

A Meaningful Life

TEXT: Galatians 5:13-15

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on September 22, 2024

When you got up this morning, did you freely choose to come to church? In one sense, you did, because you're here, either in person or virtually; and we don't have church police to go drag you out of your bed and force you to attend. But some of you may have rather done something else, but felt a level of obligation because you sing in the choir or because there's a meeting after church, or simply because you were raised to attend church whenever there were services. I felt a particularly strong obligation to be here, since I'm the pastor.

The question of whether human beings are really free to make choices is one that has bedeviled the church for millennia. We first encountered it in this sermon series early on in the person of Pelagius, a British theologian in the fourth century who St. Augustine, then Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, fought and pursued with charges of heresy throughout Pelagius' life for suggesting people could freely choose not to sin.

But the debate in the church over the freedom of human will did not end with the death of either Pelagius or Augustine, and denominational divides, even in the present day, are largely shaped by the 16th century battle between two Protestant theologians: Jacobus Arminius, an ordained pastor and professor of theology in the Netherlands, and John Calvin of France, a humanist lawyer by training and later a pastor serving a church in Geneva, Switzerland.

Arminius was born into a Reformed family in 1560, when the Protestant Reformation was in full swing. Arminius was orphaned at a young age, his mother slaughtered as part of a Spanish massacre in his town, and was adopted by a Reformed priest. Although Calvin's ideas reigned supreme in Protestant circles by the time Arminius went to college, Arminius studied under those who felt bold enough to challenge Calvin's thought, on the grounds that the God depicted in Calvin's theology was, in their words, "a tyrant and executioner." Since I have personally thought of writing a book called "Calvinism Makes You Mean," I happen to agree with Arminius' professors. So, full disclosure on my bias in this debate.

We have records of the assessment of Arminius from his professors, who praise his academic prowess and call him, "marked by piety, moderation, and assiduity in study; and very often, in the course of our theological discussions, he made his gift of a discerning spirit so manifest to all of us, as to elicit from us well-merited congratulations." They noted that he seemed well-suited, "if, indeed, he goes on to stir up the gift of God that is in him," to teach and preach.

John Calvin, who was born in 1509, before Luther even posted his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, was raised a Catholic and became a dominant part of the Protestant Reformation movement that Luther started. Although technically already Christian, John Calvin had a conversion experience in his twenties, something that is very common now as then.

But, unlike many we've looked at, whose faith became real and relevant to them on hearing the news about God's grace in Romans 3, Calvin's conversion was largely based in a fear of hell based on how he had lived his life as a young man. While John Wesley describes his own conversion as his heart being "strangely warmed," Calvin describes his as God bringing, "my mind to a teachable frame."

Calvin writes further of his experience, "Being exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen, and much more at that which threatened me in view of eternal death, I, duty bound, made it my first business to betake myself to your way, condemning my past life, not without groans and tears. And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defense, earnestly to supplicate you not to judge that fearful abandonment of your Word according to its deserts, from which in your wondrous goodness you have at last delivered me."

Although never ordained, Calvin came to a position of such religious power in Geneva, that a word from him could—and did—sway the government, despite his clear teaching on a need for the separation of church and state. It would seem from his actions that Calvin wanted that separation so that Catholic governments would not interfere in his Protestant church, but that he himself had no qualms about bringing his own religious influence to bear on decisions of state. And the governmental councils in Geneva most frequently went along.

Since Calvin died just four years after Arminius was born, the two men did not spar in life. But Calvin was such a strong personality and such a respected theologian that Calvin's thought reigned supreme in Geneva, which is where a young Arminius finished his theological training. Calvin's thought overshadowed even that of Martin Luther in Protestant circles, not just in Geneva, but well beyond.

Although Arminius was raising objection to much of what Calvin taught, the biggest controversy came as he lectured and preached on the book of Romans, saying that with God's grace and a spiritual rebirth, human beings did not have to live in bondage to sin. We are justified by faith. Out came the knives—not just from Catholics, but from Calvin's adherents—and people started accusing him of being a Pelagian heretic.

We humans are strangely defensive when someone suggests that we are able to freely reject not just sin as a concept, but actual sinful choices that confront us. Like, I don't know, choosing not to massacre all the people in a town. For his part, Arminius met that heresy charge with some raised eyebrows. Protestant theologians, of all people, were now not allowed to think for themselves? Wasn't that kind of the point in the Reformation? Read the Bible for yourself? Challenge monolithic interpretations? He expected pushback from Catholics; all Protestants were heretics to Catholics by definition; but on whose authority does one Protestant call another a heretic?

Arminius might not have been so surprised, if he remembered the incident for which John Calvin is most famous. Michael Servetus, the man who introduced the Islamic idea of pulmonary circulation to Europe, was a Spanish theologian, physician, and cartographer, versed in math, astronomy, jurisprudence, geography, and the study of the Bible in its original languages—among other things. On the run from the Spanish Inquisition after he published a treatise calling Original Sin into question and having a different take on the nature of the Trinity, Servetus went to Geneva in 1553. It was an unwise choice.

