

**There's a Wideness in God's Mercy**  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Psalm 123**

- <sup>1</sup> To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
- <sup>2</sup> As the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
until he has mercy upon us.
- <sup>3</sup> Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
- <sup>4</sup> Our soul has had more than its fill  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.

**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

<sup>2</sup>I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. <sup>3</sup>And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—<sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup>Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The author of this morning's hymn, “There's a Wideness in God's Mercy,” is Frederick William Faber. He was born at Calverley, Yorkshire, England in 1814 into a family of faithful Protestants. His grandfather was the Anglican vicar at Calverley and his father was the secretary for an Anglican Bishop. “Faber was of Huguenot descent and his family had sympathy for John Calvin's fierce reformation beliefs which denounced the priesthood, sacramental theology, and Roman Catholic doctrine.”<sup>1</sup> With this upbringing under his family's convictions, Faber headed into ministry in the Anglican Church, but not without question or great internal debate.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ely.anglican.org/about/good\\_and\\_great/faber.html](http://www.ely.anglican.org/about/good_and_great/faber.html)

Even as a young boy, he was known to have a way with words<sup>2</sup> and he enjoyed both reading and writing, developing his skills as a poet. Faber met and became friends with William Wordsworth, who regarded highly Faber's writing. When Faber made the decision to accept a parish as part of his ministry, believing he could only do it rightly by giving up poetry for pastoral concerns, Wordsworth wrote to him, "I do not say you are wrong; but England loses a poet."<sup>3</sup> He also accepted the position with hesitance because he had been exposed to what was known at the time as the Oxford, or Tractarian, Movement, which called, among other things, for the Anglican Church to return to the rituals of the true church, the Catholic church. Not only was he exposed to the Oxford Movement but he felt pulled by its message. Faber was concerned that he would have difficulty being true to the Anglican Church in the ways he ministered to his parish so, with caution, he accepted the parish at Elton in 1843.

Once there, he found he could not separate himself from the church to which he was being drawn, at times against his will, and "he established the observance of saints' days and the hearing of confessions in the parish church, preached the Catholic doctrine, and wrote *The Life of St. Wilfrid*, openly advocating the claims and supremacy of Rome."<sup>4</sup> The people of the church were more than pleased and the church grew and flourished, becoming central in the community for old and young alike.<sup>5</sup> But, in his heart, Faber knew he was not being true to the Anglican Church nor to his own more and more prevalent leanings toward the Catholic Church. In November of 1845, he left his post, albeit with much sorrow and worry for the people of his parish, and he was received into the Catholic Church the next morning.<sup>6</sup>

As his call within the Catholic church began to unfold, he did not shun everything from his Protestant heritage. As author Kenneth W. Osbeck explained, "Faber had long realized the great influence that hymnsinging had in Protestant circles and was determined to provide materials for the Catholic Church in the same manner...He worked tirelessly in writing hymn materials that would express the universal Catholic faith and which could be used by the people for their own devotional purposes."<sup>7</sup> To this end, in the eighteen years as a Catholic priest, until his death, Faber wrote 150 hymns,<sup>8</sup> including the familiar "Faith of Our Fathers" and this morning's hymn.

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," not surprisingly, began as a poem. The poem, entitled "Come to Jesus," had thirteen stanzas - we use four of those stanzas, with some slight modifications.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.catholicpamphlets.net/pamphlets/Father%20Faber.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ely.anglican.org/about/good\\_and\\_great/faber.html](http://www.ely.anglican.org/about/good_and_great/faber.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.catholicpamphlets.net/pamphlets/Father%20Faber.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.catholicpamphlets.net/pamphlets/Father%20Faber.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories, Part 2*, p. 282

([http://books.google.com/books?id=rQ\\_Y078X5NAC&pg=PA282&lpg=PA282&dq=faber+come+to+jesus+oratory+hymns&source=bl&ots=PCYwJ3oQN7&sig=kGcuCFiRPGQW6XfJmzmFKqmaWpQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=OMX4T\\_eVF4bUqgHD652LCQ&ved=0CFQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faber%20come%20to%20jesus%20oratory%20hymns&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=rQ_Y078X5NAC&pg=PA282&lpg=PA282&dq=faber+come+to+jesus+oratory+hymns&source=bl&ots=PCYwJ3oQN7&sig=kGcuCFiRPGQW6XfJmzmFKqmaWpQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=OMX4T_eVF4bUqgHD652LCQ&ved=0CFQQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faber%20come%20to%20jesus%20oratory%20hymns&f=false)).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.catholicpamphlets.net/pamphlets/Father%20Faber.pdf>

This is the full poem:

Souls of men! Why will ye scatter  
Like a crowd of frightened sheep?  
Foolish hearts! Why will ye wander  
From a love so true and deep?

