

**“I HAVE A REPERTOIRE, TOO: HYMNS TO
STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH 1: COME THOU FOUNT OF
EVERY BLESSING”**

PSALM 96, 1 SAMUEL 7:5-13A
EPHESIANS 1:3-14

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

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OCTOBER 8, 2017

In early August, Tyler and I received an e-mail from Tom saying he wanted to discuss an idea for a sermon series. I shot back an enthusiastic e-mail, “Oh yay! I love sermon series! I can’t wait to hear your idea.” As we sat around the table in the church library, Tom began outlining his series, “My Repertoire: Hymns to Strengthen our Faith.” As I scanned the list of hymns and the dates, I realized he had skipped over my Sunday’s to preach. It read simply, “Kelly preaches.” I was crestfallen. I was so ready for a good sermon series and a little break from the lectionary, but I had been excluded. Pouting, I said, “how come I’m not included in the series?” “Uh, well, this is MY repertoire of songs.....” Tom began. “But I have a repertoire too,” I whined. And so, my miniseries of two sermons on two of my favorite hymns in my repertoire was born. When trying to decide what we’d call my two sermons, Tom smiled and said, “I have a repertoire too!” So, here is the first in my miniseries, “I have a Repertoire too: Hymns to Strengthen our Faith.”

It was easy to pick the two I wanted to include in my miniseries. Tom and I have many of the same favorite hymns. I could easily preach on those he has offered up this fall. I’m not suggesting my reflections would be as eloquent or meaningful, but our repertoires have much overlap. The two I will offer are my absolute favorites, however, so I was thrilled they were not on Tom’s list.

Today’s hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” is my number one, absolute, top of the list favorite. This is the hymn I hum quietly to myself when driving or working around the house. This is the hymn Kristen and I sang to Cora when she was still in utero. Each time it elicited a response as Cora kicked and moved around inside me. I’m pretty sure it is her favorite hymn as well.

This is the hymn that I hear through her baby monitor (our poor PK is subjected to a playlist of lullabies that is made up almost entirely of hymns and church music) - but this song, unlike the others will stop me in my tracks when I hear its grainy tune through the baby monitor and causes me to take a deep breath and notice where I am and what I am doing at that moment. It brings me into the present moment. This is the hymn that has carried me through difficult times, grief, and sadness. I hope and pray all of you have a hymn like this in your life - one that acts as a life preserver and a link to your faith and to God.

So why do I love it? Well, I love the tune. It is lovely, easy to sing, and seems to flow out of the mouth and heart. I'm sure Tyler can explain why that is in technical terms but as one who knows very little about music theory, I just like it. It's beautiful and it makes my heart sing. More importantly, I love the words, the poetry, and the rich imagery of this hymn.

The first line is almost enough: "Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace." The hymn begins by placing us before God from whom all blessing flow - meaning that all the good, the beauty, the joy, the wonder, the challenge, the growth, and the love in my life is from God. Every blessing I enjoy today and every blessing I have ever enjoyed is from God. From the first line of this hymn, our perspective is reordered and rightly ordered.

So often, we think the goodness, success, and joy in our life is due to our hard work, our determination, our devotion, but this is not the case. Every blessing is from God. When we live in gratitude for the blessing offered, our hearts are tuned by the love of God and we more clearly see the grace that pervades our lives.

The Sufi poet, Hafiz, has a beautiful line in one of his poems "The heart is a thousand-stringed instrument that can only be tuned with love." This hymn is a hymn to that love.

It was written by Robert Robinson to accompany his sermon on Pentecost Sunday in 1758. You have probably noticed the reference to "flaming tongues above" or the tongues of fire that rested upon the early disciples when the Holy Spirit filled them on Pentecost.

As the story goes, Robert was just a boy when his father died. This meant that he had to go work despite his young age. His mother sent him to London to be an apprentice. Without any guidance, however, he fell in with a notorious gang of hoodlums and lived a rather corrupt life.

One source tells the story this way, "one day his gang of rowdies harassed a drunken gypsy: pouring liquor into her, they demanded she tell their fortunes for free. Pointing her finger at Robert she told him he would live to see his children and grandchildren. This struck a tender spot in his heart. "If I'm going to live to see my

children and grandchildren,” he thought, “I’ll have to change my way of living. I can’t keep on like I’m going now.”

I’m not sure if this story is a hundred percent true, but something did inspire Robert to go hear the well-known and powerful Methodist preacher, George Whitefield. Robert was so impressed and moved by Whitefield’s sermon that he left changed. Several years later, he entered the ministry himself.

Robert knew what it was to wander from God, but he also had a powerful experience of God’s grace and God’s love. The hymn is full of images of God’s movement towards us. God is the fount of every blessing. God’s streams of mercy are never ceasing. God’s love is unchanging. God is our Ebenezer - our stone of help, referring to our 1 Samuel text we read this morning. And we are claimed by God, through Christ Jesus who sought us out even when strangers and wandering from God.