About a decade earlier, as Servetus thought through theological matters, he naturally read Calvin's magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which is still required reading in most seminaries today. Servetus began sending letters to Calvin about it, and on one occasion, he sent his own copy of Calvin's *Institutes*, heavily annotated with Servetus' own notes about which parts he thought Calvin had gotten wrong and mentioned that he might come to Geneva to talk to Calvin about it.

Calvin responded to that, not directly to Servetus, but in a letter to the colleague who had helped him establish the Reformed church in Geneva. Calvin wrote to his colleague, "If he came, as far as my authority goes, I would not let him leave alive." True to his word, when Michael Servetus arrived in Geneva in 1553 to pay Calvin a visit before continuing on to Italy, Calvin had him arrested. Calvin's secretary drafted a list of accusations to bring before the court. Because Servetus was so widely known, the long trial was followed across Europe. Servetus was convicted and burned alive at the edge of the city the next day.

Michael Servetus was the best-known, but not the only one to feel John Calvin's wrath. Since Calvin didn't hold formal power in Geneva but had deeply entrenched informal power with government officials, it's hard to say for sure; but some have estimated that in his first five years in Geneva, 58 people were executed and 76 exiled for their religious beliefs.

Although Calvin would not abide a critic like Servetus, he did give shelter in Geneva to the Catholic exiles from Mary Tudor's England, which allowed them to create their own Reform movement, based on Calvin's ideas, under John Knox and William Whittingham. Those men then took all that back to England and Scotland. Calvin also started a school in Geneva, which ultimately became the University of Geneva.

Arminius has been described as a reformer of Calvinism, so we need to look at the particular points in Calvin's theology that Arminius found so distasteful. When we talked about the question of whether human beings still retained their created goodness after Adam and Eve treated themselves to some forbidden fruit, Calvin was strictly in the "No, they do not" camp.

The label Calvin gave to that is "Total Depravity," meaning that, absent a full inner regeneration and turn to Christ, all people are born and remain sinful to their core. Arminius didn't totally throw the tendency to sin out, but he did coin the phrase that Wesley ran with over a century later called "prevenient grace," the grace of God that we sing in hymns is "greater than all our sin," that "saved a wretch like me."

Prevenient grace is the grace of God that goes before us, whether we are aware of it or not, to make a way for us to overcome that sinful nature and make a decision to change our lives. Prevenient grace imagines a God who approaches every single person as a suitor in search of a loving relationship, rather than as a harsh judge looking to remove the unrighteous from society. John Wesley's heart was warmed by the former, John Calvin's mind was clarified by the threat of the latter.

If you believe, as Calvin did, that people, by their nature, are totally depraved, and that people are not free to choose the change that conversion represents; why does conversion happen with some people and not with others? To answer this question, Calvin preaches what I find to be his most abhorrent view. It's called "Unconditional Election," better known as pre-destination or, in his case, "double predestination." Calvin believed that God, from before time, predestined some people to be saved and others to be damned, conditions that had no basis in a person's virtue, merit, or faith but solely at God's discretion, before a person was even born.

"But," others countered, "Didn't Jesus die so that all might be saved?" "Nope," said Calvin. The atonement achieved through Jesus' death and resurrection was for all people generally, but is only actually effective for the "elect," those God had

predestined from eternity for salvation. They still needed saving in this life, because of the total depravity thing—apparently God couldn't just let the elect be born good—so Jesus had to die, but it was only for them. It was a “Limited Atonement.”

“Well,” say Calvin's detractors, “Suppose the elect just refuse that salvation and don't convert?” “They can't,” said Calvin. God's grace was “irresistible” or “effectual.” Calvin's belief was that God's Will was sovereign; and human beings could not counter it. So, if God willed that a person be among the elect, that gift could not be refused. And don't bother praying for the damned, either. Won't work. To allow for a human being to counter God's will in any way was to make human beings more powerful than God, which was unacceptable and plainly offensive to Calvin.

Further, once a person has converted, which they must if they are among the elect, God will “preserve the saints.” In other words, no backsliding. They might still sin, but they will be duly chastened and repent and remain among the saved through it all.

If you hear someone talk about “Five-point Calvinism,” those are the doctrines they mean, Total Depravity, Unconditional Election (to salvation or damnation), Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. An acronym for all that is TULIP theology.

One thing leaving five-point Calvinists in a lifelong state of angst is the fact that on the Unconditional Election piece—that God has predestined each person either to heaven or hell without regard to the relative merits of their lives—is that nobody knows which camp they are in and no one on the outside can tell because God chooses the elect without regard to their virtue or merit.

All I can say is that John Calvin would have made me into a barbeque in no time flat.

To work the argument backwards, a lot of the propositions in TULIP theology that I find offensive spring from the idea that God's will is sovereign. I don't object to that; but I do object to Calvin's conclusion that if God wills something, it therefore must happen. God's will can't be thwarted...so everything from your seeming decision to get up and go to church this morning to the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust must all, somehow, be God's will or it couldn't happen. It's all tied into some mysterious grand plan that we are incapable of knowing as humans.

