

So in case you were wondering, I did get the memo that Fathers Day was last Sunday! I hope you're not completely over Fathers Day until next year, because part of what I have to say is a Fathers Day reflection.

My father was a pastor, in the Reformed Church in America, and he preached regularly from his late 20's until well into his 80's. I don't know precisely how many sermons that added up to—for most of his tenure, Reformed churches had both morning and evening services which were different—but many, many thousands. After I agreed to give this, my first ever sermon, I was wracking my brain trying to remember things he'd said about preaching that might help me in my preparation. I came up with a quite short list of principles—two bullet points on it. I remember him saying, “I'm never preaching out of Revelation.” The scripture passages offered in our lectionary let me off the hook there, good thing too, for a first time preacher that would be like jumping in the deep end of the pool in your first swimming lesson. On a less lighthearted note, our daughter, who was in theological seminary about 15 years ago, told me that many faculty and some fellow students carried scars (and chips on their shoulders) from old debates about interpreting Revelation. So in his time and place I think my father had a point with not poking the bear.

His second principle was: It's the pastor's job to orchestrate a service that contained all the necessary and expected elements, AND was over in ONE HOUR. If anything before the sermon went longer than expected or got added at the last minute, then the pastor should trim the sermon as required. He had the ability to edit it in his head after he had started. I do not—either I timed this correctly, or rule number 2 will be bent. I heard him recap his on the fly adjustments so many times that I also became very aware of how that hour was unfolding. Once upon a time when I had a college summer job working at a little radio station in Michigan, I had the job of recording the evening service of a local church, then broadcasting it on tape delay. One Sunday I completely spaced out starting the tape recorder at the beginning of their service. Graphically, I did this, taped this, and I realized I was going to get fired the next day unless I thought of a gold plated excuse for not having this. Fortunately for me, on that night of all nights, their pastor preached an extra long sermon, which he never did! I told

the listeners over the air that I was skipping ahead in the service so they would get to hear the entire sermon. Fake news, but I got away with it!

This year for Father's Day, the New York Times published a list of '25 questions to ask your dad to know him better.' The question 'what is your favorite book, and why?' was not on their list—although I think it's a revealing question. I know what my father's answer was, since for many years, he said his favorite book was one called "My Utmost for His Highest," by Oswald Chambers. His copy of the book was on his bedside table right up until the end of his life. Unsurprisingly, it's a book of sermons, cast in the form of daily devotionals. If you've not heard of it, it was first published in Britain in the 1920's, in America in 1935. It has been continuously in print ever since, and copies are for sale at the bookstore in the mall today. The book started the modern trend of daily devotionals, but it's actually a book of transcribed sermons excerpts, edited and assembled by his wife after his death. There are no recordings of him, but by all accounts he was an exceptionally charismatic preacher.

In retrospect, the best response I could have made to knowing this was his favorite book would have been to read it myself before he died, and discuss it with him. But I didn't do that. It's been three years since he died, and I found myself thinking of that book and why it had such an impact on him. I decided to read and research it now, rather belatedly. It is a book that has been primarily popular with evangelicals. As a reader, I come to it as someone who was born and raised and made profession of faith in an evangelical church, but as an adult I joined an ecumenical denomination (this one) 45 years ago. I didn't do that because I was disaffected by evangelicalism—I'm not claiming scars or chips on my shoulder. This book had an outsize influence on my father, and for the first twenty odd years of my life, he was my pastor as well my father. In keeping with it being my father's favorite book, I intended to give it a sympathetic reading, and find out which parts of it I might respond to.

From the index, the chapter of the Bible referred to more than any other is Romans chapter 6, the second half of which Rusty just read (Erin used the first half last week). It's used for six of the 366 devotionals. With that, I felt I had found my text for today. So what is in this chapter of

Romans for us and for first century readers, how did Chambers explicate it for his early 20th century wartime audience, and how did the arc of his faith lead him to that point?

The first half of the chapter in Romans is on the theme “freedom from sin’s penalty and power” and the second part, “the choice between two masters” (using the metaphor of slavery). I chose to use the NIV translation today that we use in our pew bibles, should you like to take a look at how those sections fit together.

