

Romans 6:1-11
Come Thou Font of Every Blessing
August 27th, 2017

In our hymnal every hymn tells a story, and behind every hymn there is a story. If you memorized the words of our hymns you would possess the sum of our teachings as Methodists.

If you memorized our hymns you would have a song for every occasion, every trial, every joy in life.

The whole spectrum of Christian and human life is addressed in our hymns: birth, baptism, death, life, love, service, salvation, fear, freedom, praise of God, commitment, trial, comfort and assurance; the assurance of the love of God that forgives all our sins, the grace of God that grants new life and freedom.

Today I've picked the story behind, and the story within the hymn, "Come Thou Font of Every Blessing", as the text for my sermon. It was written by Robert Robinson at the age of 23 in 1758.



Robert had a rough beginning in life. His father died while he was young. His mother was unable to control him, so she sent him to London to learn barbering. What he learned instead was drinking and gang life. Yes, gangs are nothing new. There are always those around who prey on the orphaned and fatherless.

When he was 17 he and his friends visited a fortune teller. They were drunk and laughed as she tried to tell their fortunes. But something about the encounter bothered Robert, and that evening he suggested to his buddies they attend an evangelistic meeting being held by George Whitefield.

Whitefield was one of history's greatest preachers with a voice (as he has been described) part foghorn and part violin. Whitefield could

preach to 10,000 people at a time and they could hear and understand him and be moved by his preaching.

Whitefield preached from Matthew 3:7, “**But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Scribes coming to his baptism, he said, to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’**”

Bursting into tears, Whitefield exclaimed, “Oh my hearers! The wrath to come! The wrath to come!”

Robert immediately sobered up and sensed Whitefield had been preaching directly to him. The preacher’s words haunted him for nearly three years until December 10, 1755, when he gave his heart to Christ.

Robert soon entered the ministry and three years later wrote this hymn for Pentecost Sunday as a prayer that the Holy Spirit flood into our lives with streams of mercy, (for the sins we had committed) enabling us to sing praises to God and remain faithful to God.

With this in mind let’s again sing verse one!

*“Come thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace,
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.*

*Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I’m fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.”*

“Personal holiness”, being holy as God is holy brings glory to God and peace, wholeness, and health to our lives. Another way of saying this is that if we live our lives like Jesus’ life, we follow his way, we live as his disciple, then peace, wholeness and health will enter our lives.

Robert Robinson’s life was an absolute mess before he responded to Jesus: a dead father, living out of control and in rebellion to his mother, abusing alcohol and involved in gang life and the occult. His life was any thing but peaceful and whole and healthy. He was anything but holy.

One aspect of his life I want to lift up is his alcohol abuse. It was rampant in his day and age. The gin houses would advertise, “**Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two**”.

Alcohol abuse today is not so cheap, but it’s just as real and destructive and in our midst today. Alcohol’s twin is illegal drug abuse and today most lump the two together and call it, “Substance abuse.” Today the type of addiction we hear most about is “Opioids”. The abuse of legal pain relievers that leads to addiction and when people are cut off from legal pain relievers they often turn to Heroin, which is cheap and easy to get.

The National Institute On Drug Abuse gives the following statistics, “In 2015, over 33,000 Americans died as a result of an opioid overdose. That year, an estimated 2 million people in the United States suffered from substance use disorders related to prescription opioid pain medicines (including fentanyl), and 591,000 suffered from a heroin use disorder (not mutually exclusive).”

Alcohol abuse is just as destructive today as 250 years ago. It destroys lives, families, jobs, businesses, marriages and friendships and the wake of destruction is wide and endless. In the US it kills about 88,000 people a year

If I asked people to raise their hands if alcohol has negatively affected their family or friends there wouldn’t be a hand left down including mine in this Sanctuary.

We all know that and the sad thing is often we don’t speak of it, and so it leaves family and friends stuck, not in , “The Wrath to come”, but in the wrath, the pain, the destruction that is already here present in their lives!

And we often fail to lift up the hope and power of God that can and does change hearts and lives and lead people to health and wholeness to the Praise and Glory of God: To personal holiness or as it is often put, “**Clean and sober lives.**”

This is a problem in each and every church, and one thing I've discovered through the years is the denial of the problem by those who are addicted.

In a previous church I worked with a Rehab House and Mesa's largest AA group. Many of them were members of our church. They sang in the choir, played in the band, worked with the youth.

Some left that life of addiction never to return. Some suffered relapse after relapse, and some spoke to me of an almost unending desire to relapse that was a daily battle.

