

“The Twelve Steps: Humbled”
Philippians 4:6-7; Matthew 5:21-26
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3rd Sunday after Pentecost
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7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

When I was 5 years old I lived for a year in rural South Carolina where my brother and I were allowed to run wild through the forest. At least that’s my memory. It was probably just a stand of trees across from the house, but as a 5 year-old it was a magical forest with abandoned tractor gear that served as our rocket ship, monster truck, and Super Friends Hall of Justice. One day our neighbors-to-be got a mountain of gravel dumped on the lot across the street where their home would soon rise from the soil. I’m told that we were told to stay away from the gravel.

But what kid, living across the street from a perfectly climbable pile of gravel is going to stay off of it? To do so would be to reject childhood itself. So my brother and I jumped and jumped and jumped until the mountain deflated to roughly the size of a speed bump. That night the phone rang. It was our neighbor-to-be. The gravel that needed to remain in a pile for some reason, obviously a ridiculous reason as any 5 year-old can tell you, was going to require machinery to come in and undo the damage that had been done. Did my parents know how this had happened?

Under pressure, my brother fessed up with his usual words to my parents, “It was *his* idea.” And then they dropped the kicker. My brother and I had to call up the people we had wronged and apologize to them – right then. I was petrified. Call up strangers and admit this? Right now? I protested. How about tomorrow? I cried. I threw a temper tantrum. My parents were unmoved. Call them now or go pick your switch.

In the end the phone call wasn’t actually that difficult. My brother and I stammered and stuttered but we got out an apology. It was the *willingness* to make the call that was so difficult. The *willingness* to own up to our indiscretion. Part of me remembers almost preferring a spanking to the phone call.

Steps 7 and 8 are all about that kind of willingness. Step 7: Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings. Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. The *willingness* to ask God for help. The *willingness* to make amends to people we have harmed.

The Bible often speaks of this humility in a positive light. God delights when we ask for help. God rejoices when we decide not to try to take on everything ourselves. And when we do come to God, how often great burdens are lifted from our shoulders. “Do not worry about anything,” Paul writes, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Paul writes these words while he’s in prison. “Do not worry about anything.”

Imagine writing those words from prison. Asking for God's help is good for us and for God.

Now if I were you sitting in the pew, I would anticipate right now that the conclusion of this sermon is that a good Christian *should be willing* to ask God for help. And a good person *should be willing* to make amends to people we had harmed. Exhortation complete – we can all go home. There's probably some gospel truth to that kind of exhortation. But AA approaches it differently. Do you want to be healed? If so, then here are the steps that will lead you there. Ask God to remove your shortcomings. Be willing to make amends. But it's your choice. If you don't want to be healed, that's a real choice. If you don't think you need healing, that's your choice. If you don't see that you've wronged anyone, then don't apologize for anything. Keep doing what it is that you're doing. It's your choice. We can't choose for you.

Judgment of any kind is not permitted in AA. When someone else is sharing, no cross talk is allowed. There are no gasps, no eye rolls, no offerings of advice or direction. The minute somebody smells judgment, the group shuts it down. You are invited to do hard work only by observing the healing that results in the lives of others. You cannot be pressured into healing. It does not work. You have to want it for yourself.

I think this is probably the hardest lesson that loved ones of alcoholics have to learn if there's any hope of their spouse, or parent, or child, or friend getting better. Some call it tough love, but it's really just love – to recognize that you cannot choose for someone else what they are unwilling to choose for themselves. They have to come to the conclusion that they need it. They have to come to the conclusion that they want it.

This is especially true when it comes to making amends with people you have harmed. You have to really want it. When people try to skip this step they often end up creating worse problems in relationships. There's nothing worse than someone who's not fully decided that they have hurt you come and make a half-hearted apology. You know the kind I'm talking about. "I'm sorry that you feel that way." "I apologize if I offended anyone." The word "if" doesn't belong in any real apology because as any alcoholic in recovery knows, you cannot get forgiveness from someone at the same time that you are avoiding taking responsibility for behavior that has injured them. Or as Richard Rohr puts it, "it is a self-serving concern to alleviate just your own guilt; it is a loving question to say, 'How can I free others from theirs?'"¹

