

“GOOD FOR THE SOUL”

a sermon on Joel 2:23-32, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

Before the Prayer of Confession:

As you may have surmised by my choice for the opening hymn . . . the one hymn in our hymnal attributed to John Calvin, and a text that most certainly captures the essence of how he viewed of the state of humanity and the work of Jesus Christ . . . we are starting our observance of Reformation Day a week early, primarily because the Gospel lesson for the day just naturally *took* me there.

John Calvin’s worship services began with a simple declaration of God’s glory and our frailty, with the words, “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Those words were then followed immediately by a call to “public confession,” by saying “My brethren, let each of you present himself before the face of the Lord, and confess his faults and sins,” and the words of our printed prayer are an exact translation of the prayer that then followed (let us pray together):

Declaration of Pardon (Absolution)

And then, following “some word of Scripture to console the conscience,” Calvin would boldly state:

“Let each of you truly acknowledge that he is a sinner, humbling himself before God, and believe that the heavenly Father wills to be gracious unto him in Jesus Christ. To all those that repent in this wise, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation, I declare that the absolution of sins is effected, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Sermon

So as I said, we are *beginning* our consideration of the Reformation this morning. Reformation Sunday is officially the Sunday closest to October 31st, which is *next* Sunday. And so next week, we’ll deal with the Reformation and its effects more generally and broadly.

But *this* week, where the assigned text is Jesus’ parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector (or in older translations the “Publican”), I want to focus on

just one matter that was of great importance to the French and Swiss Reformers in particular, who were the founders of what became the “Reformed” branch of the Reformation, of which Presbyterianism is a part, and that is *confession*.

To this day, in case you haven’t noticed, Presbyterian and other Reformed Churches are much more insistent about, and faithful in including in worship services, a clear, distinct, and forceful prayer of “corporate confession” at or close to the beginning of our worship services, and *also* at following that prayer with a bold and definite “declaration” of forgiveness – or “absolution” as both Martin Bucer and John Calvin referred to it.

And before I leave that thought. Martin Bucer was originally a Dominican priest, but after he came under the influence of Martin Luther, he had his Dominican vows annulled. He became the lead pastor in Strasbourg – a city then part of Switzerland, which is why we “claim” him in the Reformed church (along with the fact that he was Calvin’s mentor and collaborator on worship reform). But Bucer – and Strasbourg itself – also had strong ties to Germany. And so he is also claimed by many German Lutherans as one of *their* early Reformers as well. And not only that, but late in his life, when Strasbourg once again became Roman Catholic, Bucer was exiled to *England*, where he was recruited by Thomas Cranmer and became a major contributor to the second revision of the Church of England’s *Book of Common Prayer* – so he is *also* widely known and respected in Episcopal Church history.

Now here’s the point. In the Roman Catholic Church of pre-Reformation days, *confession* was also a big deal. But it was all tied into the “authority” of the clergy, who were believed to hold, by virtue of their ordination, the “keys of the kingdom.” In other words, that by *their* words of absolution to a “penitent,” forgiveness was “effected” – or for that matter, *withheld*. And that made the priests very *powerful* people indeed.

And the church required individuals to make confessions to their priests *in private*, who then assigned them acts of piety or charity to perform in “satisfaction” of the sins, in return for which the priests then “absolved” the “penitents.”

Doing away with that system was one of the *major* reforms instituted by nearly all of the Reformation Churches, but again, most *directly* addressed by Calvin and the other French and Swiss Reformers.

In addition to the inordinate power it vested in the clergy, in Calvin’s mind, that practice led to – essentially – the view of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, the

understanding that “righteousness” and therefore “justification” before God were just matters of just *doing* certain things a certain way.

For Calvin, that wasn’t the point at all. Confession and repentance, as he saw them, were matters of a fundamental awareness of our *unworthiness*, and our utter reliance on God’s grace – undeserved, unearned, and completely beyond our own ability to effect.

