

Sermon: Sweet Hour of Prayer

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 22, 2023)

In 1842, William W. Walford, an obscured, blind lay preacher who served in the hamlet of Coleshill, Warwickshire, England, with the help of his friend Thomas Salmon, penned down a poem, which would be published three years later in the New York Observer. It starts with these lines:

Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
That calls us from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known.

In seasons of distress and grief;
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter's snare
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

This text and the subsequent three other stanzas will eventually be set to tune in 1859, by the famous American gospel writer William Bradbury. The hymn in its final form known as the "Sweet Hour of Prayer", fosters in the hearers a desire for a private prayer, that seeks refuge from temptations and trials, and pours out the depths of one's soul before God, who already knows our "wants and wishes". It is not an exaggeration to say this hymn has since touched hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides of the Atlantic, and has become one of the more beloved hymns in the English language.

Prayer as a spiritual discipline of the Christian faith, has, unfortunately, fallen by the wayside. Part of the problem, as I see it, is our misconception of what prayer actually is. Allow me to show you this cartoon collection on prayer, by Glasbergen, an American syndicated cartoonist best known for his satirical humour.

We start with a preacher, praying from behind a pulpit, with an slightly altered version of the Lord's prayer, "...Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who call to harass us about our debts..."

How about this grandmother, seemingly lecturing a young boy who is holding a cellphone, saying, “Wireless communication is nothing new. I’ve been praying for 75 years!”

Or the same young boy, still holding a cellphone, asking his dad, “If I send my prayer as a text message, will I get a faster reply?” Think of it, in a world where we get from Google or Bing or other search engines, instantaneous response to any question we may have, what is the allure of praying?

How about this one, a gentleman answering the question from his financial advisor, “I do have a diversified retirement plan: 30% hopes, 30% wishes, 40% prayers.” Does that sound like a good retirement plan to you?

This last one is a bit disturbing, depicting a scene where a doctor is telling a dying patient, “You are a very, very sick man. Ask your family to pray for your insurance company.” Presumably that the company will pay out the promised death benefit from the life insurance policy.

I know, I know, these are just silly cartoons, but they do challenge us to reflect on prayer—What is prayer? What is its purpose? To whom do we address our prayers?

Our lectionary reading of Exodus 33 takes us to a personal prayer, a private dialogue between Moses and God. It was set in the aftermath of that terrible episode of the Golden Calf, where the Israelites bowed down before an golden idol of their own making. Although Moses stood at the breach and staved off God’s wrath from wiping out an entire people, God was still not pleased.

So God said to Moses, in Exodus 33:1, “*Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt...I will send an angel before you... but I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.*”

What a terrible thing it is to know that the Lord’s wrath has not been abated, that the Lord will not go with you. What a terrible thing it is to realize that in spite of repentance on a communal level, the Lord is still angry enough to destroy you, or the people whom the Lord is no longer calling his own.

It is in such a context, Moses prayed. Prayer in this context took the form of a dialogue between Moses and the Lord God, which I’ll break down to three parts: **lead me**; **lead us**; and **show me your glory**.

Moses began his prayer with ‘**lead me**’. Actually, he said to God in verse 13, “*Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your*

ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight.” It is a prayer to bring one closer to God.

Author and pastor Ralph W. Sockman describes, in his book *The Higher Happiness*, the true intention of prayer: “We use prayer as a boatman uses a boat hook: to pull the boat to the shore and not to try to pull the shore to the boat.” I always find that description to be such a simple and ingenious insight, for it is futile to try to pull the shore while one is on a boat. Go ahead, give it a try, you will only accomplish pulling the boat closer to shore, not the other way around.

However, irregardless of one’s intention, the end result is always the same—that the distance between the boat and the shore decreases and diminishes. Isn’t that the way with prayer, as we see in the dialogue between Moses and God? So God replied to Moses in verse 14, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Do you see God’s position softening?

Next, Moses implored God to ‘**lead us**’, that is prayer brings God’s blessing closer to God’s people. So in verse 15-16, Moses said to God, “*If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. For 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.*”

Notice what Moses did in this intercession? He changed the language that God used earlier, of ‘you and the people you brought up’, meaning Moses and the people that he brought up, to ‘your people’, meaning God’s people. It’s a minor shift that can be easily missed, but it comes with a major implication—that is Moses is shifting the conversation from ‘me’ to ‘us’. If God has already set apart Moses from the Israelites, shouldn’t God also set the Israelites apart from the rest of nations? That is the language of intercession, the prayer of intercession.

German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, had this to say about intercession. “A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others.”

In response to this intercessory prayer of Moses, God said in verse 17, “I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.” Yes, two out of two. This prayer is really going Moses’ way, so he boldly asked this third and final request: ‘show me your glory’.

‘Show me your glory’ is a prayer that advances the Kingdom of God, as seeing the glory of God is equivalent to seeing the Kingdom of God. We recall when Moses was first called at the burning bush in Exodus 3, the first time he faced the glory of God. We recalled when he was instructed by God to take off his sandal, for the ground on which he was standing is holy ground. Did Moses comply? No, of course not! Instead, Moses covered his face because he was fearful. He didn’t know God then, but now he does. After all that he had been through with God, after all that he witnessed and experienced, Moses boldly asked God: “show me your glory”.

That may have been a bridge too far, as God replied in verse 19, “*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. But,*” he said, “*you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.*”

The grace of God has limitation, the goodness of God is sufficient, and the glory of God cannot be seen. That is until the God incarnate, as proclaimed in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, in verse 14, “*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” And continuing to verse 18, “*No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.*”

Know him we do, in the person of Jesus Christ, our friend, our brother, our intercessor, our saviour. Therefore, I will conclude this reflection by the prayer that Jesus prayed, in the garden of Gethsemane, shortly before he was crucified to the cross, a prayer that would be the model, the key to all prayers of followers of Christ, “*O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.*” Indeed, not as I will, but as You will.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**