When Paul writes in verse 14, “for sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, you are under grace,” that was a new thing for Paul and his contemporaries. A pastor named Kyle Fever wrote “in baptism, Christians who have died to sin are also no longer under the law, then what are we under? Not being under law is a particularly difficult claim for Paul’s audience (whether Greek, Roman, or Jewish). Everyone in the first century operated with a sense of “law” as that which ordered life and gave identity.” As far as I know, the phrase “minds blown” was not current in the first century. So it was time, in Paul’s view, for an example from then-everyday life, our everyday life, not so much.

This metaphor of slavery, in the 21st century has, should have, the “ick” factor. For Paul and his contemporary readers, 40% of the population were slaves, so it was a concrete, everyday reality. It seems like a harsh metaphor. It struck a chord for me to read a commentary on this passage by Mary Hinkle Shore: “many contemporary Christians cannot hear good news in Paul’s characterization of our new lives as “freed from sin and enslaved to God” (Romans 6:22). It is much easier for many of us to think of ourselves as **belonging** to God rather than being **enslaved** to God. Still, the preacher needs to sit with the harder metaphor on behalf of hearers. True, those of us who are temporarily able-bodied and financially stable have a love affair with our perceived autonomy (“we have never been slaves to anyone”), but might that love affair itself be a symptom of enthrallment to sin and denial of death?” For Paul, everything reduces to two and only two choices, each of which leads to one and only one outcome: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Now circling back to my Chambers' book, I will read one of the daily devotionals. It is based on just one of the clauses of Romans 6:13, "offer every part of yourself to him as as instrument of righteousness."

"I cannot save and sanctify myself; I cannot make atonement for sin; I cannot redeem the world; I cannot right what is wrong, purify what is impure, or make holy what is unholy. That is all the sovereign work of God. Do I have faith in what Jesus Christ has done? He has made the perfect atonement for sin. Am I in the habit of constantly realizing it? The greatest need we have is not to do things, but to believe things. The redemption of Christ is not an experience, it is the great act of God which He has performed through Christ, and I have to build my faith on it. If I construct my faith on my own experience, I produce the most unscriptural kind of life—an isolated life, with my eyes focused solely on my own holiness. Beware of that human holiness that is not based on the atonement of the Lord. It has no value for anything except a life of isolation—it is useless to God and a nuisance to man. Measure every kind of experience you have by our Lord Himself. We cannot do anything pleasing to God unless we deliberately build on the foundation of the atonement by the Cross of Christ.

The atonement of Jesus must be exhibited in practical, unassuming ways in my life. Every time I obey, the absolute deity of God is on my side, so that the grace of God and my natural obedience are in perfect agreement. Obedience means that I have completely placed my trust in the atonement, and my obedience is immediately met by the delight of the supernatural grace of God.

Beware of the human holiness that denies the reality of the natural life— it is a fraud. Continually bring yourself to the trial or test of the atonement and ask, "Where is the discernment of the atonement in this, and in that?"

Now parts of this, I didn't understand too well on first reading. I worked on my text until very late in the week, as some of you know. In part, I was hoping, "I will completely figure this book out before Sunday," and it didn't happen. Asking my dad how he came to appreciate it

isn't possible for me now, but I found an articulate reaction from The New Yorker writer Macy Halford, who has written a memoir about the impact of My Utmost for His Highest on her life. In an interview, she said, "by far the most common critique of the book is that it is difficult to understand." Halford's defense on that point is "that Chambers' thought is difficult to follow on purpose. He took his cue from John 3:8--'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' Essentially he thought that the Spirit was inherently unpredictable and that those following its dictates (those who had the Spirit dwelling inside them) were impossible to pin down or predict." As for what makes this book worth returning to over and over, Halford writes, "I think of Utmost as a refrain that calls us back, again and again, to certain essential truths. The most notable, for me, is the truth that God is in control over every aspect of our lives ... he has commanded us not to worry, and he expects us to abandon ourselves to his will, day by day, minute by minute. This is the discipline of faith. When we commit to living in this way—continually abandoning ourselves to his will—we are free." I believe my father would agree with this.

