**June 11, 2017**

*[For six weeks, we are working through the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, pairing the Steps with scripture and seeking wisdom for all people. This week’s sermon is the second in the series, and deals with Steps 3 and 4.]*

**Tim Hughes Williams**

**Sermon: Light/Dark**

**Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood God.**

**Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**

**The Gospel Reading: Luke 9:23-27:**

**23** Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. **24** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. **25** What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? **26** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. **27** But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

**The Epistle Reading: Ephesians 5:6-14**

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be associated with them. 8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; 13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

*Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.*

**Sermon:**

Old Jimmy is shuffling up the aisle again.

The organ is playing soft, sustained tones, beckoning anyone who might wish to make a change in their lives to come forward. The pastor, who happened to be my father, is standing at the front of the church, his eyes scanning the room, expectantly. “Is there anyone in the room today who might feel led to give their lives to Jesus?” He would ask a variation on that question week after week, opening the doors to that dramatic moment we call an “altar call,” the invitation to come forward and begin the life of faith. It’s a staple of the evangelical church and it gives a lot of us mainline folk the willies. I know. Honestly, it gave me the willies even then, for reasons I couldn’t fully articulate.

I sat up in the balcony, a jaded preacher’s kid. Pulled into worship week after week, whether I wanted to be there or not, polished and presented to the congregation as a part of this special family. It’s not an easy thing, ok, being the preacher’s kid. I found myself wanting to be anywhere else, just on principle, even when I was enjoying myself. I confess that I found myself, on occasion, wishing that things would go wrong with the worship service.

Yes, I’ve worked on this a little bit in therapy. I imagined organ pipes falling off the walls or some kind of rodent causing a stampede in the choir loft. It was a very, very, minor form of rebellion. Some kids were experimenting with sex or drugs. I was just imagining bad worship services.

But when it came time for the altar call, or the “Invitation,” as we called it, I kept my eyes fixed on Jimmy.

He was an old man in a shabby, ill-fitting suit. He wore a toupee that was cocked at an awkward angle. He walked with a plastic cane and spoke in an odd gargle. I now understand him to be a senior citizen with a developmental disability. When I was a kid, though, he was just Jimmy, the man with the power to destabilize any worship service. He was my patron saint of church disruption.

If there was one thing Jimmy loved, it was to respond to an altar call. If there was an invitation, Jimmy would accept it. He would lumber to his feet and shuffle down the aisle as the congregation sang something like, “Just As I Am.”

He would make his way to the front and I would scan my father’s face, looking for signs of weariness or frustration. If he was feeling it, he didn’t show it. He had the poker face of a veteran card shark. Jimmy would take my father by the arm and lean his face in very close and say something like, “I’ve decided that I would like to give my life to Jesus.”

My dad would give him a warm embrace and ask him to sit on the front pew. It happened more weeks than not and I lived for it. It got to the point where if Jimmy *didn’t* rededicate his life to Christ one Sunday than we all wondered what he was up to.

It wasn’t just the saboteur in me that loved Jimmy’s weekly ritual. He was breaking the rules. The whole idea of a dramatic conversion experience is that you build up to it and then you finally break down and say YES and then God transforms your life. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime moment that some churches have done a very good job of fetishizing. But there was something very human inside of Jimmy that said yes *whenever* the question was asked.

I would like to think that I was not just a jerk, amused by a man with a disability. I would like to think that I saw something subversive and holy in Jimmy’s weekly shuffle up the aisle.

\*\*\*

This is the second week of a sermon series about Christianity and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Each week we are taking two more steps through Bill W.’s cherished sequence, asking ourselves what wisdom might be found there for all of us.

Last week, Andrew laid the ground work for us, taking on the enormous first and second steps: (1) admitting we are powerless before addiction, and (2) coming to believe that there is a power greater than us that could restore us to sanity.

The case we are making may seem self-evident to some and outrageous to others. We are making the case that we are all addicts. We are all addicted in one way or another. That’s a very loaded word – addict. It conjures up very specific images of people you see or people you love or people you hate. It is not a word that anyone cares to apply to herself, which is why owning the addiction is Step One. It is foundational to the process.

Webster’s defines the word “addict” in surprisingly religious terms: “to devote or surrender oneself habitually or obsessively to something.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

While addiction can look like a devoted, dogged attention to something, Richard Rohr makes the case that it is often also a consummate form of distraction - minimizing other uncomfortable realities we would just as soon ignore. [[2]](#footnote-2) “I was using alcohol to treat my alcoholism,” someone told me earlier this week. “It was really just a powerful anesthesia against other painful things I would rather not consider.”