I think this is why Jesus teaches the disciples that you can't really be reconciled to God if you've you haven't tended to wounds you've caused others. It's not a punishment or a threat. It's just a fact. If hurt comes between you and another, it will still be there between you and God. And that hurt, AA teaches, really has its deepest roots inside of you. Which is why steps 7 and 8 are intertwined just as Jesus teaches that loving God and loving your neighbor are inextricable from each other.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media), 2011, p. 71.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus connects this teaching to the commandment against murder. It's like Rabbi Jesus is saying, the first step toward murder is denying the legitimacy of another's pain or personhood. It's allowing your own needs to obliterate another – the sin that stands in the way of every real relationship. The sin that needs healing.

And here's why the sermon can't end with exhortation. Because the heart of the Gospel is not that we get close to God by making ourselves better than anyone else. It's not that we get closer to God by removing our shortcomings ourselves, or by bringing about reconciliation through our own acts of apology to people we have harmed. That is still putting ourselves back at the center of everything and just attaching God's name to it.

The heart of the Gospel is that we fully entrust ourselves to God. We don't let fear get in the way of admitting our shortcomings. We don't let fear prevent us from owning up to our responsibility for the hurt we have caused others. We are willing to be humbled. That's the only way to healing, at least the only way through Christ of the cross.

Part of the training I received as a pastor was visiting patients in the hospital setting. The hardest part of the work was the required group processing. Each week one of us brought to the group a verbatim transcript of a conversation we had with a patient. Important details were edited to protect patient confidentiality and the focus was not on the patient but on the pastor-in-training. When a patient brought up fears about dying why did one of us try to change the subject? What fears of ours were getting in the way of walking with this patient as she found the courage to discuss her own death? When a patient shared disdain for a spouse, why did we try to contradict her instead of encouraging the patient to be more self-reflective and follow those thoughts to their source? Why were we afraid of what she might reveal? When a patient shared a theological view that was not our own, why did we feel the need to contradict? or let it slide?

Those meetings were humbling because it was impossible to hide yourself – the parts of your person you were proud of and the parts that needed to see the light of day. But that didn't stop us from trying. I remember one person from my group, who I'll call "Cathy." She was second career and often reminded us of it. Most of Cathy's answers to group questions began with something like, "Well, since I have so much experience with X, Y, or Z, then I'm able to be this, or do that, or say such and such." It was as annoying as it sounds. Then one day our supervisor interrupted our group session to ask Cathy a single question. "When was the last time you learned something new?" The question hung in the air for so long that it still makes me sad to think about it.

God wants our whole selves – a real relationship – that is incredibly good news. But a real relationship means all of us – the parts you're proud of and the parts you know you've found impossible to change. A real relationship means that we have to be humbled before we can be healers. Otherwise we'll use even the act of helping itself to reward our own ego, to elevate ourselves above others.

The iron rule of community organizing is something you learn early in the training. It is reinforced again and again in community work – never do for others what they are unwilling to do for themselves. For individuals who want to be

leaders and change their communities, the teaching goes, we'll walk into the fire together. We'll speak truth to power. We'll cross boundaries together. But we won't do it for you. In fact to try to do for someone instead of with someone, robs them of their dignity, of their agency, and ultimately of their humanity. It's you deciding that you know what's best for someone else, which, outside of a healthy parent child relationship is really just another form of playing God. AA and community organizing would say that kind of paternalism works against someone's healing, not for it. And lest anyone who is financially privileged think this iron rule only applies to people "less fortunate" than you, remember that Jesus says it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of the needle than it is for a rich person to enter heaven. The path toward healing for rich and poor is a way of humility where all true power is found.

And that's why this sermon doesn't end with exhortation anymore than AA does. If there is healing from this God – and I believe that there is – it comes in the form of a real relationship. You can choose the way of humility offered by Jesus, instructed by AA, or you can keep on doing what your doing. The church's best evangelism is not unrealistic promises of prosperity in this life, nor it is threats of some otherworldly punishment to come. The church's best evangelism is real people who have found healing in the way of Jesus sharing the freedom and the joy they have found, and are still finding, in this real relationship with God.