

JULY 25, 2021

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON: Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, 1 Samuel 7:12, Mark 14:21, psalm 23:1-6

This hymn was written in the mid 1700s in England by Robert Robinson. At age 14, Robert was sent off by his mother to learn to be a barber. For three years, as he was learning, he took up with a band of hoodlums, and as it's told lived a "debauched life". At 17, he and some of his friends decided they would go heckle a worship service held by "those deluded Methodists". The preacher at this service was none other than George Whitfield, widely regarded as one of the greatest preachers of his time.

Whitfield was so persuasive that rather than heckle the minister, Robinson ended up giving his life to the Lord. He became devoted, and wound up preaching in the Methodist movement. When he moved to Cambridge, he preached for the Baptists. At 23 Robert wrote the verses to this beloved hymn.

Noted in the write up of this hymn's history are two interesting pieces. First is his use of the term "Ebenezer". If you're anything like me, your biggest reference for this brings you straight to Dicken's A Christmas Carol, and Ebenezer Scrooge. In truth, this term is used in the verse in Samuel we heard this morning. It simply means "God's help", or "God's helping hand". In fact, the verse in which we find it refers to it right after as just that. The second is more tragic. He writes of God striving with us even though we are prone to "wander" and "leave" our God. Unfortunately, as he got older in years, he returned to a more unstable and sinful life, leaving orthodox Christianity for Unitarianism.

As a point of clarification, some significant things that separate Unitarianism from Christianity are 1) they do not believe in the Trinity and 2) they see Jesus as simply a man, and not divine.

At one point, there is a story of Robert riding in a coach, and conversing with a woman who was reading a hymn book. She was humming and asked if he knew what she was humming. He replied that he did, and that in fact he was the "poor fool who wrote it." He also confessed that had he in his possession every world that existed he would trade them all to feel the way he felt when he wrote those words.

Robert's life proves just as instructive for us as the hymn that he wrote.

The hymn itself is fairly straight forward. It speaks of the God who calls us, the Savior who redeems us, and the Spirit that walks with us even as we are tempted to walk away from God. It is a very Trinity kind of hymn. God calls us and ultimately desires to lead us "home" to God's kingdom.

The title of the hymn demands that we consider the notion of blessing. In a message six or so months ago we discussed the nature of blessing. There's no need to be redundant and reproach that message, though it is helpful to be reminded of what we saw., particularly given that this hymn exemplifies it.

Notice that there is nothing material or physical addressed as blessing in this hymn. It is all spiritual. It is about God's presence and grace working in our lives. This is consistent as we recall that the vast majority of God's blessing isn't material. It is the spiritual, gracious favor of God poured out to help us through whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. Blessing is simply that, God's favor poured out how, when, where, and why God so chooses. It is not up to us to command or demand. We are simply the creation, called to honor God in our lives, pay attention for God's favor expressed, and receive it when it is.

That we have no right or ability to command or control God's blessing is not a problem. This hymn also reminds us that God is a "fount" of blessing. When I think of a fount I think of a never ending wellspring. A limitless supply that gushes out. This is the nature of God's blessing. We don't need to command or demand it, we simply need to look for the abundance of what God is already doing. God doesn't want us abandoned or alone, or unable to fulfill God's calling. As such God's equipping is generous. We merely must look for what God is doing rather than focus on what we are wanting.

God's abundant blessing directs us to arguably the most popular Psalm ever written, Psalm 23. "My cup overflows." What does this tell us? It tells us that when God gives us what we need to get through a situation, the blessing isn't just enough to get us through. God isn't stingy. It is more than enough. In fact, however depleted our "cup" is, blessing goes beyond the brim and runs out. The question now is "what do we do with the excess?" Do we hoard it? Do we ignore it? We do neither. We share it. The abundance of strength, grace, direction, purpose, compassion, healing, whatever it is we are intended to pass on to bless others. Just as God is generous, so we too are called to be generous as well. What does this look like in practice? Allow me two illustrations.

The first we experienced at the breakfast last Sunday when the gospel group Second Chances ministered to us through their music. They have been blessed with both the ability to sing, and to minister through that singing abundantly. They share that gift, and in turn bless those to whom they minister. They pass it on and God is glorified. They don't have to. They could simply not sing as a group and just sing in the pew on Sundays basking in the compliments they receive. They could choose to sing secularly, even joining in the many songs out there that simply shouldn't be sung. They could. They don't. Their cup runs over and they share it.

There is more to their story. Owen and I spoke with them after the service. We learned that they are all gainfully, successfully employed. They don't need the money. So they put all they receive from their engagements into a bank account. Being from Maryland, every Christmas they work with Title 1 schools to provide Christmas for families in need. Last year I believe they served nearly 150 families. Not only do they bless in ministry, they bless materially. Their cup runs over, and over, and over, and spills into the lives of many to honor God.

They did wonderfully last Sunday, however there is one correction I feel compelled to make. The comment was made that it is "impossible to praise God and be unhappy at the same time." This is not accurate. Our next illustration makes the point.

