

“In the Secret Place”

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6).¹

As we begin Black History Month, 2017, the inspiration for each week’s sermon will once again be an African American Spiritual taken from *Bound for Glory*, a book of expressive calligraphy by Timothy Botts, with commentary by Patricia Raybon.² This week’s spiritual is *Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees*, the first verse of which is

Let us break bread together on our knees.
Let us break bread together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees,
With my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

While this is generally used among us as a Communion Hymn, it may have originally been a “gathering song” that signaled the beginning of worship among slaves. It is perhaps in both senses that Patricia’s note for this song goes like this:

“Commune with me, Jesus, making me one with Your body, with Your blood, with Your suffering, with the others singing down yonder in our hiding place where we fall on our knees, worshipping together the God Who will free each one of us while we praise Him.”³

And our text from Scripture this morning is just one verse, an instruction from our Lord that has to do with being “on our knees”: “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). This is in fact a Communion Sunday, and our topic this morning is the matter of prayer.

Now in the text we read this morning, Jesus was not speaking against public prayer in worship. There is much beauty and strength and power to be found both in the spontaneous prayers here in the “Free Church” and in the ancient prayers of the liturgical Church. Jesus’ warning and His exhortation were not about these. Our Lord’s purpose was to curtail lengthy and flowery prayers intended, not for God, but for the ears of human listeners.

I have just this week finished listening to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe,⁴ which I’m sorry to say that I had never read or listened to before. I’ve written about that experience elsewhere, and won’t go over all that again here; but one of the most beautiful aspects of the book is Tom’s profound and articulate Christian faith, energized by a robust and lively life of prayer. And the truth of the matter is that “profound and articulate Christian faith” and “a robust and lively life of prayer” are quite frequently found together.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin pillories not only the institution of slavery, but the laws that made it possible; and many of us are all too familiar with the fact that the laws of our land and their implementation frequently remain, even to this day, impediments to the full freedom and justice that God intends. As just one example, not so very long ago, Bryan Stephenson was trying to

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 5, 2017.

² Timothy R. Botts, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011).

³ Botts, p. 86.

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Life Among the Lowly* (1852).

secure the acquittal of an African American man who was wrongly accused of a crime, and an African American woman named Mrs. Williams was a key witness in the man's defense.

The problem was that there was a large German Shepherd—a police dog—standing watch outside the courtroom, and when Mrs. Williams saw that dog, she began to shake and to cry and she ran away before she could give her testimony. When asked what was the matter, Mrs. Williams said, “I wanted to be in there so bad, but when I saw that dog all I could think about was Selma in 1965. I remember how they beat us, and I remember the dogs. I wanted to move and I tried to move, but I just couldn't do it.”

The next day, Mrs. Williams' sister told Mr. Stephenson that her sister had been up all night praying the same sentence over and over and over: “Lord, I can't be scared of no dog. Lord, I can't be scared of no dog.” Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Williams walked up, said, “I ain't scared of no dog,” and walked right past that German Shepherd into the courtroom. And it was her testimony that turned the tide in that case.⁵ Prayer works.

Linda Wilson-Allen drives a metro bus for the city of San Francisco, and she was recently honored on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* for the amazing kindness, care, and service beyond-all-expectation she gives to her harried passengers. She's even gone so far as to take lonely passengers home for Thanksgiving dinner at her home.

Driving a city bus can be a thankless task; but Linda gets her power from thirty minutes of prayer at 2:30 a.m. every morning. And when she gets to the end of the line, she always says, “That's all. I love you. Take care.”

Pastor John Ortberg asked, commenting on that article, “Have you ever had a bus driver tell you, ‘I love you’? People wonder, ‘Where can I find the Kingdom of God?’ I will tell you where. You can find it on the #45 bus riding through San Francisco.”⁶

Prayer, my friends, is the doorway to God's heart. It is the pathway to Heaven. It opens our eyes to previously unseen Realities and to previously unknown Resources. Prayer changes everything.