Many of the denials I heard went like this, "It's only one drink." "It's only one hit." "I don't have a problem." "It's only on the weekend." "It is only beer." "It is only wine." "It doesn't hurt anybody but me." And all the while jobs were lost, marriages ruined, and friendships lost forever as people choose their love for drugs and alcohol over love for family and friends.

But yes, there were successes such as Robert Robinson who wrote this song. Men like Reverend Doctor Nate Holt, who threw away a successful law career to drink himself down to parking cars for a living. But one day at a Lay Witness mission in response to an invitation he gave his heart to Jesus! He was healed of his addiction immediately and told me he never so much as ever desired alcohol again! Health, wholeness and holiness returned to his life.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit he was set free and healed.

The 4th verse of "O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" speaks of this experience and expresses it for all. **"He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free."**

Let's sing of this freedom in Christ, this grace that frees as we sing verse 2 of our hymn.

*"Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home."*

Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God, he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.”

To sing this verse and understand it we need to get the image of Ebenezer Scrooge out of our heads. An “Ebenezer” was a stone of remembrance. Say that with me, **“A stone of remembrance.”**

It goes back to Samuel, 1 Samuel 7:12, when the Israelites were fighting the Philistines and won by the help of God.

Literally, Ebenezer means, **“Stone of help”**, a stone reminding us of God’s help. Samuel propped up a stone and named it Ebenezer to remind him, and all the Israelites, that God helped them that day and God would help them in the days to come. For Robert Robinson his Ebenezer-his reminder of the help and Grace of God came in George Whitefield’s preaching. The seed was planted then, which bore fruit 3 years later.

God’s first word to him, God’s first sign of His grace came to him while he was **drunk** sitting in the parlor of a fortune teller.

As the words of the verse say, **“Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.”**

And God did save him, God did help him. The verse ends, **“He to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.”**

Again and again and again I have listened to people tell me of the time and place God called them to wholeness, health and healing.

They achieved this through the power and help of God and their own **“response-ability.”**

Even though it’s the power of God that heals, we have a **“response-ability”** to respond. It takes an act of our will - a decision to be clean and sober in order for it to happen. The Holy Spirit empowers us to do this.

The free gift of God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit is there to then make it happen. **'We have died to sin, but we must choose to be alive in Christ' as our scripture says.** We must grab onto that higher power, **that power of Jesus Christ that heals and makes whole, holy, and healthy.** We must "Repent and Believe."

The most successful program I know of for treating addiction in America is **"Teen Challenge"** a Christ centered program. It has the highest cure rate and the lowest relapse rate of any program in the U.S. And it is not just for teens. In fact most of the people I have met in the program are significantly older than teens many in their 30s and 40s.

AA and NA have done fantastic things for people and I highly recommend them. And denial is not just a problem for those who are addicted. It is a problem for those who live with addicts. Sometimes the route to a clean and sober life for an addict begins when a person who loves them goes for help to such groups as Alanon.

Now for some the bondage, the fetter of addiction is broken immediately upon response and commitment to God like my friend Rev. Nate Holt. For most others it is a daily, continuing struggle to remain clean and sober, which is why recovery groups such as AA are so important, and groups like the Church itself. When we turn from something we need to turn toward Someone and some ones to help us.

God works in and through the lives of others to keep us clean and whole and holy. For some it seems like it is easy and the break with addiction is immediate. For most others it is a day by day, even moment by moment struggle for the rest of their lives. That desire needs be replaced with a desire for God and the fellowship of others, if not the chances of backsliding or relapsing increase.

That is the meaning of Jesus' saying in Matthew 12:44-45 about the return of an unclean spirit to a cleaned house. **"Then (the unclean spirit) says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order.**

Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.” We must fill that emptiness with God and the people of God who help us.

This Robert Robinson recognized in verse 3 when he wrote, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love,…”

In a moment we will sing verse 3. I encourage you to pray it as you sing it either for yourself or a loved one.

If you or a loved one is struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, here and now is your Ebenezer. Here and now is your **stone of help**.

It is time for you to respond. It is time for you to receive the ability to overcome. **It is time for you to practice response-ability.**

Respond here and now, and receive health and wholeness, holiness and new life.

Let us sing verse 3 now:

*“O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.*

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.”*

My friends don’t be ashamed to ask for and seek help. Call me or speak to a Stephen Minister and we will put you in touch with the people and places that can help! Names and numbers of groups that can help are in our bulletin. What is God saying to you and what are you going to do? In Jesus’ name amen.

Prayer for freedom from addiction....

Last hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” is a prayer of trust and praise for what God has done.