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Sermon: Moebius Loop

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

The Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6-9

6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. **7** But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. **8** None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. **9** But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

The Gospel Reading: John 21:15-19

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." **16** A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." **17** He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. **18** Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." **19** (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Sermon:

There is a comedy troupe in New York City called “Improv Everywhere.” Their mission, according to their website, is to “create unexpected performances in public places,” with the aim to “surprise and delight random strangers through positive pranks.”¹ They define a positive prank, by the way, as one that creates laughter and wonder and delight, not pain or embarrassment or humiliation.

For example, they flooded a Best Buy store in Manhattan with hundreds of men and women dressed in blue polo shirts, just to see how people would respond. Or they had 100 people freeze in place in Grand Central Station for exactly four minutes before continuing on their way.

One of my favorite pranks is a more modest one that they call “Moebius Strip.” A Moebius Strip is a mathematical concept – a single-sided strip of paper with a twist in the middle and connects back upon itself in a loop. There are many people in this congregation who understand it better than me so don’t get too worried about it. But just know that it loops but it also twists. And that mathematically, it does things that seem to be impossible. That’s the best I can explain it. I’m sorry. I’m just a minister.

Anyway, for the prank, Improv Everywhere meticulously rehearsed a sequence of events involving eight actors all of whom located themselves inside of an unsuspecting Starbucks in Astor Place. Two actors played a husband and wife who get into an argument in line because the husband has started smoking again. “Wait a minute – is that a cigarette?” she says indignantly. “Are you kidding me?” The husband responds and their argument escalates until finally the wife leaves the store, upset, and her husband follows after her.

Another actor takes a phone call and has to move closer to the window to get better reception.

Another spills a cup of coffee on the floor, apologetically wiping it up with a napkin.

¹ <https://improveverywhere.com/2003/03/22/the-moebius/>

And finally – the absurd conclusion – a man walks through the store with a boom box that is playing “Shiny Happy People” by REM. He goes in one door and out the other without saying a word.

But the instant that the man with the boom box goes out the door, the husband and wife re-enter the store exactly as they did before. They are holding hands and seem happy. They get into the line again before the wife says, “Wait a minute – is that a cigarette? Are you kidding me?” And the cycle starts all over again.

It’s not really until the third circuit of the actions that the regular old paying customers – the unwitting audience of this performance – start to really pay attention to what is happening. They start to nudge each other. “Do you see this?” they ask each other. They start to predict what will happen next. “Now the man will spill his coffee – wait for it!” someone says. He does. It gives the people a rush of adrenaline to be able to predict the future.

When the man with the boom box comes back through a third time, the whole store bursts into laughter. Who would do this?

They repeat the cycle for an hour, or about 12 times, without ever breaking character. Many people in the store are repeating their lines along with them. And then, the 12th time the man with the boom box leaves the store, nothing else happens. The show is over and the people are just left with “Shiny Happy People” echoing in their heads, waiting for the next extraordinary thing that might happen to them.

The whole thing, by the way, is captured on video. You can watch it, and many other things, www.improveeverywhere.com.

We’re in our own sort of Moebius Loop, you know, in this sermon series.

We’ve reached the fifth week now of this series exploring the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and pairing them with passages from Scripture. You can see all Twelve Steps listed in the back of your

bulletin. Today we tackle Step 9, making direct amends to people we have harmed, except when doing so would harm them. And then we move on to Step 10, continuing to take a personal inventory of when we are wrong, and promptly admitting it.

The transition from Step 9 to Step 10 moves us into a new phase of the Twelve Steps. Steps 10, 11, and 12 are considered the “maintenance steps” of Alcoholics Anonymous, meaning that if all is going well in your recovery, you can cultivate them, in repetition, as a *lifestyle* of recovery. The initial Twelve Steps involve dramatic, foundational shifts in perspective. Step One: Owning the reality of one’s addiction. Step Two: Acknowledging the need for a higher power. Those steps can take a very long time to move through. Having done the hard work of acknowledging all of one’s personal flaws and wrongdoing in Step Four, having done the *really* hard work of sharing your shortcomings with other people and then making amends to the best of your ability - you might be a little bit dismayed to discover that Step 10 returns once again to the personal inventory. More self-examination? Really?

There are those outside of AA (and occasionally inside of AA) ² who argue that the model is flawed because it forces each person to own the identity of “addict.” You are constantly repeating it as your identity – “Hello, my name is _____ and I’m an alcoholic.” Or acknowledging your powerlessness. Or making amends. Or, as Step 10 would have it, beginning your personal inventory all over again.