I also agree with the idea of our limited knowledge of God's plans. But the thought that God's will is easily discerned by just seeing what happens, no matter how horrific, and believing that because it happened God must have willed it, is why Calvin's Dutch detractors in the 16th century told Arminius that Calvin's ideas turned God into “a tyrant and executioner.” Calvin himself, in my mind, became both of those things.

What is absent in Calvin's assessment of God's sovereignty but is present in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and is central to the Gospel story of Jesus' life, is the idea that self-limitation might be a tool that God employs, in the ways that we humans say to ourselves, “Just because we could, doesn't mean we should.” God, from the very first chapters of Genesis onward, has entered into power-sharing agreements with human beings: Covenants. If you, people, will live a certain way, God promises to respond to those choices with blessings. If you choose otherwise, all bets are off.

The whole idea of commandments of any kind in the Bible, from God's command not to eat of a certain tree in the Garden, to the Ten Commandments and the myriad laws that follow, is the recognition that people have free agency and need some guidance from God in how to make choices that will have the outcome God desires. When Paul describes the “mind of Christ” in Philippians 2, he begins by saying that Jesus, “while being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” The sovereign God taking on human form in Jesus is the ultimate act of self-limitation; the ultimate example of God's nature and love for Creation.

It's not that God doesn't have a will or intention or desire for people and all the things God has made; just like parents have hopes and dreams and sometimes very strong wills about the life they want for their children. But to the dismay of every parent alive, children have their own ideas about those things. But a good parent doesn't burn their child at the stake when they decide to teach public school instead of running the family business, as much as they might have willed the latter for the child.

I do think the opposite extreme, of unencumbered free will in every moment, is also problematic. As in the examples of why we might choose to attend church, our choices are never totally free from our context, culture, or genetics for that matter. Amazingly enough, scientists who don't believe in God have similar debates about whether we actually have free will. For some, the laws of physics, or genetics, or natural law more generally predetermine every choice we make.

But the equation totally changes when love enters the picture; when the Word becomes flesh. In other words, it is possible to be both able to exercise power and authority and to exercise restraint in doing so for the benefit of those we love. Once the Bible lays down the fact that God's objective is love—that God's very nature is love—Calvin's theology crumbles from within.

If God's will is love and God's will can't be thwarted, then we must have free will. Freedom is the necessary condition for love's existence. If it's not freely chosen, it's not love. And, if people are all predestined for heaven or hell before all time, regardless of how their eventual lives take shape, what meaning is there in words like "forgiveness," "mercy," or "grace?" What is the point of justice? What is the point of intercessory prayer or thanksgiving?

And if God wills some to salvation and others to damnation and that will can't be thwarted, then why is Jesus even necessary? If God is all-powerful and people have no choice, it's all a play or elaborate deception. Nothing loving about that. I mean you may as well just do what you want and burn people at the stake if they criticize your books. Oh, wait...that's exactly where Calvin's theology led him. Which is the point of this series. Our beliefs will be evident in our behavior, which is why our beliefs matter.

Arminius killed no one that we know of, directly or indirectly. He died at home from failing health at only 49 years of age. But Arminianism, lived on and became embodied in his Dutch followers who came to be known as Remonstrants. Although Wesley came by many of the same beliefs as Arminius on his own when he had to read Calvin's *Institutes*, Wesley eventually became one of the staunchest defenders of Arminius in Britain, spreading his teaching with the Methodist movement in Britain and subsequently across the United States.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist, psychologist and Holocaust survivor, has said that human beings can endure any "how" as long as we have a "why." In other words, the thing the human psyche needs more than anything else is meaning. We want our particular lives and life more generally to "make sense," to have a direction, a purpose so that we don't simply flounder in the endless choices that come before us every minute of every day. We can choose this and not that in accordance with the broader meaning and purpose of our lives.

Theology, at its core, is an attempt to meet that need for meaning; to find a system of belief about the mysteries of life that rings true when we survey what happens to us and around us; some way to account for our actions, emotions, and longings.

The theological task in every religion is to look at the world around us and make it make sense. Frankl's observation in the Nazi death camps was that those who had a sense of meaning and purpose were far more likely to survive than those who did not. What we believe about God and the world we live in affects our actions, and what we do will determine whether life on earth is heaven or hell, irrespective of whether the beliefs that led to those actions are ultimately discovered to be true or false.

Every theological system on the planet—Christian or otherwise—is no doubt deeply flawed. God is God and we are not. We are, all of us, the blind men trying to describe an elephant not one of us has seen. But the benefit of trying to think it through anyway is to give our lives meaning, something that can help us when life overwhelms, make sense of tragedy and joy, and keep us living with our eyes open in the world.

Every year I have to fill out a form for the Conference describing my ministry and priorities. One of the questions is, "Briefly describe your theology." Most of you will concur that I can't "briefly describe" anything; but on that question, I simply write 1 John 4:8b "God is love." Had John Calvin done the same, he might have had his heart warmed instead of his mind terrorized into submission. He might have experienced the sweet sound of God's amazing grace, and maybe Michael Servetus would have lived to write about it. Amen.