Now for one specific phrase I found obscure at first reading: "Beware of the human holiness that denies the reality of the natural life— it is a fraud." Chamber's biography sheds some light on it. What I gleaned from it is that in his 20 year ministry from his call to enter seminary until his death, he covered a lot of ground, both literally, and figuratively in his spiritual life. He taught in the UK, the United States, and in Japan. He went from his upbringing as a Scottish Baptist, to an adherent of the late 19th century holiness movement (whose members believed if they had completely opened themselves to the Holy Spirit, they could lead a sinless life, not as their doing, but as the Holy Spirits' doing) and then the Pentecostal movement (with the belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit described in Acts, including speaking in tongues, were not limited to New Testament times, but could be claimed by believers now) then he took a step back from these things. Where Chambers had his at least partial break with the Pentecostal movement was with the flip side of that, if you were NOT speaking in tongues, then the Holy Spirit was not with you. This wasn't a no-hard-feelings kind of break. In this section, Chambers is apparently continuing a theological argument with former allies, he just didn't name names.

So we do have a case of the “wind blows wherever it pleases.” His spiritual progression stopped because he died at age 43, not because he had it all figured out and just quit searching.

An even more obscure part of the devotional for me was Chambers saying “The greatest need we have is not to do things, but to believe things.” It seems to contradict immediately what his text says about “offer EVERY PART of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.” That must include our minds, the part of us that believes, but figuratively our feet, if we intend to spread the gospel in other places, and our hands, if we are to serve others. Honestly, I don’t know what Chambers meant by that, but just taking it face value, I would disagree with it. I might defend the reverse position, “it is less important what you believe about the book of Revelation than what you do.”

Also, this isn’t in accord with the facts of the last part of Chamber’s life. In 1915, in wartime London, he was moved by the disabled soldiers returning from the front, and he decided to apply to be a chaplain with the British army. The YMCA sponsored him to go to Cairo, where huge numbers of Commonwealth troops were rotating in and out. With the support of the British high command, the YMCA had been providing the soldiers with letter-writing tools, a place away from their tents, refreshments, and entertainment. The generals were happy with any alternatives the troops might have to the temptations of wartime Cairo. Chambers decided he must preach to the troops, which didn’t get off to a good start. They weren’t used to explicit religious instruction in the YMCA facilities, and on the first night, all the soldiers just left, resulting in him preaching to an empty tent. But later he built a sizable congregation among the troops. He worked so hard that his health suffered. His charismatic and rather dogmatic style of preaching hit a nerve with those young men looking into the face of eternity. His posthumously published book was thought of as a wartime book and had its first big wave of popularity during the Second World War.

Some of the devotionals in his book are drawn from his sermons in Egypt, but there’s no clear indication which, more’s the pity in my view. I would find them to be the most interesting. In his ministry, he had helpers, and he had allies with the same convictions. They all put their

backs into it. Maybe you thought I forgot all about the first scripture reading, Matthew 10, but not! I suppose many times in Christian history, those who gave welcome and aid to people carrying the Gospel are forever anonymous. But not this time!

My wife Jane's great grandparents, Samuel and Amy Zwemer, were Reformed Church missionaries to Arabia and they spent the World War 1 years in Cairo. They knew Chambers well. Sam was a writer and preacher, Amy was a nurse and a lifelong worker for women's education and women's health. 20 years later, when Amy Zwemer died, this obituary appeared in the newspaper in Perth, Australia, a place she had never been. "The death has occurred of Mrs. Amy Zwemer, late of the American Mission, Cairo. Mrs. Zwemer was born in England in 1866, and traveled alone to Australia when orphaned at the age of 18. She trained as a nurse in Sydney and later became a missionary. She was sent to Mesopotamia, where she met Dr. Zwemer. During the war Dr. and Mrs. Zwemer were stationed at Cairo and gave a warm welcome to many Australian soldiers. Their friendship was not qualified by any regard for military rank and many lonely men of all ranks found happiness within their home. Dr. and Mrs. Zwemer had four children, one of whom (Bessie, now Mrs. Pickens, of the China Inland Mission, Hankow) was in her teens during the Great War and was a frequent visitor at the bedsides of sick and dying soldiers. The memory of Mrs. Zwemer and of her family is cherished with affection and gratitude by many who benefited from their kindly hospitality."

Oswald Chambers had intended to accompany the troops when they went on the planned offensive to capture Jerusalem in the fall of 1917, but he didn't live to see it. He died suddenly of appendicitis in Cairo before it happened. Jane's great grandfather Sam preached the sermon at Oswald Chambers' funeral.

It would likely be too niche for the New York Times to suggest, "ask your father what his favorite hymn is." But my father was equally clear about his favorite book and his favorite hymn, one that expresses everything he needed to know about his faith. It's a direct and simple message. Amen. Please stand for the closing hymn.