In addition to the perceived negativity, there is something a little bit exhausting about the *grind*, the cycle, the idea that this work of being in recovery is never over. And it is very true that one can get addicted to self-critique. God knows the church has made that mistake. I also think we live in a culture that almost always values “new” over “old” and sees repetition as inherently boring. How could you possibly just repeat these steps again and again? What is gained from something like that? But I think we would be wise to see the repetition less as an obsession with self-analysis and more as a spiritual practice.

² One example: <https://psmag.com/social-justice/ive-finally-concluded-12-step-programs-25-years-writing-drugs-addiction-91099>

Richard Rohr notes a similar evolution in the prayer life of Jesuit priests. “We [initially] learned...about a daily and personal ‘examination of conscience,’ he writes:

“which certainly had some wise intent and worked for some. But I found that people with a mature conscience did this naturally anyway, and some way too much. Now many of the Jesuits recommend instead an ‘examination of consciousness,’ which to me seems much more fruitful.”³

By ‘examination of consciousness,’ Rohr means adopting spiritual practices like prayer, contemplation, confession, and even silence that allow us to escape our howling brains and pay attention to what God is doing on the deeper level of our existence. Like a Moebius Strip, there are some forms of repetition that expand our awareness, rather than reduce it. There is something to be said for learning to live inside of rhythms and disciplines that repeat. In my own humble exploration of the recovery process, it seems to be much-needed infrastructure, a corrective to the “stinking thinking” that will lead an alcoholic back to the drink if left to their own devices.

Throughout this sermon series, Andrew and I have made the case that the wisdom of AA applies to nearly any one of us. We each struggle with addictions and compulsions and self-defeating tendencies. Alcoholism is simply a very harrowing and visible manifestation of a universal problem that the church has taken to calling “sin.” But each of us needs structures and rhythms that perhaps, over time, twist us into something new.

We come to church for lots of reasons, I think that’s fair to say. And I do think we run the risk, with all of our rituals and repetitions and liturgical calendars, of looking like a endlessly repeating loop. If this is some kind of religious version of the movie “Groundhog Day,” where the same thing happens week after week at exactly the same time, with the same result, one might wonder what, exactly, is the point? Our Gospel

³ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Media, 2011, pg. 84-85.

reading today manages to pull the threads together, touching on Step 9, Step 10, and with a twist of the Moebius Strip – something new.

There was a man standing on the beach, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, in the region of Galilee. The man had a lot of opinions, as it turns out, about what constitutes the best practices of fishing.

Fishermen of all times and places are not known to appreciate unsolicited fishing advice from strangers, and these fishermen were no exception. But they did what he suggested, and the fish poured into the nets, straining them to the breaking point.

It was less the man's voice and more the excess of fish in the net that opened their eyes. It was as though they recognized him in the abundance. They realized it was Jesus.

And while they all realized it was Jesus, only Peter found it necessary to jump out of the boat and swim the final paces to the beach, back to the man they had believed to be dead. Knowing Peter, a man who almost always *acted* first and *reflected* second, he was probably halfway up the beach, heaving and heavy with seawater, before the full implication of this reunion dawned on him.

The last time he had been face to face with Jesus, it had been to betray him. "No – I don't know him," he had cried, no less than three times, as the guards were dragging Jesus away to his death. The moment had arrived, just as Jesus predicted, and Peter had failed. And now here he was, standing on the beach in front of a man he loved more than anyone, a man he could scarcely look in the eye without seeing his own failure.

It's a telling moment. Peter loves Jesus so much that he leaps out of the boat to be the first to reach him. But he has no idea where to go from there to rebuild the bridge that he has burned.

I'm going to go out on a limb now and assume that most of us have a person like this somewhere in our lives. A person that we love so much and a person that we can scarcely look in the eye. Because we've hurt them. Because there is a lot of history. Because maybe we just don't know where to start.

The Twelve Steps addressed this so concisely. Step 8: Make a list of persons we've harmed and *become willing* to make amends with them. I appreciate that finding the will to make amends is its own step. Some folks in AA will tell you that in fact Step 8 is the real work. Some people stay on that step for a long time.

Step 9 says simply to make direct amends to such people, but with two very wise caveats. *Whenever possible*. And when such a confession *will not do further harm to others*. In other words, this is not a zero-sum game. There are times when reconciliation will soothe our own egos but actually continue to wound other people. The Twelve Steps wisely say that this is not what the work is about.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels like a little more advice is warranted. Old wounds don't heal overnight, after all, and some don't heal at all. But I appreciate the advice of Step 10, however annoying. When in doubt, return to the cycle. When you don't know what else to do, lean into the loop.

