

Sunday, October 19, 2014 Ordinary Time

Prayer of Confession

You, Lord, have been our dwelling place in all generations. You free us, you provide for us, you have even given yourself to us. Yet so often we forget that this is your story, and try to take the lead. We confess that we have turned from your way and gone our own ways. We have served other gods. We have loved you with our words but not with our actions. Forgive us, and turn us yet again to your path. Give us courage to follow you, and to proclaim in our lives that we worship and serve only you. (Silence) Amen.

Time Out for Teaching: The U in TULIP

Last week we began a series of teachings about Calvinism. The 5 points of Calvinism, which spell the word “TULIP,” are the roots of modern Presbyterianism. But have you ever noticed, that just like the roots of a tree only barely resemble the branches, so also it’s true that these 5 points may look foreign to you. For they don’t look exactly like the practice of our faith today.

Last week I discussed the T in TULIP: “Total Depravity,” which basically means that sin and brokenness is both in and around us. We have trouble staying out of trouble. Today I want to tell you about “Unconditional Election.” It’s connected to that idea we call Predestination.

Originally, Predestination and Unconditional Election said that before the foundation of the world, God knew who he was going to save and who he was not. It made sense to those early Calvinists that because God was truly sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, that He would know everything and had a hand in everything. This helped our forefathers and mothers to make sense their faith.

Today I have heard many arguments against Unconditional Election and Predestination, although there are still many people who believe in it. It’s opponents believe that it sounds like a cruel joke, if God wanted us all to be good people, but only some of them would be saved, but they didn’t know which ones. Some would say that God has a much bigger heart than that.

John Piper is one of the modern theologians who believe in this. But he says that by your very faith, you will know that you are one of those chosen people. And by your joy of being chosen you will be compelled to live according to God’s desires. He says that God has chosen believers so that they will set an example for the rest of the world.

I’m still not satisfied though. Who’s chosen and who’s not may not be the right perspective. Who am I to feel so self-assured that I’m special enough to have faith? Who am I to think that I am in any position to to know God’s plan for me or for others. God once said through the mouth of Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways.”

There are plenty of places in Scripture which say God has a plan for us, and God has a chosen people to be the crucible for His Gospel message. This unconditional election thing is saying that we have been unconditionally elected by God, that is even though we are imperfect God still chose us to be that crucible. Not motivated by a future salvation. Motivated by the love and joy of knowing of God's goodness to us.

MATTHEW 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

EXODUS 33:12-23

¹²Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I

have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Prayer for Illumination

O God of Peace, be with us all.
As we gather our hearts with yours,
Nourish us with your word.
That we, taught and renewed,
Shall be your word in the world.
Amen

Sermon: Suspension Faith

If it weren't for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel, it would take motorists an extra 95 miles out of their way to get to Virginia Beach. I have very distinct memories of traveling on this bridge as a kid. I thought it was a marvel of engineering. My brother and I use to practice holding our breaths as we crossed the marshy and salty waters, but we could never do it, since 23 miles long!

Crossing over the waters I would wonder how they managed to get the bridge supports so deep down in the ocean floor. But again, as a kid, I didn't know there was such a thing as the Continental Shelf.

It was, to me in my little world, a highlight of family vacations, the biggest bridge I had ever seen.

In Exodus, God is building a bridge, the biggest bridge ever! And this bridge is between God and humankind. God has elected Moses to a new office, the office of taking care of his people. But Moses has his own request, as he prepares for his new vocation. He demands assurance that he won't be all alone without any help.

Put yourself in Moses' sandals for a moment. He was used to the pagan gods and goddesses. They worked a little like a vending machine. They were impersonal. You

put your money in and you get the goods. For these gods, you put out your offering and they supposedly give you rain, or good crops. But they never took the initiative to follow you wherever you went. They weren't motivated by love, to go and save their people. This Lord, Moses hoped, would not be just like all the others. And so far, He wasn't.

But now as the Lord has ordained Moses to a new position, something that those other gods would never have done, Moses needs to know he's not going to be alone in this.

We can all relate to that. Has this church ever asked you to do something that you didn't think you could do? Has God ever elected you to a new office? Perhaps it is the office of raising your grandchildren. Or the office of "resident cancer survivor." Or the office of "moderating meetings..." Or the office of "Supervising a Presbytery meeting"...With every moment we live for the Lord, we increase our chances of being tagged to do something we have never done before. And as long as we feel like we have the resources to carry out the duties of that office, and the assurance that God will help us, we can do it. But if we feel too much doubt, it can be frightening to begin.

Moses seems a little frightened, but he's willing to negotiate. And the Good News is, God is prepared to give him the assurance and help he needs. God tells him in no uncertain terms, that he will go with them. God promises to not leave them alone in the wilderness. And while He refuses to show Moses His face, God promises to hide him in the rock to protect him from his blinding glory of God's face. But he gets to see God's backside, at least.

This negotiation between God and Moses can be reassuring to us. For it shows us that God seeks a personal relationship with each of us. God is building a bridge, in part,

because He has elected us to serve His purposes, and also, because he desires us. He loves us and wants our unchained hearts, loving him out of joy and freedom. God decided to cross that bridge all the way, for us and to be with us. Just as He took the initiative to come to Moses, call him to lead His people out of slavery, so also he went all the way for us, by becoming the person of Jesus Christ. It is the biggest bridge ever, from His heart to ours.

If God has a job for us to do, we have very few excuses. But we have the assurance that we are not alone in it. God will be with you in all the things to which He has called you. And if you need to call upon Him to complain, or to ask his help and love, go ahead and do it. Take Moses as your example. For He loves us so much that he has built a bridge from his heart to yours. Amen.