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6/5/11

Rooted In Eternity
John 17:9

The explorer Christopher Columbus was never able to grasp the fact that he had discovered a new world. He made four separate transatlantic trips. But to the end of his life he continued to believe that each trip had ended in China rather than Cuba. He could not bring himself to believe that he had actually come upon something new. The new world that he had entered did not fit his pre-conceived notions of what lay across the Atlantic. When Columbus died in 1506 he was blind to the significance of what he had discovered. He died a lonely, confused, and bitter man. The money and recognition that he craved for opening a new passage to China eluded him. He had no vision of any larger purpose for his life's work. Because there was no room in his mind or heart for the new world he had discovered he died in despair (Peter Marty, Journal for Preachers, Easter, 2011, page 19).

A similar challenge confronts the disciples in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John. There we find Jesus preparing the disciples for the life they will lead when he is gone. Their relationship with Jesus has opened a new world that is both exciting and baffling. They are profoundly confused about the implications of the journey they are making with Jesus. They cannot begin to comprehend the significance of what has happened to them. They do not know how to open their minds and hearts to the new future into which Jesus has led them.

It is at this moment that John presents Jesus offering a pastoral prayer on behalf of his followers. It is a prayer that God will help the disciples meet the challenges of living apart from their Lord. At the heart of Jesus' prayer is the request that God will open their hearts and minds to the new world of faith that beckons them. The grace of God that has come to them in Christ has changed everything at the moment when the future seems most threatening. The gospel writer knows that the future they face will include persecution and suffering. But Jesus' prayer makes clear that the disciples' lives will not be defined by persecution and suffering. Their lives will be defined by the fact that they belong to God. They can find their way in a shifting world because they are rooted in eternity.

On our recent trip to Europe Barbara and I spent some time in the city of Heidelberg. The architectural history of the city is highlighted by two Renaissance era structures. One is the hotel where we stayed. The Zum Ritter is located at the center of the old city where it is the only building that survived the fires set by the troops of Louis

XIV who destroyed the city in 1693. Our room was located on the second floor in the center of the building with three large windows looking out on the main square. The first day we stayed there we received something of a shock as we looked out the window to see a large Japanese tour group looking toward us as the tour guide was pointing directly at one of our windows. Ministers are accustomed to living in glass houses but this experience took that concept to a whole new level.

The other surviving piece of Renaissance architecture is found in the castle ruins on the hill overlooking the city. The Renaissance façade of the now ruined Ottheinrich Palace has a very interesting feature. A group of life size statues have been carved into the facade. They were carved in the fashion of ancient Greek statues. Renaissance architecture was very much about recovering the legacy of the ancient world. One particular statue attracted my attention. It is an aristocratic looking woman dressed in ancient Greek attire looking across the square. Usually these figures are holding an orb or some other item to represent wisdom or power. But this figure has a large bible clasped firmly in her hand. The people who created this piece of art about 1560 clearly valued the classical tradition of their past. But they also had an eye on their future. The presence of the Bible shows that they knew they were rooted in eternity.

The people of Heidelberg were quick to embrace the Reformation during the 16th century. But the more difficult question for the city was whether to embrace the Lutheran form of the Reformation or the Calvinist approach to church reform. Heidelberg is in Southwest Germany near the place where the Neckar River meets the Rhine. Lutheran ideas came from the city of Wittenberg in the North down the Neckar River while Calvinist and Reformed theology came up the Rhine from Switzerland. In 1559 a new Palatine Elector (the regional leader of the Palatine area who helped elect the Holy Roman Emperor) took up residence in the Castle. He found the university and the city deeply divided between Lutherans and Calvinists. The new Elector was a man named Frederick who had grown up in the decadent Catholic court of Charles V. There he had been disgusted by the immoral behavior that was so prevalent at court. When his new wife encouraged him to become a Protestant he was more than ready to make this change.

When Frederick realized that he was confronted with a religious crisis in Heidelberg he did not respond in the conventional way by issuing an edict. Instead he closed himself in his rooms to read the Bible and pray about what to do. He then arranged a seminar inviting Lutheran and Calvinist theologians to outline their positions. In the end Frederick decided to align the city with the Calvinists because it seemed to him that Calvin's version of the Reformed faith had a stronger scriptural basis. Here was a leader making the most important decisions of his life not by political expedience, but based on his reading of the Bible. Here was a man who understood that he was rooted in eternity.

But then Frederick did something else that set him apart from leaders of his time. He brought in the best theologians he could find and set them to the task of writing a Catechism. The purpose of this confessional statement was not to fan the flames of religious controversy but to transcend it. Frederick called for a Calvinist document that emphasized the overarching themes common to both Lutherans and Calvinists. It's central purpose was to help ordinary people internalize their faith. Frederick wanted his people to know that they need not live in confusion or anxiety in the face of the new world that was breaking in them. They could navigate the new world because they were rooted in eternity.

Because Frederick's approach was so different the other German Electors did not understand it. Most of them were more accustomed to exploiting religion (Protestant or Catholic) to enhance their political power. In 1566 Frederick was summoned to the Diet of Augsburg to answer to the Emperor for what he had done in Heidelberg. Many thought the end result of this summons was that Frederick would be banished by the Catholic Emperor Maximilian. As he prepared to leave Heidelberg, maybe for the last time, Frederick said this:

> There may be danger in store for me at the Diet but I have a comforting hope and trust in my heavenly Father, that he will make me an instrument for his own power … (Jack Rogers, Presbyterian Creeds, page 106).

When Frederick arrived in Augsburg the charges were read accusing him of heresy. When Frederick spoke from the heart, about what it meant to him to belong to God his critics were shamed. Frederick was acquitted of the charges and the emperor gave him a nickname that would stick; Frederick the Pious. No one could doubt that this was a man who was rooted in eternity.