Dana Tierney writes for *The New York Times Magazine*, and she doesn't believe in God at all. While so far as I know, Dana is not yet a follower of Jesus, she does feel as though she's missing out: “My religious friends have an expansiveness of spirit. When they walk along a stream, they don't just see water falling over rocks; the sight fills them with ecstasy. They see a realm of hope beyond this world. I just see a babbling brook. I don't get the message.”⁷

Dana's comment reminds me of the words of the old Gospel Hymn:

Heav'n above is softer blue,
 Earth around is sweeter green!
 Something lives in every hue
 Christless eyes have never seen;
 Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
 Flowers with deeper beauties shine,
 Since I know, as now I know,

⁵ Lauren Spohrer, Phoebe Judge and Eric Mennel, “Just Mercy” (Episode 45), *Criminal Podcast* (6.17.16).

⁶ John Ortberg, *All the Places to Go* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2015), pp. 70-72.

⁷ David Bradstreet, *Star Struck* (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 108-110.

I am His, and He is mine.
 Since I know, as now I know,
 I am His, and He is mine.⁸

There's a poignant moment in the movie, *Gravity*, when the astronaut played by Sandra Bullock thinks she's going to die: "I'm gonna die, aren't I God? I know we're all gonna die . . . we're all gonna die. But I'm going to die *today!* Funny that you ought to know. But the thing is I'm still scared . . . I'm really scared. Nobody will mourn for me; no one will pray for my soul. Will You mourn for me? Will You pray for me? Or is it too late? I mean, I'd pray for myself but I've never prayed in my life. Nobody ever taught me how. Nobody ever taught me how."⁹

How utterly sad, how completely tragic it is for anyone to go through this life from its start to its finish without ever knowing the God Who Is There, who knows all the stars by name (Psalm 147:4), who lovingly numbers the hairs of our heads (Matthew 10:30); who knows every tiny sparrow that falls to the earth (Luke 12:6); who calls His own sheep by name (John 10:3); who misses even one sheep, one coin, one boy gone wrong (Luke 15); who says of every little child in the whole of human history, "*It is not the will of your Father . . . that even one of these little ones should perish*" (Matthew 18:14).

It is prayer that introduces us to this loving Heavenly Father, this God who is nearer to us than our breathing, but we miss much of God's gift because we're so infernally busy with our bulging briefcases of second-rate stuff. In this age of "big data," of "information overload," of "data asphyxiation," of "data smog," and "information fatigue,"¹⁰ many of us feel hard pressed to find time to pray . . . but we pay a great price for such neglect.

Dr. Susan Koven of Massachusetts General Hospital has noticed a growing epidemic of patients who present with "fatigue, irritability, insomnia, anxiety, headaches, heartburn, bowel disturbances, back pain, and weight gain. There are no blood tests or X-rays diagnostic of this condition, and yet it's easy to recognize. The condition is *excessive busyness*."¹¹

The famous New York pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, once noted that "*Only a theoretical deity is left to any [person] who has ceased to commune with God, and a theoretical deity saves no [one] from sin and disheartenment and fills no life with a sense of divine commission. Such vital consequences require a living God who actually deals with [us]*."¹²

Dr. Fosdick also named what has become for me a crucial insight. He called it "**the Prayer of Dominant Desire**." The idea is that the brief speeches we often call "prayers" are not really prayer, because they seldom represent the deepest yearnings of our spirits. What we desire with our whole hearts, we organize our lives—both consciously and unconsciously—to achieve, and we are quite often successful in this quest. **Whatever its goal, "the prayer of dominant desire always tends to attain its object."**¹³

This understanding of the true nature of prayer as "dominant desire" adds a significant contribution to our understanding of "unanswered prayer." *It suggests that while a person's outward petition may be denied, the dominant desire, which is the real prayer, may be granted.* We are given to complaining about "unanswered prayer," but *the great disasters of our lives are*

⁸ George Robinson, "I Am His, and He is Mine," 1876.

⁹ *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Warner Brothers, 2014).

¹⁰ "Too Much Information: How to Cope with Data Overload," *The Economist* (6.30.11).

¹¹ Quoted in Scott Dannemiller, "Busyness is a Sickness," *Huffington Post* (2.27.15).

