

Sermon: Honey From the Rock

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 31, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you happen to catch the news that Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce are engaged. Kelce, the tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs, and Swift, the best-selling and wealthiest musician of all time, have been dating for the past two years. Their engagement, announced via Instagram, though not really a surprise, nevertheless caught the social media by storm. 24 million likes in the first 24 hr alone, to this simply heart-warming message, “Your music teacher and your gym teacher are getting married.” Isn’t that something!

You got to put it to Swift—she seems to do everything right. From her early success, capturing the hearts and minds of teenagers everywhere, her business acumen, buying back her earlier label from greedy and controlling studios, to her prolific touring, the latest Era tour grossing over \$2 billion, which she promptly shared a portion with her people—other musicians, handlers, technicians, dancers, the whole-nine-yard. Everything Taylor does seems well thought through, and right on the mark. Never a scandal, just sweet and wholesome news and images coming out of her.

What can I say about her music: while I am not a huge fan of break-up songs, there are nevertheless a few that have grabbed my attention (and my heart—a sort of secret guilty pleasure), like ‘Blank Space’, ‘Shake It Off’, and my personal favourite ‘Twenty-Two’.

Yes, Daisy and the boys kind of find it funny that Dad actually likes and listens to Taylor Swift. Yes, guilty as charged. What she represents, and her career over the past twenty or so years does pose a challenge to a preacher like me: that is, how does one preach against idolatry when there comes an idol worthy of idolizing?

Idolatry, in the biblical sense, is the act of worshipping anything other than the Creator God, whether it be a carved idol, a concept, or a person. Such worship may not take the form of actually prostrating oneself physically, it may be simply as substituting the One True God with an idol, in a person’s heart, thoughts and devotion.

In the North American context, gone were the days when one bows down to an actual carved idol (though such practice is still rampant in many other parts of the world). In so far as North America context is concerned (the legions of Swifties notwithstanding) idolatry mostly takes the form of ‘something-ism’; individualism, consumerism, nationalism, militarism, secularism, just to name a few.

Now, some of you might question how secularism made it to my list of idolatry, just watch what is happening in Quebec. Under the current CAQ government’s proposal, public prayer in all forms may soon be banned. I don’t have time to delve more into it today, but it really is a deplorable situation that deserves more of our attention.

My point being that faith in the Triune God, in our current context, is simply one among many that is vying for our attention, contemplation, dedication and devotion. Faith in the One True God has become a mere proposition raising its voice in a marketplace of polytheistic shouts, and its ultimate outcome is far from assured.

It occurs to me that the biblical Israel, a subject I touched on couple of weeks ago, existed also in a sea of polytheism of its time. Psalm 81, our responsive reading today, sheds light on how the psalmist envisions faith and encourages the people of God to remain faithful.

The psalmist first begins with: “*Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.*” It is an invitation for the people of God to offer to God their unadulterated praise. Not only with their voices, but with tambourine, with lyre, with harp and with trumpet, for a festal day is to be observed.

Psalm 81 is usually sung during Sukkot, or the feast of booths, a joyous harvest festival when all Israelites are to go out from their cities, from any permanent structure, to build a temporary living quarter, usually a flimsy tent, in remembrance of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It is the nation’s way of reflecting on their ongoing relationship with the Holy One of Israel. How does one dwell with God? What is one’s place in the Kingdom of God, in light of this invitation, such promise in verse 10, “*Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it*”? It is also a way for the people to reflect how we are to live with others—those within our own community, as well as strangers in our midst: visitors, travellers, temporary foreign workers, migrants, and refugees.

The week-long festivity of Sukkot, is then followed by the solemn Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in a structure mirrored by Psalm 81, as in verse 11-12, *“But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.”* Idolatry is seen as turning away from listening to the voice of God, to then follow one’s own desire, one’s own counsels. It is the original sin committed by Adam and Eve, the first human, and it is replayed over and over again in subsequent generations, right down to our own.

But the beauty of this psalm is in the lament in verse 13, “O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways.” The heart of God is thereby revealed. It should come as no surprise to many that God desires repentance. When people venture astray, God is like that father, standing by the door, with arms wide open, waiting patiently for his prodigal son to return: Return to me! Why should you be eating with swines and mocked by your foes? Why should you perish? Repent, seek life, life to the fullest..

The irony of Sukkot is the blessed chosen people, choosing to live in temporary structures, while extending blessing more to strangers than to self. The irony of Day of Atonement is that God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6), yet the people of God are often unwilling to extend that same mercy to forgive a neighbour who may have wronged them.

Nevertheless, the psalmist concludes Psalm 81 by answering the question left open from verse 10, “Open your mouth, I will fill it!” Fill it with what? With ‘the finest of the wheat; and with ‘honey from the rock’.

Karl Rahner, one of the more influential theologians of the 20th century, had this to say about heresy and orthodoxy, in his book *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, that our greatest heresy surely must be that God’s grace is scarce. Rahner contends that it is not scarce, rather from abundance to abundance is the better way to describe and to understand God. Indeed, the better orthodoxy does not derive from narrow doctrine or excluding law, but rather from sweet ‘honey from the rock’.

2015-16 was a trying time in my family life. Kids were growing up fast, financial demands were outpacing our meagre ability to provide, ministry was hard, taking a toll on all of us. Daisy had returned to oil painting, after a ten year hiatus due to child bearing and rearing. She had taken to abstract painting, some of her best works were done back then.

I recalled when she first re-engaged painting, she was tentative in her expression. One might say her use of colour was guarded, tending towards blueish and greenish hue, one might even say on a sadder tone. Who is to know with abstract painting, it really is in the eye of the beholder.

However, in her exhibition that year, at Galerie Espace in Montreal, titled “Feed me honey from the rock”, there was an explosion in subject matters and colours: fiery red, brilliant yellow, deep purple, saturated green, just to name a few. Google it and see for yourself.

The bulletin cover this week, displays her particular painting “Honey from the Rock”, my personal favourite, which is now in my private collection. Apology for the black and white print, but if you check St. Giles’ website, you can see the full range of colours used in that piece—portraying what might’ve been like when golden honey unexpectedly oozes out from a grey rock. Of course her inspiration is Psalm 81. As I understand it, this painting is a prayer on her part, while holding on to the promise on the part of God.

As I now look back and reflect on our journey of faith in the past ten years, I can only say: thank you Lord, you have indeed been gracious and merciful. You have indeed fed us with the finest wheat and with honey from the rock. From abundance to abundance is your grace, to me, to my family, and to all those whom have serve you wholeheartedly. And I think no amount of idolizing Taylor Swift would ever come close to the joy of knowing that You, Lord God, is for us and with us.

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