

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“John Calvin – Another Look”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 7, 2010

Spoken Meditation

What might John Calvin pray if he were a Unitarian minister? Here is my creative riff on one of Calvin's prayers titled, “The Fountain of Life”

Most gracious and loving God,
As we follow the guidance of your great disciples
 that unites us as one congregation,
 and helps us resist the forces that scatter and divide us,
May we continue and preserve that unity of faith
 and struggle against the temptations to self-absorption
 the world continually presents us.

May we never deviate from the wholesome course,
 no matter what troubles may daily arise.
And though we encounter disease and death,
 May we not be seized by fear, such as might
 extinguish every hope in our hearts.

May we, on the contrary,
Learn to raise up our eyes, minds and all our thoughts,
 to the universal powers
 that transcend death and nothingness,
So that, though we be daily exposed to ruin,
 our souls may ever aspire to eternal assurance,
 until thou reveals thyself to be the fountain of life.
In that luminous moment, we shall enjoy that endless felicity
 foretold by the saints and holy beings in every generation.
The promise of this life cannot be diminished.
The blessed assurance of what is beyond this life,
 can bring us peace.

(compare to: <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/jcprayers.htm>)

Sermon

For better or for worse, Unitarian Universalism wouldn't exist without John Calvin. Those Eighteenth Century New Englanders who rejected the Calvinistic aspects of Puritanism became our Unitarian and Universalist forebears. They separated themselves from the Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches of their day, to form a new way to do religion. Going back to the sources we rejected can help us understand who we are today. Looking at how Calvinism still shapes and defines us, can help us go beyond any negative reactivity that remains embedded in our thinking and encourage us to grow beyond it.

In my ongoing outreach to local ministers who might be interested in being involved with community organizing, I read the Delmar Presbyterian Church website last summer and noted that their minister, the Reverend Larry Deyss, was doing a video presentation and discussion on John Calvin in honor of his 500th birthday. I emailed him, asking what he was doing and suggesting we get together for lunch. He agreed and we met at the Metro 20 Diner in Westmere. We discussed the negative impression most Unitarian Universalists have of Calvin. Rev. Deyss cautioned me that there is more to the fellow than the problems we have with his theology. Intrigued, I accepted his challenge to give Calvin a second look.

In seminary, I learned that John Calvin was one of the towering figures of the Reformation. He greatly influenced the development of the Reform movement in Holland, the Huguenots in France, the Presbyterians in Scotland, and the Puritans in England. Twenty-five years ago, the last thing I wanted to do was to study his life and work. Thankfully that study is so much easier now. This past week, I just googled him.

Born July 10th, 1509 not far from Paris, his father, a cathedral bureaucrat, wanted all three of his sons to enter the priesthood. Precocious Jean found employment with the bishop at the age of twelve as a clerk and received tonsure as a symbol of his renunciation of worldly fashion and esteem. Through the patronage of an influential family he was able to attend college in Paris, learning Latin and then studying philosophy. Seeing Jean's earning potential, his father decided he should go into law rather than the ministry. It was while studying law that Calvin was attracted to Humanism and classical studies, including learning Greek. Sometime during his early 20's he had a religious conversion that would direct his focus back into religious studies.

Calvin got his license to practice law in 1532. Luther's nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church in 1517 was rippling out through Europe. Calvin's identification with the humanists and reformers in 1533 got him in trouble with the Catholics, causing him to go into hiding, then flee to Basel in Switzerland. It was there he published his first edition of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* that became the template of all his future work.

