

Three men are stranded on a desert island, when a bottle washes up on the shore. When they uncork the bottle, a genie appears and offers three wishes. The first wishes to be taken to Paris. The genie snaps his fingers, and the man suddenly finds himself standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. The second man wishes that he were in Hollywood, and with a snap of the genie's fingers, he finds himself on a Tinseltown movie set. The third man, now alone on the island, looks around and says, "I wish my friends were back." Wishes and prayers can have unexpected consequences. We'll see that in today's prayer.

Today we move on to our next category of prayer in our series "Lettuce pray: A Spiritual Salad". Many a time, I myself have offered up a prayer for guidance. Green onion prayers for guidance are scattered all throughout the bible. There was the time that Elijah prayed to God for guidance when he was combatting the prophets of Baal. God's response left those prophets smoking. In the book of Acts, the disciples asked for guidance in selecting a replacement for Judas Iscariot.

Our green onion prayer of guidance for today is not from the bible. But like the Serenity Prayer it is certainly inspired by the bible. This prayer is called the Unknown Confederate Soldier's Prayer. Here are the words to that prayer. (It's in your bulletin)

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.

I was made weak, that I might learn humbly how to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do greater things.

I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy.

I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men.

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for – but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all, most richly blessed.

The author of this prayer is unknown. All we know is that it was written by a confederate soldier. Let's use our imaginations for a moment. It's spring of 1864. Picture a young man. Late 20s, maybe early 30s. Perhaps from Virginia. Definitely a southern drawl. Sandy brown hair. Bushy, because being on a march doesn't afford luxuries like haircuts. Scraggly beard and mustache because again, who has time to tend to those things. Piercing hazel eyes. His gray confederate uniform streaked with dirt and gun powder. He holds his gun at his shoulder, ready to aim and fire.

Today was the day. His unit would engage in battle with the Union. General Lee had a hunch about General Grant. That hunch led them to the courthouse in Spotsylvania, VA. Those Union soldiers had no idea what was in store for them.

For a moment his thoughts fled back home. Home to his fiancé. Oh, for this war to be over so he could marry her. Even though he was a young man, he was a man of faith. He thought about sitting in his tent last night. For the sake of his love and for the sake of his love of God, he felt compelled to write something. He didn't always feel this need so strongly but tonight. It was like he couldn't sleep until what was in his head was down on paper. So, he wrote and he wrote and he wrote.

On this morning, he put his hand to his pocket and felt the folded piece of paper there. He kissed his fingers, lifted them up to heaven and then patted his pocket. Then it was off to the fight. The battle lasted for several days. Both the Union and Confederate armies were losing many soldiers. But finally...General Grant. He backed off. The Confederate armies. They

started celebrating. They won! The joy was short lived as they looked around at all of the comrades who were on the ground. Most of them dead, including our unknown soldier. As they carried him away to be buried, a soldier noticed the slip of paper sticking out of his pocket. He pulled it out. On it was written a prayer. Our prayer for today.

When I think about this prayer, I can't help but think about the irony, the juxtaposition, the contrast with our scripture today from Matthew chapter 7. "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." From where I sit nothing could be further from the truth when you look at what was asked in our soldier's prayer and what was received instead.

What did this soldier pray for that was so wrong? What he asked for seemed to be legitimate things. Innocent requests. He prayed for strength. He prayed for riches. He prayed for power. Wouldn't these be the exact things needed for a life of service and accomplishment? Doesn't God need people with stamina, vigor, financial resources, and personal influence. Exactly the things that the soldier was asking for.

Perhaps these requests were not crass. Perhaps they were not sinful. But could these requests be naïve and unwise? Perhaps our sincerest prayers for divine guidance run the risk of being hijacked by our undisciplined desires.

As Christians, I think we'd all be grateful to accomplish great things for God. But the world has a tendency to value personal achievement over love. When we assume that our motives are pure, we might forget something. We forget that we don't often have the wisdom to ask for the things we truly need from God. We are far too prone to devise our own grandiose plans. Thinly disguising our own ambitions. Asking God to bless those plans.

This is what the prayer's author came to realize. How audacious of us to impose our needs on God. God knows what we need. But even more importantly. God knows what God needs. Yes, we all want to be a dashing success for God. But what if Christ needs a noble failure?

Although he was young, enough time had lapsed for this prayer warrior to learn something. There will always be people willing to accept privilege and prestige in the name of Jesus. But God wants a different group of people. Ones who understand that when they say yes to service, God will quickly and abundantly provide for their every perceived need. No action required on their part other than trust.

Our prayer's author was a quiet and peaceful spirit wrapped up in a Confederate Uniform and carrying a rifle. This peaceful spirit learned that it might be unwise, even naïve to presume that we know what God should give us to do God's will.

We are humans. Prone to forget our proper place. God may use unanswered prayers to remind us that it is God who made us, not we ourselves. It is these unanswered prayers that let us know that only God prescribes our role and stature in the kingdom.

While we think it would be best to accomplish God's work through privilege, position and opportunity, God instead asks for hearts that cry out for character, virtue, and Christlikeness. Only by being schooled in the ways of humility, obedience, wisdom, and desire for God will we be ready for whatever service comes our way.

When I worked at Intuit an opportunity came up in our training department. For quite some time now, I'd wanted to work in this department. Besides the fact that I loved teaching there were other appealing benefits. Obviously, a raise. Salaried instead of hourly. I would no longer be tied to a call center schedule. I would clearly be "moving up" at Intuit. What's not to like. I went through the interview process, feeling like I'd nailed each of the three interviews. I had a great relationship with the head of the department because of projects I'd helped out with in the past. So, imagine my surprise and disappointment when I found out that I didn't get the job. Those feelings were short-lived. Not even a month later, the whole department was laid off, including the person who got that job.

What we need most is often what we desire the least. So, I will be grateful when God is kind enough to give me what I need and not just what I ask for.

Church family. When we pray for these green onions of guidance, we should remember the counsel derived from this prayer. Our ambitions can only be fulfilled after they've been transformed.