

The scheduling of John Calvin as our July 4 Faith Story was quite deliberate. Calvin's legacy is civic as well as ecclesial, for in his Geneva there was no separation between church and state, and every public policy was determined by theological considerations, overseen by church officials, and designed to bring all aspects of life in Geneva into compliance with God's law.

Today, in this nation, we celebrate our freedom. Calvin and his fellow Reformers would, I expect, have been, at the very least, bewildered and quite possibly offended by some -- many -- of the ways freedom is defined and pursued in our time and place. We might look at Calvin's Geneva and conclude that church-led administration of civic life, with both the authority and the zeal to impose consequences for citizens' sinful behavior, is a flawed and problematic way to approach governance. We might, likewise, look at the US today and find all sorts of flaws and problems in the way our secular federal, state, and local governments function. Did 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva offer too little personal freedom to its citizens? Does 21<sup>st</sup> century America offer too much?

Today -- July 4<sup>th</sup> -- is, I think, an excellent day to set our contemporary cultural understanding of freedom alongside our Christian theology of freedom and see where they match up and where they diverge.

Let's start with a quote from Calvin, which gives us a pretty clear idea of what he thought about personal freedom and autonomy. In his theological masterwork, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us forget ourselves and all that is ours. (*Institutes*.III.VII.1)

Twenty-first century America -- or at least 21<sup>st</sup> century America as experienced by people who fall within the privileged social categories of white, straight, Christian, financially secure -- tells us that we are, indeed, our own; that our primary, if not only, obligation is to ourselves and, optionally, those we choose to care about; and that we must be constantly on guard against efforts to diminish our individual rights.

Whether or not we credit British mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell as the source, our contemporary culture operates under his definition of freedom as "the absence of obstacles to the realization of desires". When we encounter obstacles, we put social, financial, legislative, and judicial resources into efforts to eliminate them. Of course, that gets complicated when different individuals or groups seek to realize mutually exclusive desires. If

the route to the freedom I envision requires depriving you of the freedom you pursue, and we are both our own with no interdependence or commitment to reciprocity, whose freedom should prevail?

In his book, *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Johnathan Sacks writes:

This is in essence, the human dilemma. Which comes first? Altruism or survival? The common good or individual self-interest? (p. 27)

To put it another way: is freedom the means to defend and preserve ourselves and our individual interests, or is it the opportunity to connect with and care for our neighbor? Are we free **from** obligation to others or free **for** substantive, costly relationship with them? Does freedom keep us selfish and safe, choosing whether and when and how to interact with our neighbors; or does it free us to be selfless and engaged and vulnerable as we weave our particular thread into a complex tapestry of mutuality?

Christians speak of being free in Christ but the freedom we find in him is quite, quite different from the freedom that Bertrand Russell describes.

In his theology text *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Daniel Migliore writes:

-- In popular usage as well in many philosophies ancient and modern, freedom is understood as maximum autonomy and independence from all external constraint. By contrast, Christian theology understands true freedom as the gift of freedom *from* the bondage of sin and death and freedom *for* the new life of reconciliation, communion, and service that God purposes for humanity. This distinctive understanding of human freedom is grounded in God's own exercise of freedom -- that is, God's self-determination to be God with and for the world revealed decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (*Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 410-411.)

Our freedom in Christ will not protect us from the world's rigors and threats. It will not insulate us against discord or indemnify us against heartbreak. What freedom in Christ **will do** is reset our perspective so that we can ride out the storms and cross the valleys of human experience without being defeated by them. We can weigh the choices before us and freely, joyfully choose to be people who love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and who love neighbor as self. We are free in Christ to live as people who worship and serve, not out of obligation or anxiety, but as the outflow of hearts full of love and spirits full of faith and hope.

Calvin identifies three freedoms of the Christian:

1. we are free from the law to obey it.
2. we are free from things that don't matter
3. we are free to use God's gifts for God's purposes

Those freedoms may not line up particularly well with some of the ways our society pictures and pursues freedom. But *we know* that meaningful freedom is not unrestrained license to attain our own desires with no regard for how our actions impact others. Rather the freedom that we hold and cherish is the space and the grace to live as God's beloved and Christ's disciples. We are free to find fulfillment and purpose in offerings of praise, deeds of compassion, words of connection. We, who worship and serve a triune God who is with and for us, are made free in Christ to be with and for one another. We are free to work for a world in which justice and peace are everywhere known and enjoyed; a world where all God's children flourish.

Mark's Gospel tells us that when Jesus sent the Twelve out to do ministry in his name "They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different."

Such radical difference comes from the freedom given to us in Christ.

This weekend, we celebrate a holiday that honors the high ideals on which this nation was founded and renews our shared national commitment to continue striving to fulfill the noble promise of our forebears. Our country prizes freedom, and rightly so. But let us not forget that the freedom we know as Americans is not the absence of restraint but the presence of potential. It is most truly expressed and most fruitfully used when we live as those who have been made free in Christ so that we may be joyfully obedient to the God we worship and serve, and bound to one another in covenantal mutuality.

John Calvin claims that we are not our own. Indeed, we are not. We are Christ's, free in him for all eternity.

Thanks be to God. Amen.