¹² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1949), pp. iii-iv.

¹³ Fosdick, p. 138.

frequently due to *answered prayers*. The trouble with us is that so often we *do* get what we really and truly want.¹⁴

So what are we to do? How can we get from where we are to the robust and world-changing prayer life of Uncle Tom and Linda Wilson-Allen; to a spiritual life in which our “prayers of dominant desire” match what God is up to in our lives and in our world? Dr. Fosdick offered a word for such a situation, and it is a good and encouraging word: **“When you cannot pray as you would,”** he wrote, **“pray as you can.”**¹⁵ Here’s an example of what that could look like

Novelist Andrew Klavan spent the first forty-five years of his life “as a philosophical agnostic and a practical atheist.” He had many positive experiences with followers of Jesus over the years, but he brushed them off as foolishness.

Over time, though, Klavan began to realize that the life, words, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus formed “the hidden logic behind every novel, movie, or play that touched my deepest mind. And one night, while I was reading one of Patrick O’Brian’s great seafaring adventure novels, a character whom I admired said a prayer before going to sleep. I thought to myself, ‘Well, if *HE* can pray, so can I.’ I laid the book aside and whispered a three-word prayer, ‘Thank you, God.’

“It was a small and even prideful prayer: a self-impressed intellectual’s hesitant experiment with faith. And God’s response was an act of extravagant grace. I woke the next morning and everything had changed. There was a sudden clarity and brightness to familiar faces and objects; they were alive with meaning and with my own delight in them. I called this experience ‘the joy of my joy,’ and it came to me again whenever I prayed.”¹⁶ **Klavan eventually became a follower of Jesus; and it began when he “prayed as he could.”**

Well, the time gets away, and there is yet so much to say! I want to close with a couple of short stories *about perseverance in prayer*. . . .

There was once a woman who went to her neighbor’s produce stand to buy some grapes on a hot summer afternoon. The line was long, and she waited patiently as the owner gave special attention to each customer. When she got to the front and asked for grapes, the proprietor was gone for a very long time, and she began to become cross.

When he finally returned, he gave her a big smile and handed her some of the most beautiful grapes she had ever seen. He asked her to taste them, and they were as delicious as they were gorgeous. **“I’m sorry you had to wait so long,”** he said, **“but I needed the time to give you my very best.”**¹⁷

Hang onto that thought while I add one more image. Norwegian pastor Ole Hallesby has likened prayer to the process of demolition that creates mine shafts. The beginning of the process requires long periods of time in which deep holes for the explosives are laboriously drilled through the hard rock. Such drilling requires steadiness, skill, and a great deal of patience.

Once the holes are finally completed, the process of inserting the explosive and lighting the fuses goes quickly. The fuses are lit, the explosives erupt, and the shaft begins to take shape. *“While anyone can light a fuse,”* Hallesby noted, *“the drilling requires skill and persistence.”*

¹⁴ Fosdick, p. 141.

¹⁵ Fosdick, p. 78.

¹⁶ Andrew Klavan, “How a Man of the Coasts and Cities found Christ” *Christianity Today* (8.22.16).

¹⁷ H. B. Charles, *It Happens After Prayer* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), p. 37.

I'm afraid that many—and probably most—of us are more given to “fuse-lighting prayers” than we are to “hole-drilling prayers.” We tend to give up pretty quickly if we don't see immediate results of the sort we expect and desire. *But the most important prayer is the steady and patient “hole-drilling prayer” that creates channels through which God's power can flow.*¹⁸

So don't give up praying for that loved one, that spouse, that child, that grandchild, that friend, who seems so resistant to God's grace. Keep drilling the hole, and leave the rest to God. **“I'm sorry you had to wait so long,”** our Father says, **“but I needed the time to give you my very best.”**

“So when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). Let us join the saints of previous generations and pray on. Let's pray on

Let us break bread together on our knees.

Let us break bread together on our knees.

When I fall on my knees,

With my face to the rising sun,

O Lord, have mercy on me.

¹⁸ Tim Keller, *Prayer* (Dutton, 2014), p. 137.