make gods out of something far less than God. It was a reminder of what we are commanded in the second commandment"

You shall not make for yourself an idol
whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above
or that is on the earth beneath,
or than is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Following the miraculous healing of the lame man, the people were heralding Paul and Barnabas as gods and ready to offer them sacrifice and worship. The people were ready to elevate the apostles to divine status.

In case you haven't noticed, that is a tradition that continues to this day. Whenever we see someone - another human being, not all that different from us - achieve something we think amazing, even miraculous, we begin our idol worship. It may be a political figure from any party, it may be a business giant, it may be a sports legend, it may be someone who carries the title "celebrity" - it really doesn't matter - we exalt them to dizzying heights and are prepared to bring garlands and kill the fatted calf. This isn't just admiration. This goes way beyond admiration. It grows until we find ourselves defending the defenseless, overlooking heinous improprieties, condoning immoral practice, and justifying whatever these demigods do under the rubric of "that's just the way it is."

The late Professor John Leith reminded us:

The Reformed polemic against idolatry prevents human endeavors from overreaching themselves, claiming too much for themselves, and this destroying themselves. Only God is great enough to answer to [our] highest and total loyalty without destroying the truly human. Every lesser loyalty when made absolute is abortive and destructive.¹

The exaltation of another human being to god-like status is not only an abrogation of the second commandment against idolatry, it is a direct contravention of the first commandment:

I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery:
you shall have no other gods before me. (Ex. 20:2-3)

This is where Calvin got it right. Idolatry - especially when it comes to idolizing another human being - is deadly to the soul. It robs God of the place that only God should have in our lives. And it too often leads us away from the way of God and onto paths that lead to destruction.

What Calvin also got right - and one of the brilliant insights he continues to offer - is how very easily we can take anything and make it an idol. He reminds us that we all too quickly give the position and standing which should be God's alone to all manner of things that are less than God. Calvin instructs us that we will look to things that are less than God for meaning and significance in our lives. We will trade the role of our connection to God for relationships with lesser things that we hope will bring us happiness and contentment.

These are not necessarily "negative" things. The tricky thing about idolatry is that you can make an idol out of something quite good and noble. Some of our most widely accepted idols are exceptionally good and well-intentioned.

What was the subject most addressed by Jesus? Prayer? Reading the scriptures? Keeping the Sabbath? Nope. The thing Jesus most talked about with people was money and possessions. Hands down. No fear of contradiction.

Why? Because Jesus knew, in an economy far simpler than our own, just how easy it is to misuse money and mistake money for the principle goal in life. Jesus knew that money and possessions can easily become sources of social injustice and used in ways that are destructive to the common good. Jesus understood that money and possessions are seductions that can lead to idolatry. Jesus realized that to look to money and possessions for joy and comfort was to settle for a pale and puny imitation of the joy and comfort that comes from a life spent in loving and serving God and neighbor. When money and possessions take the place of God for providing meaning and significance in life, we are flirting with idolatry.

While I'm meddling, let's think about food for a minute. Now, I've got some expertise in this area as you can plainly see. Food is a good thing. We need it to survive. But, sometimes, food moves beyond necessity and becomes obsession. We look to food to provide meaning and significance in our lives. We spend time thinking about food, planning where we will go to eat, musing on what we will prepare, making multiple trips to multiple stores to procure the provisions. We spend money - lots of money - on food we eat and even more on food we throw away. Food quickly becomes a controlling force in our lives and we spend more time and money on food than on serving God and neighbor. And before you know it, food becomes an idol - a little demigod - that we worship and serve.

Want one more? Probably not, but here it comes. Let's think about technology for a moment. There's absolutely nothing wrong with technology. It is astounding what we have available for us today that saves us time, opens doors to information, enables us to make connections across several platforms. We have more computing capacity, we are told, in a simple calculator than NASA had when they landed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon on July 20, 1969 - almost fifty years ago. But with the proliferation of technology and its devices, we see people more attached to screens than reality. We placate children by giving them something with a screen. We arm our teens with smart phones, which do not necessarily produce smarter teens. We see adults glued to their screens. The worst offense is when adults use their phones like walkie-talkies, with the audio on speaker, allowing us to fully participate in their calls. Take any of those technological tools away from any of those people - children through adults - and watch what happens. They will have something equivalent to the D.T.s. Technology, while perfectly good, becomes a source for meaning and significance in our lives. It becomes a replacement for time spent in serving God and neighbor.

This is where Calvin got it right. We can take just about anything and turn it into an idol - into the governing force of our lives. We can take just about anything and imbue it with the power and place in our lives that is rightfully God's alone. We can take things that are good and necessary and allow them to guide and direct our lives, instead of living in sync with God.

The good news is that we can recognize when it is happening, and we can change our behavior and practice. The good news is that God forgives and provides us with strength and ability to reorganize and restructure our lives and practices to get back to the right priorities in life. The good news is that we can enjoy the life God meant us to have.

When it comes to the whole pre-destination thing, I think Calvin sort of blew it. Where he got it right was that God reaches out to us and invites us to the life God intended for us to have.

When it comes to this whole business of idolatry - of our ability to allow things other than God to become the source for meaning and significance in our lives - he nailed it right on the head.

Keep your eyes open this week to where those traps may be for you. Keep a look out for those things that you are serving that are not God. Watch for those things that are controlling your life that are not from God.

And then, reprioritize life to be what God has in mind in the first place. Put God back at the top and everything else will find its place.

For now and evermore. Amen.