Perhaps because of the Dutch Reform connection, the five main points of Calvin's theology, outlined in the Institutes, have been identified with the acronym, TULIP. Here are the five points:

1. **Total Depravity** – Calvin embraced Augustine's theory of Original Sin. Every son and daughter of Adam and Eve is tainted with their sin. Calvin thought there was nothing a finite human being could do to atone adequately for this crime against God. Only Jesus' love for us and willingness to sacrifice himself for us made it possible for any of us to enjoy salvation.
2. **Unconditional Election** – It seemed obvious to Calvin that some of us merit salvation and others do not. Because of our depraved nature and God's infinite power, knowledge and goodness, he felt there was nothing we could do to influence God through our good works. Calvin concluded from a close analysis of scripture that the only way for some to be saved while others were not would be if God had preordained from the beginning of time who would be saved and who would be left behind. There would be no way for us to know if we were one of the saved or damned until the Judgment Day.
3. **Limited Atonement** – In Christian theology, one view of Jesus' atonement through his self-sacrifice on the cross is that it paid the infinite price for our sinfulness to appease God's need for justice. Calvin believed Jesus' death only atoned for those elected by God and not for the rest of the non-elect who would be damned.
4. **Irresistible Grace** – (I think of this as the get-out-of-hell-free card) If you are one of the elect, you will enjoy God's grace. Not only will you enjoy it, at the time of God's choosing, you will not be able to resist it when it comes. Think of the song, Amazing Grace. I was lost but now I'm found – when the Holy Spirit comes to you, you will be changed!
5. **Perseverance (or Preservation) of the Saints** – If God has picked you to be one of his Elect or a visible saint, you are assured that you will not lose God's favor till the end of days. If it appears you have fallen out of God's favor, like Job, you will be returned again by and by.

So do you recognize the parts of Calvin's theology that might rub us the wrong way?

Well, total depravity, was the first one that most bothered the budding Unitarians. American Unitarian founder William Ellery Channing took on Calvinism directly in his essay,

“The Moral Argument Against Calvinism.” He argued, in brief, yes, we humans are finite creatures. Yes, we do things that are harmful to ourselves and others. And there is more to being human. We are created in God's image. We are endowed with faculties that, while limited, are not inconsistent with God's nature. We are able to discern natural laws. We can predict the movements of the planets. We can deduce the universal laws of physics. The most holy capacity the Creator has given us that allows us to figure these things out is our reason. Our capacity for reason demonstrates an indwelling holiness in humanity that reflects God's glory back in a way that pleases God. Instead of total depravity, Channing might have argued, we have limited depravity. And that depravity can be diminished through the cultivation of character.

What bugged the early Universalists was the concept of limited atonement. They carefully read their Gospels and the Letters of Paul and found proof texts that Jesus didn't atone just for an elect few, he atoned for everyone. Having incarnated as Jesus (remember the Universalists were Trinitarian Christians) God recognized first-hand in a human body just how hard our lot is. But God also recognized, through Jesus, our capacity for love. By experiencing through Jesus' sacrifice that this love can embrace all of humanity, God accepted Jesus' atonement, promising that all will eventually be reconciled and none need be left behind. That Irresistible Grace will embrace all of us, by and by, not just the elect.

But our dislike of Calvin extends beyond his theology. The reason many Unitarians have vilified Calvin is because of his role in the execution of one of our guys, Michael Servetus.

Servetus was a Spaniard who objected to the Inquisition's persecution of Jews and Muslims. One of the chief complaints against them was their rejection of the Trinity. Servetus did his own careful study of the Bible and found no convincing evidence of the concept, publishing a book to this effect. Needless to say, both the Catholics and most reformers rejected his arguments, accusing him of heresy. Servetus sent numerous letters to Calvin on this subject trying to convince him of his ideas. This made Calvin quite angry as he had little patience for those who disputed him. Fearing for his life, Servetus went into hiding – but for some mysterious reason visited Geneva. While there, he attended a worship service led by Calvin who recognized him and had him arrested. The town council tried him, convicted him and sentenced him to burn at the stake, surrounded by his books. To Calvin's credit, he wanted to see him beheaded instead but his request was refused.

Okay, if we froze Calvin at the age of twenty-seven when he first published the Institutes, or after Servetus was put to death, there wouldn't be much to take a second look at today. What we miss by reducing him to his theology and his complicity in Servetus' death is his ministry in Geneva.