It wasn't until breakfast was over, and they were lounging on the beach by a smoldering charcoal fire, that Peter found himself inside of the conversation that he was dreaded. The fire seems to invite comparisons to the fire pit where Peter had huddled to warm himself before denying Jesus, but he preferred not to think of that.

"Peter, Son of John, do you love me more than these?" It's a strange question and we are left to wonder about the tone of Jesus' voice. Was it a playful question? A pointed one? I imagine Peter laughing a little defensively, preferring to interpret it playfully.

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus replied, "Feed by lambs."

A strange little exchange and all well and good but Jesus feels the need to repeat himself. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

I can imagine a flush of color in Peter's cheeks as the question is asked again. "Yes, Lord," he says more seriously. "You know that I love you."

"Then tend my sheep."

The third time Jesus asks the question there is no pretence of normal conversation. Jesus is explicitly invoking Peter's three denials when he asks a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

The Scripture says that Peter was hurt by this third question and he replied, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."

Jesus replies to him with a new response. A call. "When you were young you used to go where you wished. But now: follow me."

The rest of the story is told in the Book of Acts. Peter goes on to become a key leader – perhaps *the* key leader, in Christ's church.

Please don't mishear me. I'm not really suggesting that there is a direct correlation between the Twelve Steps and Jesus' reconciliation with his old friend. There are some obvious differences. But I do think there is some wisdom to hold up here. Just some observations.

Why does Jesus repeat his question? I don't think its because he doubts Peter's answer. I don't think its because he intends to shame him in repetition. I think, rather, loop by loop, he is healing him. He is reinstating him. He is saying: "I am hardly done with you yet and in fact, if you are willing, there is so much more for us to do together.

Spiritual wisdom – the kind of wisdom talked about in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It's not just sitting there on the surface waiting to be

picked up. You can't just absorb it like information from an article. That's a very Western way of thinking about wisdom and healing. What couldn't we learn from an online course or a good book? Instead, Paul says, "We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages, for our glory." He goes on to say:

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:6-9)

I don't think it means there is some kind of secret code or knowledge to be learned. That's 'Da Vinci Code' nonsense. I think, rather, that spiritual wisdom is learned by living into it. By trusting the process. By accepting the notion that in the repetitive steps of the Holy Way, we will find ourselves, with a twist of the Moebius Strip - some place unexpected.

I know that some married couples – not me and Perry of course, but other people – might see a wry resemblance to their own marital conflict in the poor couple at Starbucks who have the exact same argument on repeat, every five minutes, for an hour.

"Wait a minute – is that a cigarette? Are you kidding me?"

It seems to be the unique burden of any long-term relationship, whether friend, family, or lover, to endure the same fights, conversations, and situations again and again and again.

But – if you are lucky - it is also surely the grace of long-term relationship to discover along the way that there can be healing, and hearing, and reconciliation in those repetitions. Sometimes it's a big dramatic change. But more often it is growth through repetition over time.

I have to think that this is how our relationship with God works too. We show up in good faith. Sometimes, like Peter, we show up feeling wet and worthless but we find ourselves strangely encouraged. AA is great on this point: "Keep coming back," they say cheerfully to a person who

just relapsed. And they mean it – because all of them hear those words at one point like a life-preserver thrown out into the water.

So we show up in good faith. We work the steps. We say the words, even if we can't really always believe them. We return to the stupid personal inventory. We summon the courage to attempt to make amends with a person that frankly, we've enjoyed hating.

If it were all simply a loop on repeat – a GIF – we would have good reason to despair. But if it is in fact a Moebius loop – if there is in fact a twist that makes impossible things possible – then we have reason to hope.

My favorite thing about the Moebius Loop video is unspoken. It's the idea that bored people in a boring Starbucks that looks like every other Starbucks in Manhattan – people that go there every day are suddenly sitting upright in their seats, saying – “Are you seeing this?” People who have never looked up from their phones are singing “Shiny Happy People” together in a room? That is a low-key miracle.

A good spiritual practice will not just elevate your spirit but center you in the present moment, quiet your spirit and open your eyes enough to hear the Good News that perhaps you have not yet been able to hear:

How much you are loved. How much you are forgiven. How it is not too late to begin again.

The testimony of folks from Alcoholics Anonymous happens to match up well with some of the wisest saints of the Christian tradition. What are they saying to us?

“What eye has seen? What ear has heard? What heart has possibly conceived what God is preparing for you and for me, beloved, when we gather together, just one more time, in love?”