

This is a wonderful day as we celebrate our Presbyterian heritage with this Scottish Reformation Service.

The bagpipes, the kilts, the tartans – the stole that I wear is the clergy tartan and has the St. Andrew cross on the bottom - maybe even some haggis – the beadle with the Bible – all connect us with our religious roots in Scotland.

While the major source of our Reformed tradition is found in the Swiss Reformation of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich and John Calvin in Geneva, our American Presbyterian tradition is traced back to the Scottish Presbyterianism in which John Knox was the most important actor.

(An aside: If you want to give your Presbyterian preacher a tour of the Holy Land, know that for Presbyterians the Holy Land is actually Switzerland and Scotland!)

Now, I have to be honest with you that John Knox would not be pleased to see some of you here as he wrote in The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women: *To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; contumely to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.*

The woman that Knox had in mind was Mary, Queen of Scots.

He was brought before her for questioning, possible arrest and conviction for treason; it's an understatement that they had a very tense relationship, but note there is no second or third trumpet blast!

You see, one of the first things that the Church of Scotland did when it was restored was to establish schools of different grades for boys and girls in every parish throughout the kingdom, which were supported by public funds as to make education possible to the poorest in the community.

And through the Scottish Reformation and John Knox, women gained new educational possibilities and religion played a major part in the lives of many women.

So it really wasn't that John Knox resisted the role of women in society, what drove John Knox's opposition was his bedrock faith in the sovereignty and majesty of God and in the dignity of every human being to live in the presence of God.

Such is the essence of our reading from Psalm 8 this morning. As one commentator simply said of this psalm: “This is important: We are told that God is the cosmic sovereign whose majesty is visible in the whole world...and the salvation of those who pray is important because they are treasured by God.”

Most of us think of the psalms and the Scottish Reformation in terms of the psalter as the only hymnbook, only singing the psalms in church.

But the psalms are even more the sourcebook for Reformed theology, and this eighth psalm introduces us to what will be the big picture of the psalms, and will be developed in Reformed theology, a picture in which it is very clear that:

- God desires be honored by all peoples and all nations and God holds all nations and people accountable.
- Because we are close to God, we are more responsible than those who are far away; yet God holds all accountable before him.
- We hear of God's passion for justice in every nation, a justice which seems awfully slow to come. But we are called to be ambassadors of his justice even as we wait for that ultimate justice to come our way.
- And we hear of God's sovereign power over all peoples that puts our pride in perspective, that puts our power in perspective, leading us to humble ourselves before the mighty God even in the midst of a world that we don't fully understand.

These are the biblical building blocks on which John Knox formed the church in Scotland, and I

believe that Psalm 8 is a cornerstone psalm...one of the truly inspired and inspiring pieces of Scripture as the psalmist describes the most magnificent and important truth of who God is and who we are as human beings.

And this psalm traces its spiritual genealogy to the Shema, that foundational statement in Deuteronomy, *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*

You might recognize it as the source of Jesus’ answer about the Great Commandment in which Jesus is telling us that we do not belong to ourselves, we belong to One who made us.

This idea of the majesty of God and the sovereignty of God was what fed the passion of John Knox’s faith: *that you and I have no right to live for our lives for ourselves but for the One who made us.*

For this reason, we Presbyterians have been particularly concerned about the human tendency towards idolatry – the tendency to turn away from the living God and to serve and follow a small god, something less than God because the sin of idolatry leads to the sin of injustice – we treat other people less than the God-created creatures we all are; or we give to other people god-like powers that deny our own shared humanity.

You see, John Knox knew that small gods make for very big idols, very good idols.

Well, that is what happens with idolatry. We begin to make God into our image.

Eugene Peterson, a good Presbyterian pastor and writer, says, “While everyone has a hunger for God, deep and insatiable, none of us has any great desire for him. What we really want is to be our own gods, and to have whatever other gods that are around to help us in this work.”

Instead of allowing God to remake us in God’s image, we remake God in our image.

Peterson says that people come to church with the same mindset in which they go to the mall, to get something that will please them or satisfy a personal

desire – don’t necessarily need it, but it feels good to have it!

We turn away from the living God and glorify other people as means to an end; or we victimize other people instead of recognizing that everyone is valuable in the sight of God.

He says that most people would prefer to worship a god of their own making – a god who always agrees with them, and doesn’t make any demands of them or do anything unexpected.

We bring God down to size so that we can fit God into our hip pocket, in our wallet or in our purse so that God becomes no more to us than a credit card or a fake ID – that’s our tendency to idolatry – to have a false image of God, not who God really is, but a God who gets us what we want, where we want, when we want it.

God becomes no more to us than those things which make life easy, which enable us to keep on doing things our own way.

We tend to end up with a god actually made in the image of our culture, of the world in which we live today.

Martin Luther once proposed an interesting test to see what occupies the place of God in our life.

Luther said, “That to which you give your final loyalty, and from which you expect your highest help, that is your god.”

I think that is worth pondering. To what do we give our final loyalty? And from what do we expect our highest help? That, says Luther, is our god.

So conducted a test of my own. In preparing for this sermon, I did a little crowdsourcing on Facebook and requested my friends to complete the sentence, “You know your God is too small if...”

I received several replies. Most of them had something about your God is too small if you have to be in charge or in some ways try to control God or the faith you have or live.

One friend from Alabama answered in terms of my being from Louisiana and I quickly replied that you know your God is too small if his name is Nick Saban and your call to worship is 'Roll Tide'!

I did like what a pastor friend said, *"You know your God is too small if you think your preacher should never say anything that upsets you."*

Some answers reflected our present culture: *"...if it takes a political party to defend him or ...if you let politics determine friendships."*

A few made reference to our religious habits: *"You know your God is too small if grace is limited to words before a meal, instead of a way to respond to life..."* or *"...if you can carry God around between the covers of a prayer book."*

But it was my friend Paul Hooker, Associate Dean for Ministerial Formation and Advanced Studies at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, who brought it back to the mystery and majesty of our psalm *"You know your God is too small if you can finish this sentence."*

So who is this God in whom we believe? How big is this God or how small?

We do not believe in any old god or just 'some god out there.'

At the heart of the sovereignty and majesty of God, the Christian faith means we are not alone in this universe, but there is one infinite being to whom we can relate and to whom we are related intimately as family members.

This is the story of God from the beginning of the Bible to the very end of the Bible – an intimate relationship with the infinite God that is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

To believe in the sovereignty and majesty of God is to be ready to recognize the powerful presence and work of God's love and care in our own lives and in the world around us when there is disappointment, suffering, and death as well as in health, happiness, and success: not because God "sends" or "wills" the bad as well as the good but because nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

It has to do with the fact that we are called into life with a capital "L" from a big "G" God:

- To love someone else's life more than our own: reach out in support of another person's weakness when we ourselves are falling; give another person hope when we are close to despair; and offer forgiveness when we feel unforgiveable – as Jesus taught.
- To do what is tough: notice the weak and the poor, keep our eyes open for the blind who cannot see, and for the oppressed who are not free – as Jesus did.

This is the God to whom we belong, who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves, who is passionate about every sphere of life and calls us to be stewards of the earth and stewards of our lives to hand them back to the one who gave us life in the first place.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.