Was there ever kindest shepherd  
Half so gentle, half so sweet,  
As the Savior who would have us  
Come and gather round His feet?

It is God: His love looks mighty,  
But is mightier than it seems:  
Tis our Father: and His fondness  
Goes out far beyond our dreams.

There's a wideness in God's mercy,  
Like the wideness of the sea:  
There's a kindness in His justice,  
Which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows  
Are more felt than up in Heaven;  
There is no place where earth's failings  
Have such kindly judgment given.

There is welcome for the sinner,  
And more graces for the good;  
There is mercy with the Savior;  
There is healing in His Blood.

There is grace enough for thousands  
Of new worlds as great as this;  
There is room for fresh creations  
In that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader  
Than the measure of man's mind;  
And the Heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.

But we make His love too narrow  
By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify His strictness  
With a zeal He will not own.

There is plentiful redemption  
In the Blood that has been shed;  
There is joy for all the members

In the sorrows of the Head.

Tis not all we owe to Jesus;  
It is something more than all;  
Greater good because of evil,  
Larger mercy through the fall.

Pining Souls! Come nearer Jesus,  
And oh come not doubting thus,  
But with faith that trusts more bravely  
His huge tenderness for us.

If our love were but more simple,  
We should take Him at His word;  
And our lives would all be sunshine  
In the sweetness of our Lord.<sup>9</sup>

We don't know of any specific experiences which led to the writing of this poem but we can know that Faber was well-versed as a theologian. The prevalent theme of mercy has strong Biblical roots, one of which we find in the psalm this morning. "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us." Both the psalm and the hymn speak a language uncomfortable to us, who pride ourselves on our independence and self-sufficiency. The psalm outright compares us to slaves and maids, with God in the role of master and mistress; the hymn is more subtle: "If our love were but more faithful / We would gladly trust God's Word."

Culturally, not only is there shame in being submissive to another but a sense of failure that *we* are not in command. But that is not the case with God above us. Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "The term 'mercy' bespeaks unconditional regard for, love that is completely gratuitous. The master gives himself over to the well-being of the servant without condition or prerequisite."<sup>10</sup> To relent and release ourselves to God's care, to God's providence is to remove the restraints of self-reliance, the persistent pressures of looking out for oneself.

Who is your toughest critic? So the saying goes, it is yourself. But Faber reminds, "There's a kindness in God's justice / Which is more than liberty." That liberty we crave and strive for leaves us judging our every decision and scrutinizing our every mistake. In God's eyes there is grace in even the biggest of gaffes, missteps, bad decisions. This grace is freely given; it is only ourselves which hold us back from receiving it.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.archive.org/stream/a5806473fabe00uoft/a5806473fabe00uoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/a5806473fabe00uoft/a5806473fabe00uoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>10</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 7*, p. 202

And it is this grace of which Paul speaks in the second letter to the Corinthians. We can at best speculate what thorn Paul had in his flesh yet there is a beautiful universality in the not-knowing, for a thorn is a thorn for each of us. Paul speaks of it as a weakness - if not a weakness to believe that we are in complete control, then what? Of the Lord's response to Paul's request that the thorn be removed, Paul says, "but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." If we subject ourselves to God, if we allow ourselves to be seen by others as weaker than God, then God's power, and grace and mercy, can be seen all the more clearly.

Garrett Green says it this way of our reluctance to be seen by others: "The Christian community forgets that Christ's grace is sufficient for it every time it seeks to secure its existence in the world by means of its own strength and influence, every time it allies itself with worldly power rather than allowing Christ to be revealed in its weakness."<sup>11</sup> Where Faber says, "If our love were but more simple / We should take Him at His word / And our lives would be all sunshine / In the sweetness of our Lord," our hymn says, "If our love were but more faithful / We would gladly trust God's Word / And our lives reflect thanksgiving / For the goodness of our Lord." Maybe it's the realist in me that prefers our lives reflecting thanksgiving over being all sunshine-y; I think, though, it might be the theologian in me who prefers that my faith and trust in God give glory to God rather than simply benefitting me.

"If our love were but more faithful / We would gladly trust God's Word / And our lives reflect thanksgiving / For the goodness of our Lord." In those times of uncertainty, which are sure signs that we have less control than we would want the world to think, we, as believers, are called to trust, to place our confidence<sup>12</sup> not in ourselves but in God. After all, who could deny that God is greater than we? And, if we publicly welcome God's power, then our lives will outwardly reflect thanksgiving for God's goodness. Remember in our weaknesses, "There is no place where earth's sorrows / Are more felt than up in heaven / There is no place where earth's failings / Have such kindly judgment given." What then is there to hold us back?

Let us pray: God of mercy, your grace is abundant lest we only open ourselves to receive it. Grant us humility in the face of your power that we might give glory to you and receive peace. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 7*, p. 210

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trust?show=1&t=1341746882>