One can of course be addicted to all kinds of things but one thing nearly all of us are addicted to is a false understanding of our self. Rohr argues that there is a very human instinct to build strategies for success – he calls them “happiness programs” - that rely upon and affirm our own strength. In short, we create false versions of ourselves that have everything they need to navigate the world. We invest an incredible amount of time, energy, and money into maintaining that narrative. It can look like gym memberships, virtue signaling, wealth and class signifiers, and plastic surgery. It can look like tiny little lies that move you to the center of your own story. *You* said the funny thing, not the lady next to you. You *saw* the car accident, instead of hearing about it on the news. You, you, you. The tiny adjustments we make to keep our fragile egos intact.

Or maybe that’s just me. I *know* it’s me. I’m a preacher for God’s sake. I think I know a thing or two about embellishment.

And here’s the paradox: it is frequently the most successful members of our culture who are least aware of their addictive natures, the deep investment that they have in the illusion of their ability to handle any challenge. “People who have moved from seeming success to seeming success seldom seem to understand success at all,” writes Rohr, “except a very limited version of their own.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

\*\*\*

I think Rohr’s words are a helpful lens through which to understand Jesus’ teaching that “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). There are plenty of readers, especially modern readers, who have found Jesus’ endorsement of self-denial distasteful. Some people object on psychological grounds – are we not supposed to love and accept ourselves? Some people object on feminist grounds – another man telling us to ignore our own interests! Some people object on capitalist grounds – self-interest is the engine of our economy.

There may be elements of truth in all of those critiques, but I think they also miss Jesus’ point. Here’s what I hear him saying. Let go of the illusion that you are going to be your own savior. Let go of the idea that you are the god of your own universe. And then, maybe even more gently: Look what you are doing to yourself in the process of maintaining that illusion. Look what you are doing to the people you love. It’s a very costly self-deception.

\*\*\*

Yesterday a friend who has been in recovery for many years took me with her to an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in the brightly colored Sunday School classroom of a local church. The group moves through the Twelve Steps in sequence and yesterday’s meeting was focused on the Third Step. “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood God.”

It was, in the eyes of a newcomer like myself, an absolutely eye-opening experience. Person after person introduced themselves by their first name, followed quickly by, “and I’m an alcoholic.” They shared the frankly horrific details of their descent into addiction. And then they proceeded to share their thoughts on turning their lives over to God in a manner that I honestly have never heard before.

What was so interesting to me is that I think almost without exception each speaker agreed that the “God, as we understand God” section of the Third Step was far less important than the “Made a decision to turn my life over” part of the Step. There was a very diverse understanding of who God is. Two people were Orthodox Christians. One was Catholic. One was a cheerful atheist. One person said simply, “I believe in love, and if it is true that God is love, then I believe in God.” What do all these people share in common? They get on their knees everyday. They pray – literally, out loud – to the God of their understanding. They ask God to help them relinquish control over their lives, so that they will be sober for another day.

They do it because they must do it, if they want to survive. They do it because it works. Don’t hear me wrong. I *do* think it matters quite a lot what we believe about God and who we understand God to be. But – my God – we have spent a lot of time arguing about that. We’ve spent a lot of time kicking people out over that. We’ve spent a lot of time removing ourselves over that. What I observed yesterday was a group of people who don’t have time for that. So they are walking the talk, and they are following God, and they are being saved.

When the meeting concluded, we held hands in a circle. “Keep coming back, it works if you work it,” the group said in unison.

“Those who want to save their life will lose it,” Jesus said. “And those who lose their life, for my sake, will save it.”

\*\*\*

Step Four. If Step Three didn’t manage to push your buttons then perhaps Step Four will take care of it. “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” The searching and fearless moral inventory is exactly what it sounds like. You sit down with a piece of paper and write down all of your flaws and defects. You take your time with it and try to name them all. I have been told you are also welcome to name your lovely aspects as well, though that is not usually the difficult part.

It will not surprise you that some people get a little hung up on Step Four. People get a little hung up on Steps One through Four! They are each nothing short of a full-on assault upon our false understanding of self.

It will probably also not surprise you that people who have spent time in strict religious environments have a hard time with Step Four too. We are *tired* of judging ourselves. We are *tired* of being judged. We’ve been judged, wounded, stereotyped, shamed, put-down, and rejected. We are done with that. Especially when its done by snooty church people who wouldn’t know a good time if it smacked them across the face.