Here is what Calvin wrote in his major theological work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

“For since in every sacred assembly we stand before the sight of God and the angels, what other beginning of our action will there be than the recognition of our own unworthiness?”

And so to this day, that is how we Presbyterians begin worship – by entering into God’s presence, in the first place, with acts of praise and adoration – generally, with the singing of a grand hymn, and with other acts and symbols that point to or remind us of the throne of God. Once there, however, we *immediately* take notice of “our own unworthiness” to be participants in that glorious scene.

And while Calvin believed that the “power of the keys” was being abused in the Roman Church of his day, he did accept that such authority *existed*. Jesus did, after all, declare to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19).

So Calvin went on to say, “For when the whole church stands, as it were, before God’s judgment seat, confesses itself guilty, and has its sole refuge in God’s mercy, it is no common or light solace to have present there the ambassador of Christ, armed with the mandate of reconciliation, by whom it hears proclaimed its absolution. Here the usefulness of the keys is deservedly commended, when this embassy is carried out justly, in due order, and in reverence.”

So what, in the Roman Catholic Church of that time, were acts reserved to *private* confession and absolution before a priest, became in the Reformed Church completely *communal* acts. And although many of the abuses of that Catholic Church were later addressed in its own internal reforms, it *remains* the case to this day that these opening acts of confession and pardon *change* and therefore *define* the nature of worship in our tradition.

I said in my sermon last week that our understanding that we are living (on the one hand) in the time of the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of

restoration, and yet (on the other hand) in the time of the “not yet,” when that fulfillment is not complete, directs “how we Presbyterians are ‘ordered’ as a Church – how we *worship*, how we are *governed*, our emphasis on education, and social outreach, and all the rest of what we *do* as the Church of Jesus Christ.”

Well, with respect to *worship*, this is what it comes down to. In our tradition, distinctively, everything that *follows* our opening acts of repentance, through confession, and absolution, declared in the name of Jesus Christ, the *rest* of the worship service, in other words, is therefore in grateful *response* to God’s mercy. In *gratitude*, we pray for the Spirit to speak to us in the reading and preaching of the Word. Even the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, for us, is not the “re-enactment” of the Sacrifice of Christ by which we are “forgiven anew,” but rather an act of faith that in its own way *increases* faith and, as Calvin said, literally makes us “partakers of the death and passion of Jesus Christ” that was accomplished, now, two thousand years ago on our behalf (*Treatise on the Lord’s Supper, Section II, ¶1*).

I would be remiss to not also point out that worship in our tradition is therefore patterned on the Biblical accounts of the prophets “encountering and responding to God,” *rather* than on the Biblical accounts of Israel’s temple worship – which was focused on ritual sacrifice to restore the people’s relationship with God. That, we believe, has now been *fulfilled* in Jesus Christ. And so now we have the opportunity, as ones who have been redeemed, and whose sins have been “absolved,” to hear God’s voice as calling and guidance.

Specifically, the story of Isaiah’s “call” into ministry recorded in Isaiah 6 is instructive. In that narrative, the prophet reports first that he was “high and lifted up” into God’s presence, but that once there, he cried out, “woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a *people* of unclean lips,” whereupon an angel touched his mouth with a burning coal and proclaimed, “behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.” Only then did Isaiah hear God’s voice, receive God’s Word, and go forth in God’s service.

That, in brief, is the outline of a Presbyterian worship service, totally in keeping with Calvin’s teaching, and completely affirmed, it seems to me, in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Worship, for us, isn’t about a “process” the following of which justifies us in God’s eyes. It is about the *recognition* of our complete and utter need for and reliance upon God’s mercy and grace, the *awareness* of which, coupled with the clear *declaration* that God’s mercy and grace have made us clean in God’s sight

even though totally underserved, opens our eyes to the eternal, enables us to truly *hear* God's Word, and respond to God's call to live faithfully and serve gratefully.

To God be the glory, or as Calvin generally concluded his writings in Latin, *Soli Deo Gloria* – to God *alone* be the glory.