

“ENLIGHTENED HEARTS”

**a sermon on Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31
For All Saints and Commemoration of the Faithful Departed
November 6, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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A couple of weeks ago, the focus of my sermon was the emphasis in churches of the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, on both “corporate” or communal *confession*, and also a definitive and bold *declaration* of pardon – John Calvin even called it *absolution*, which the town council in Geneva didn’t like.

That declaration is *one* of the distinctive elements of worship in our churches. Another one is the prayer we Presbyterians call the “Prayer for Illumination.”

Let me “set the scene” for you, having had the privilege of visiting St. Pierre’s Cathedral in Geneva where Calvin served as the lead pastor.

St. Pierre’s is a large, very “traditional” looking cathedral. Up at the very front of the church, in a raised chancel, is what in pre-Reformation days had been called the “high altar,” but in Calvin’s era was known more simply as the “communion table.” The opening liturgy – including the confession and pardon – were led by the presiding minister from behind that table. The opening hymns and psalms were led by a musician standing at a lectern on one side of the sanctuary, part-way up into the nave . . . where the worshipers sat – so although facing inward toward them, the musician was essentially “with” the congregation.

And so then following the Declaration of Pardon, while the congregation was again being led in song, the Preacher for the day – generally, Calvin himself – walked forward from the table out into the nave, where there was also a *pulpit* – raised up high enough that all present could clearly see the preacher, and attached to one of the cathedral’s massive columns, accessible by means of a spiral staircase that wove around the column.

Once the preacher was in place and the musical selection had been completed, Calvin led the congregation in the service’s next prayer, praying for God to “illumine” the hearts and minds of the worshipers. Here is one, typical, such prayer, although Calvin was known to simply “extemporize” the Prayer for Illumination:

Let us call upon our God and Father, beseeching Him, since all fullness of wisdom and light is found in Him, mercifully to enlighten us by His Holy Spirit in the true understanding of His word, and to give us grace to receive it in true fear and humility. May we be taught by His word to place our trust only in Him and to serve and honor Him as we ought, so that we may glorify His holy name in all our living and edify our neighbor by our good example, rendering to God the love and the obedience which faithful servants owe their masters, and children, their parents, since it has pleased Him graciously to receive us among the number of His servants and children (from *Songs of the Nativity: Selected Sermons on Luke 1 & 2* by John Calvin, translated by Robert White).

Then the Scripture or Scriptures on which the sermon was based were read, and the sermon preached, after which, while the congregation was led in singing the Creed, the preacher came back down out of the pulpit, and went back behind the table to conduct the remainder of the service.

The point of the “prayer for illumination” was both to *focus* the hearts and minds of the worshipers on their need to *pay attention* to what was about to happen – the *proclamation of the Word*, which Calvin believed was by far the most important part of the service – and also to proclaim the Church’s faith in our Lord’s promise that the Spirit will “lead us into all truth” . . . *us* being the *entire* faith community.

Today, we are celebrating “All Saints.” There are particular individuals in Christian history who have been bestowed with “sainthood” as a title. In Scripture, where the word “saint” is used (in both the Old and New Testaments), the meaning is “holy one” – *קֳדֹשִׁים* (qaddish) in Hebrew, *ἅγιος* (haggios) in Greek. What it really means is one in whom God is present – and whose life has *evidenced* that presence and influence.

And that’s a much larger and more inclusive group than just those who have been so officially recognized by the church. It is, frankly, all those who have, in Calvin’s words, been “enlightened” by God’s Spirit, and who have then by “good example, render[ed] to God the love and the obedience which faithful servants owe their masters . . .”

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, puts it only slightly differently when he commends the believers in that region for their faithfulness. He writes, in the midst of that wonderful, very long sentence, “because I have heard of your faith in the

Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might” (Ephesians 1:15b-19).

I titled this sermon, “Enlightened Hearts,” in honor of Paul’s words. Calvin would surely have added “*minds*” to the object of “enlightenment.” But the point is simply that God’s Spirit “enlightens” us – *enables* us to hear, and know, and *appreciate*. And that includes appreciating – Paul says, *loving* – the saints, through whose acts of faithfulness we are strengthened and sustained in our own struggle to be the people we know God intends us to be – to live in line with those marvelous ideals proclaimed by Jesus: loving our enemies, doing good even to those who hate and abuse us, turning the other cheek.

And what I love about this passage in Ephesians is the way it almost ceases to be Paul *writing*, and becomes Paul *praying* . . . writing down his literal prayer as he is praying it. Commenting on the passage, Professor Ralph Martin notes that this “one long, complex Greek sentence . . . suggests its origin in a liturgical setting. Later liturgies, such as the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus . . . give illustrations of this kind of elevated prose, where prayer and theological confession mingle.”

In our observations of this this special day – dedicating a piano, naming “saints” who have departed their earthly lives in the last year, in whom we have seen and affirm God’s presence, and dedicating stones engraved with the names of additional saints of the Church, that is *exactly* what we are doing – “mingling” prayer with “theological conviction,” liturgically.

So as you hear names read, and prayers prayed, and dedications pronounced, may your hearts be enlightened and your faith strengthened – both in the theological affirmations being proclaimed, and in the comfort and motivation you receive from contemplating the lives of the saints – what you saw in them, learned from them, gleaned from both their successes and their struggles, that can help *you* lead a better and more faithful life.

None of us is “perfect.” And we are all merely “servants” of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But God’s Spirit “enlightens” our hearts and minds and enables us to be participants as Christ’s body at work in the world, in God’s work of establishing His kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. And so today, we give

thanks for all God's saints – and particularly, for those “for whom their labors rest.” May our memories of those saints send us out into the world renewed in our commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ, and God's mission.

To God be the Glory.