To all of that understandable defensiveness, Richard Rohr wisely says, “Take a deep breath.”

“Moral scrutiny is not to discover how bad or good I am or to regain some moral high ground,” he writes, “but it is to begin some honest shadowboxing which is at the heart of all spiritual awakening. Yes, “the truth will set you free,” as Jesus says (John 8:32) but first it tends to make you miserable.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

The fearless and searching moral inventory is about stepping from the darkness into light. You may not like what you see, but there is no other way forward.

There is, of course, other more churchy language for the moral inventory. It is called the confession of sin. The Twelve Steps are very careful to avoid such terminology, as it is very loaded for some folks, but if you are serious about following Jesus then you are probably in a tradition that takes telling the truth about sin seriously.

We see it in the Letter to the Ephesians, our second scripture reading. The letter was not written to any specific congregation, but rather passed around like a newsletter, meant to exhort and encourage churches all across Asia Minor, maybe a hundred years or so after the ministry of Jesus.

“Once you were darkness,” the author says, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light” (5:8). “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them,” it says in verse 11. And then this very interesting construction:

“Everything exposed *by* the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible *is* light” (5:13-14).

I really love that, even if it doesn’t totally make sense. “Everything exposed by the light becomes visible.” That’s fairly straight-forward. If you want to see something for what it is, turn on the light. Even if you *don’t* want to see something for what it is, turn on the light and you will see it. Everything becomes visible.

The second part is less obvious. “Everything that becomes visible *is* light.” It’s not hard to think of instances where this is not true. Terrible things come to light every day. Just consult the Baltimore Sun.

I think what the text is getting at is that becoming visible is an inherent part of the healing process. Becoming visible, being brought out into the light is a step that cannot be skipped. Your moral imagination is Vitamin-D deficient. The Spirit doesn’t live in the shadows.

If you read the entire Letter of Ephesians, you will notice some of the content that gives the Bible a bad reputation. I’m taking about “wives submit to your husbands” stuff. The “slaves obey your masters” stuff. It’s tempting not to mention it, because this part of the letter is so good. But honestly, look what has happened, over the centuries. The inherent sexism, racism, exploitation, it has come to light. Because we *know* more than we used to. Because we *see* more than we used to. Because we are being healed. The shadowboxing is a never-ending process – even in the cultures that birthed our sacred texts.

When you come to a place of trust, a place of understanding that the moral inventory is not meant to shame but to heal, then the shadows themselves become less frightening. We can learn not to be afraid of the dark.

To say that this is hard work is an understatement. And it is happening in churches all across this country. Maybe in the sanctuary, if the congregation is so lucky. But almost certainly in the basement, in the Sunday School room, in and among coffee cups and cigarette butts and laminated copies of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. “Keep coming back, it works if you work it.”

\*\*\*

Everything that becomes visible is light. Is it not true that we return again and again to our childhood memories over time, discovering and seeing more than we once thought possible?

Why was I so amused by Old Jimmy? Why did I think about him more than many other people in the church? Why did I love him more than I understood?

It’s true, I guess, that I loved him for exposing what my teenage brain saw as the flaws and melodrama in the very idea of an altar call. At its worst, I found it emotionally manipulative and built around the idea of a conversion experience that I didn’t believe in.

So every time Jimmy lumbered to his feet, making his way forward with an embarrassing shuffle to take my father’s arm, I thought: “See. That’s the kind of man who *needs* an altar call. That’s the kind of man who thinks a walk down the aisle will save him – not just once but every week. He was, I guess, everything I didn’t want to be. A weak man. A man who fails to understand the world.

It would take me an embarrassingly long time to understand that Jimmy also possessed a gifted and deep spirit, unencumbered by the fear that keeps so many of us tethered to the insane idea that we will save ourselves. What so many of us accept only after an enormous amount of resistance was something he knew instinctively.

When Jimmy died a few years back, I felt a wave of grief that I guess shouldn’t have surprised me. But I also knew and know without a doubt that he is with Jesus. Of course he is. It was the only place he was ever going. “I’ve decided I would like to give my life to Jesus,” he would whisper, too close to your face.

Me too, Jimmy, me too, I say to myself these days. And one day, when I can summon up your courage, I will.

1. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/addict [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Rohr, *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*,” Franciscan Media, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rohr, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rohr, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)