Many years ago, I knew a man whose seven year old son was killed in a bicycle accident. He was so small the driver didn't see him. The car struck the child on the bike and the injuries were fatal. A few months after the father buried his child, he stood before a congregation and sang a solo. The song he sung was The Peace Speaker. It goes like this:

I know the Peace Speaker

And I know Him by name

I know the Peace Speaker

He controls the wind and the rain

When He says "peace be still"

All the winds will obey

I know the Peace Speaker

And I know Him by name

He was praising God. He wasn't happy. He was broken, grieving, even lost. He sang through tears, a breaking voice, and having to pull himself together several times through the song. Still, he sang. He ministered. He praised.

How is this abundance of blessing?

The blessing he received was strength. It wasn't his own strength that allowed him to perform. There was no conceivable way he could, yet he did. God's strength filled him up and overflowed to the rest of us there that service. We were all blessed. We were inspired. I doubt anyone was going through the same depth of trial that day, and so together we knew whatever we were going through we could make it. I don't know that he had peace, and perhaps he sang to remind himself of where his peace could be found. In doing so he reminded us.

It doesn't matter if we are receiving God's favor in a high or low point of life. When it overflows and we share, it blesses others just as God intends.

Unfortunately, moments of trial and tragedy can draw us near to God and open us to God's blessing, or we can become jaded and walk away. I think this is something of what happened to Robert Robinson. He walked away, and in doing so suffered loss.

A similar story is the life of Charles Templeton. Templeton was a great man of faith, a colleague, contemporary, and even fellow preacher with Billy Graham. His ministry was powerful. Yet something happened along the way. In observing the evils of the world and tragedies of life, his faith faltered. The straw that broke the camel's back was when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Faith* and *The Case for Christ*, interviewed him. In the interview, as a result of the above, Templeton made the emphatic statement that given the evils in the world and horrors of existence there can absolutely, certainly, in no way exist a loving God. He walked away from the God he once so passionately served.

At the same time, he revealed something that to many may be confusing. While he walked away from any notion of the loving God, he still held that Jesus is the most amazing, important, and powerful man ever to have lived. That Jesus is the utmost example of morality, love, justice, ethics, and all good things. That any good and decent in his own life came from emulating Jesus.

While he had walked away from God, somehow he remained disciplined to Jesus.

As these two sensibilities converged in the interview, Templeton began to sob, shoulder shaking sob. Through the tears he said "I...miss...him." Strobel didn't know quite what to make of it. Should he comfort him? Keep the interview going? Curious as to what he missed, Strobe asked him. Templeton composed himself, waved his hand and simply said "enough of that."

Both Robinson and Templeton in their dismissal of God, suffered loss and despair. When we read in scripture regarding the one who betrayed Jesus that "it would be better for him never to be born", sometimes we may misread it. Many see this as Jesus condemning Judas to an eternity of misery. Perhaps it was, perhaps not. What is instructive is the fallout. How did Judas encounter his demise? At his own hand. The grief, guilt, and despair he felt at the betrayal was too much for him to endure.

This is what I think Jesus is referring to. The fallout from walking away. To taste God's goodness and leave it is to also leave an unfulfilled hole in ourselves. The result is a longing that doesn't cease.

An important lesson remains for us here. God is generous in blessing. God wants to overflow us. But God will not force it on us.

Think of the coffee pots we have in the kitchen. Something happened last week, that I myself have fallen victim to. We have this amazing coffee maker that's smarter than I am. I went to start the brew and it had old coffee packets in the strainer. It wouldn't brew and literally had a message that read as to whether or not the grounds were fresh. It wouldn't let me start it until I'd replaced the old with fresh. That's crazy. In order fill the pot, there is a hatch on the top that opens up when placed under the drip to let it fill the pot up.

But what happens if you forget to open the hatch? Sidebar here, let me assure you that for some reason while it senses the grounds, it won't sense if the hatch is open or closed. It would be wonderfully convenient if it didn't brew until the hatch is open. Unfortunately, such is not the case. The hatch was closed, the coffee brewed, and decorated the counter and floor with brown liquid deliciousness.

We are like those pots. We choose to open or close the hatch. Neither stops God's blessings from flowing. It only changes if we receive them. It only changes whether or cup runs over, or remains dry and empty.

One of the most beautiful attributes of God is that God's faithfulness is never in question. God is always there, always trying to bless, always loving, always calling, always drawing, always wanting to redeem. God is never more than a prayer away. We are never abandoned, never forsaken. It's always, and always will be up to us. Are we open or closed to God's grace?

Think of the prodigal son. He left of his own accord. His father never wanted him to go, but allowed him to choose. Not unlike Robinson and Templeton, squandering what he had, the son found loss and despair. He returned expecting anger, and that at best he might be hired on as an employee. What did he find? None of that. He found a father who was just happy to see him return. That's all he wanted, his son back. He ran to him, hugged him, and celebrated. Nothing of what the son feared awaited him. Just a joyful, grateful father.

This is God. When we turn away, and all of us have and in some way still do, sometimes when we realize it we might be afraid of what God's reaction will be if we dare to turn our face back to God. Will God smite us? Spank us? Rail against us? No. God will be like the father. He is just glad we've come back, celebrates our reunion, loves us, and seeks to restore us and move us further forward.

Today every one of us is turned off direction somewhere. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. When you become aware of it, have no fear of what it means to course correct and turn back to God. There is only one thing awaiting. Welcome, love, mercy, and joy that you have returned. This is one more overflowing blessing, and one that we have the privilege to share with others as we shine Christ into the world.