Robert’s hymn is all about the love that tunes the thousand-stringed instrument of our hearts. We are tuned by love, by grace, by mercy, and by God’s help.

Robert is also vulnerable and honest about our tendency to wander from this God of love and grace. Perhaps my favorite line in the whole hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” Each time I sing that line, I am reminded of the truth of those words. We, or maybe I should speak for myself, I am prone to wander and to look for comfort, peace, joy, and meaning in other places. I don’t intend to do this because I truly love God. Maybe it is weakness or sin or distractibility or fear or even business. It is easy to look for meaning in our jobs, in our relationships, in the stars, in predictions for the future, in science, in our own sense of worth and importance. We are often distracted by the lure and the pleasures of this world such that our pursuit of wealth, comfort, and ease distort our relationship with God. The fears of this world also cause us to wander, to doubt, to question, and even leave the God we love.

A gunman raining bullets down upon a crowd gathered to enjoy an outdoor concert creates fear in us and robs us of our sense of security and safety. We wonder where God is in such a heinous act. Our fear causes us to questions - everything. If it can happen in Las Vegas, to other people’s children and family members, surely it can happen here and to our children and loved ones. I would be lying if I said I’m not worried about the world my child will inherit. I am worried for her safety and I pray she can and will be able to enjoy movies, concerts, dance clubs, and her kindergarten class without the fear of gun violence.

On Wednesday, as we gathered for our monthly staff meeting, Tom asked our thoughts on the shooting in Las Vegas. One staff person suggested that it was our collective move away from God and Christian morals that have led to such horrendous acts of violence and evil. I think the answer is much more complicated than this and involves the easy

access to semi-automatic weapons, the stigma of mental health diagnosis, fear of the other, desperation, and deeply wounded individuals to name a few.

I do think; however, the staff member was onto something. But first, let me be clear and say that I do not think this country is or needs to be a Christian nation. That ship sailed a long time ago. Our diversity is one of our greatest strengths, so I am not in favor of our nation returning to a narrow Christian understanding of God or morals.

But as I said, I still think the staff member was pointing to something important. Hafiz wisely writes, “The heart is a thousand-stringed instrument. Our sadness and fear come from being out of tune with love.” Certainly, Steven Paddock was out of tune with love. One who knows oneself to be deeply loved cannot take the lives of other beloved children of God. For whatever reason, maybe mental health, he was unable to hear or had not heard in a way that mattered that he was loved and valued and claimed by God.

I believe the church and faithful Christians are essential to the healing of this world.

In a world desperate for love, we proclaim that Christ seeks us even when wandering from the fold of God. Even when we sin, even when we are broken, even when we feel unworthy, we are sought and claimed and rescued from the danger of our own egos and self-torment. We are loved not because we deserve it, for all of us sin, and too often live for ourselves. We are loved because we are God’s children. As our Ephesians texts put it, “[God] destined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of God’s glorious grace freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

In a world desperate for forgiveness, we sing that streams of mercy are never ceasing. Not one of us is so broken that we cannot be redeemed. Our pasts do not define us. And whether we like it or not, this forgiveness extends even to those we think unforgivable. But in the end, that is good news, for nothing we can do will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we are never lost, never hopeless, never without the possibility of redemption and new life.

In a world desperate for connection, we ask God to bind our wandering hearts to thee. We belong to God and that connection matters more than any other. In God we are known, valued, and loved; we find a connection to God and one another. The church is a body of broken and redeemed people who find themselves bound to one another through faith and through God’s love. Market Square strives to make it clear that that invitation extends to all. Here we are all connected, we are family, and everyone is welcome.

In a world desperate for hope, we intone, “teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above.” Make our words, our songs, our heart rhythms beautiful melodies inspired by the Holy Spirit. Make our speaking understandable to the nations. Make our preaching poetry. Make our words, actions, and prayers melodious

such that the world sees beauty and grace. Make our words, words of peace aflame with hope.

We are called in this time of violence and hatred, this time of destruction, to be the church and to proclaim a love that is greater than the evil we saw perpetrated in Las Vegas and greater than the devastation visited upon the people Puerto Rico. We are called to reach out and to demand our leaders offer support to those in need. We are called to prayer as well, praying that our hearts are tuned to sing God's grace even in these times, and no matter what may come.

Finally, as a church, we commend those who have lost their lives by bullet, water, or wind to God, knowing they have safely arrived at home. For, in the end, we trust that we will all be welcomed home and in the courts above. So we sing and we pray, "here's my heart, Oh, take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts above."

Robert Robinson's hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," is all about tuning our heart strings with love. This hymn is a prayer and an invitation. As we sing we invite God to tune our hearts, to bind us, to seal us, and to make us God's own forever.

This hymn does not cure the world's ills or end the gun violence that has torn apart families and communities for far too long, but it does remind us that God's mercies are never ceasing and God's grace is ever present. So we, as Christians and as a church, are called to proclaim this grace and sing it that the world may hear, that healing may be offered, that those who are lost might find their way and know themselves to be beloved.

So we believe, so let us live.