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Stewards of Love

Matthew 22:39

As we approach the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth it is worth noting that he was one of the most misunderstood personalities in Western history. Both during his lifetime and long after his death, Calvin's motives were attacked by those who did not share his theological views or his passion for church reform. Alister McGrath of Oxford University has written a book on Calvin in which he describes some of the better known myths that were invented to discredit Calvin. He writes:

It may be of interest to some to indicate how deeply the myth of 'the great dictator of Geneva' is embedded..., where this myth is not a total invention, it is a serious distortion of the historical facts... Calvin's influence over Geneva was exercised indirectly through preaching, consultation, and other forms of legitimate suasion... He had no civic jurisdiction, no *right* to coerce others to act as he wished. Calvin could and did urge, cajole and plead; he could not however, command. The image of Calvin as the "dictator of Geneva" bears no relation to the known facts of history (Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, pages 105, 109).

John Calvin was basically an employee of the Geneva city council. The council maintained a firm grip on the levers of power and frequently interfered in church affairs. During most of his ministry in Geneva Calvin struggled to hold on to his job as he challenged the city fathers to follow the precepts of the gospel of Christ.

In the second chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians the apostle is struggling the challenge of being misunderstood. His ministry is under attack from people who question his motives. Some accuse him of pursuing ministry for financial rewards. Others say his ministry is really about power. Paul answers these charges by describing all the hardships that he has endured for the sake of his ministry. He was subjected to verbal abuse. He suffered beatings. He was expelled from some communities where he worked. In others he had been thrown in jail.

Paul points out that there is only one motive that could sustain him in the face of all this. That is the motive that took root in him through his experience of the love of God. It was this love that he wanted to share with others. Paul believed that he was called to be a steward of love. He described his ministry with the Thessalonians in these words:

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves because you have become very dear to us (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

John Calvin recognized that being a steward of love was at the heart of his ministry as well. One of his struggles with the Geneva city council was the question of how to deal with the huge number of refugees that were pouring into Geneva. The city council and the wealthy elite that they tended to represent were threatened by the influx of these newcomers. They had good reason to be concerned. In 1557 there were 13,000 native born citizens in Geneva and 6,500 refugees. Calvin

understood how vulnerable these people were because he had been a refugee himself. He was a prophetic voice reminding the city council of their responsibility to welcome these vulnerable people in the spirit of love.

Calvin repeatedly challenged the city council to provide for these newcomers something the council did not want to offer; the opportunity to become a citizen. The question of citizenship for refugees was tabled for many years. Calvin knew that doing nothing would further polarize their city. So he found other ways to minister to the needs of this vulnerable population. He created a cadre of leaders to engage in ministry with the refugees.

Elders were appointed to attend to the spiritual needs of the newcomers. Deacons were appointed to make sure they were adequately fed, clothed, and housed. After fifteen years the city council changed its mind and opened a path to citizenship. They finally realized that the energy and new skills provided by the diverse group of newcomers had transformed the city's economy for the benefit of everyone. But the real transformation began much earlier when elders and deacons in Geneva learned to reach out to those who were vulnerable. In doing that they became stewards of love.

This spiritual dynamic was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. In the 22nd chapter of Matthew Jesus is confronted by a series of challenging questions from religious leaders. These leaders share with Jesus a religious heritage. The questions posed in these encounters have to do with how to interpret that common heritage. The backdrop for these exchanges is the high level of polarization in that society. At one extreme are the Herodians who collaborated with the Romans because they believed this was the only way to modernize their country. They supported paying taxes to Rome to achieve that end. At the other extreme are the zealots who were engaged in a violent insurgency against the Roman army. The questioners want to force Jesus to define himself in relationship to this hopelessly polarized situation.

When the religious leaders fail in their attempt to draw Jesus out on the question of paying taxes to Rome, they try more questions. Finally they reach the last question asking which commandment is the greatest. Drawing from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Jesus answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and a second is like it; 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 37, 39).'" Jesus is announcing that God's priority is not to polarize or divide. God's priority is the stewardship of love. God calls us to respond to human need through acts of compassion. This priority is reflected in Jesus' choice of disciples. Among them are Matthew the tax collector, a collaborator with the Romans, and Simon the Zealot who may well have spilled Roman blood. Jesus has brought them together to be stewards of love who can transform the world in which they live.

It is to this work of spiritual transformation that we are called. As we dedicate our pledges we are making a statement about where we stand in the polarized world in which we live. Each pledge offered today is a sign of our willingness to live as stewards of love.