Calvin didn't intend to settle in Geneva. After publishing the Institutes, when it was clear to him he couldn't stay in France, he had decided to head to the hotbed of reformist activity in

Strasbourg. He was forced to pass through Geneva on his way to Strasbourg due to military activity. While there, a fellow French reformer persuaded him to stay. The two of them proposed a system of church reform that was accepted by the town council, but later renounced when Calvin wanted to decide who could receive communion. After being forced to leave and ministering in Strasbourg for several years, Geneva wanted him back and this time accepted his church reform plan. Without that reform plan, some of what makes the United States and Unitarian Universalism great might not have happened.

Geneva was one of the free European cities that had extracted itself from feudalism. Freed from the control of the Catholic bishop, citizens elected their own ruling council. In rejecting Papal ecclesiastical authority, Calvin saw the source of authority to be the people. Unlike the Catholic system, Calvin thought the selection of clergy needed to be confirmed with a vote by the people. When you voted in the winter of 1999 to confirm my selection by your search committee, you followed in a tradition John Calvin established in Geneva over 450 years ago.

Calvin also affirmed that there should be a separation between the governance of the church and the city, what we refer to today as the separation of church and state. Both were under God's law, but their God-ordained spheres of authority were different. He thought the church had no authority to impose penalties for civil offenses. And, conversely, the state had no right to tell the church how it should operate. Calvin wasn't interested in freedom of religion, only separation of powers. Calvin wasn't an advocate of secular government either. But the principles he articulated laid the ground work for just that development.

So, while we mowed down Calvin's TULIPs, we were happy to embrace his ideas of governance that distributed power rather than concentrating it. And as Unitarianism still retains an interest in character development, it should interest us to know that Calvin had many good character traits.

Even though he suffered many illnesses from his 30's until his death, it never limited his prodigious writing and study. He slept little and took little recreation. He lived very simply, asking for little in the way of compensation. He gave away much of that income to charity and refused additional sums offered by the town council. He received no royalties from his many books. At his death, he left little behind and was buried in an unmarked grave. Calvin considered himself tenderhearted ... as long as you didn't disrespect him. He was kind and affectionate to his wife and friends, taking personal interest and helping them in their affairs. He enjoyed laughter and was a witty conversationalist. He responded to the beauty of nature as a gift from God to be enjoyed.

And he had very thin skin. He displayed a vindictiveness toward his enemies, which did not rest until they were crushed and humiliated.

And this brings me to my point. Calvin was a human being just like the rest of us. Whether or not the concept of predestination is true, and I severely doubt it, Calvin fell short

of sainthood, at least in this life. But he wasn't a devil either...just like the rest of us. We can thank him for his contribution to our system of congregational governance and the design of our secular government that separates church and state. And we can discard his TULIP theology if we want.

Or can we? By rejecting the Holy Spirit and the divinity of Jesus, do we limit our religious imagination? Do we cut ourselves off from the life giving spiritual energies not accessible to the rational mind? By rejecting total depravity and embracing the inherent worth and dignity of all people, do we hesitate to name the evil at work in our world that comes through human form? By extending salvation to all unconditionally, do we diminish the demands of justice and the importance of the drive to growth and development?

These are open ended questions for each of us to ponder. I'm sure our answers will differ.

By taking a second look at what we reject, we may be able to reclaim valuable dimensions of religious identity we've left behind. That's why I've taken a second look at Calvin ... and perhaps you'll find some benefit ... in doing the same.

Benediction

While I'm improvising on other people's work, I thought I'd take on Hebrew scripture too. Here is my riff on the blessing God gave to Moses, in the book of Numbers, to give to Aaron:

May the Spirit of Life and Love

bless you and keep you.

May that vitalizing energy shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;

May the face of that radiant presence
lift you and give you peace.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.