

“Faith and the Twelve Steps: Evangelist”
Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 10:5-15
Andrew Foster Connors
5th Sunday after Pentecost
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A few years ago I was asked to present a Christian perspective at a Jewish Community Council’s event focused on the topic of Proselytizing. The Jew presented her perspective – Judaism doesn’t believe non-Jews need to follow their religious practices and customs, only abide by some basic ethical principles, she said. We don’t proselytize. I started to perspire a bit. The Muslim presented his perspective – everyone is free to worship God in whatever ways he/she chooses. Muslims have no problem with that, he said. “*Really?*” I asked. This was the most Unitarian version of Islam I had ever encountered. Now I was really sweating. Looking over my 4 page manuscript I realized that what people *wanted* me to say is that all religions point to the same basic truth and my understanding of God is no better than yours, but I gave them all 4 pages of my remarks anyway. If you’re going to make a mistake, my high school chorus teacher used to say, don’t be tentative about it. God big. To be a Christian, I said, means to have discovered good news that changes your life; news so good, that it would be selfish to try to hoard or hide it.

Wilbert Shenk, a missiologist, wouldn’t have been surprised at my dilemma. “Contemporary Western culture takes pride in its multiple pluralisms – religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and esthetic. Clearly, however, this culture intends to keep religion sequestered in the private sphere so that public culture remains wholly secular, free of religious influence.”¹ You can practice your religion as long as it stays at home.

Now before you decide to get up and leave, let me assure you that Shenk is quick to say that the antidote to this problem is not more Christian fundamentalism that seeks to powerplay the Christian faith in the public arena through those old battle lines of school in prayer, and prayers before governmental meetings and God Bless America sung just before the last beer call at baseball games. Shenk wanted the West to learn from other cultures that seem to be much better equipped to learn what he calls a “Christological openness to culture.” Rather than religion being some add-on practice that exists outside of the way we live our lives, Shenk, argues, it’s got to be an expression of faith that happens in the center of it.

I doubt Shenk had Alcoholics Anonymous in mind when he wrote those words, but the 12 steps does exactly that. God, or the higher power, if you prefer, is not some ornamental practice or badge that a person adds as a kind of extra-curricular project, but the very thing that has saved and continues to save an addict’s life. Attending an AA group recently I was struck at how little talk there was of alcohol and drinking in comparison to God-talk. And not God as an idea, or a

¹ Wilbert R. Shenk, “Recasting Theology of Mission: Impulses from the Non-Western World, *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, editors, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 2009, pp. 131 – 132.

doctrine, but as the only thing – hear this – the only thing that has kept the person alive. I dare say there was more first person talk about the impact God was having people’s lives in that AA meeting than there is in most of our Sunday School classes on most Sundays.

Step 11 is about improving “our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.” What’s jarring about reading this step as part of AA is that this is supposed to be what the church is for. This is supposed to be what draws us together. This is supposed to be our reason for being. The discipline of worship and prayer, and discernment that gives vocation, that gives assignment. And yet, when we are asked by friends or neighbors as to why we go to church I bet some of us, maybe many of us, try our best to avoid God-talk altogether. We talk about children’s programs or religious education or the beautiful music, or the social justice commitments. Next time, try telling your friend, I go to church because it’s the place where I improve my conscious contact with God, the place where I discern God’s plan for me. Try that out and see how it feels. The pressure to keep “religion sequestered in the private sphere” is so strong that it’s difficult discuss even when we’re asked about it.

Of course the real issue isn’t whether or not we feel free to talk about God in public. That’s the way the religious right cuts the issue. But I think the bigger issue is whether in the midst of a culture that makes all God-talk unacceptable, whether the church is a space where we can experience the freedom that comes with God at the center of our lives. Where the awkwardness of God-talk is overcome by the joy of the experience of God. That’s what AA wants for its members. It’s not too different from what the Apostle Paul wanted for us. Because God has already saved you, he says in Romans, live like it through the church. Give your whole self to God as a living sacrifice. And unlike most sacrifices that seem to be at someone’s expense, this kind of sacrifice results in the total transformation of the person giving himself over to God. The renewing of the mind, the gift of the body employed for what is good and perfect and true.

When you have experienced that kind of saving, that kind of freedom, you want to share it. In *The Big Book* the first four steps are covered in one chapter, steps 5-11 are covered in a second chapter, then an entire chapter is devoted to step 12 – carrying this message to other alcoholics.² Which makes recovering addicts some of the most evangelical people that you may know. Tim and I have tried to show all through this series how the 12 steps have wisdom to teach the church. Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to this kind of sharing.

First of all, AA says the best reason to carry this message to others is that it helps the person bearing the message. “Life will take on new meaning” the Big Book says. “To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish,

² *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.), first published 1939, 3rd edition, 1976.

to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends – this is an experience that you must not miss.”³

Helping others find the saving path that has saved you will help you. But here’s where AA’s form of evangelism diverges from the stuff that most of us have all rejected. AA says you can’t help others by criticizing them. You can’t help by trying to persuade someone into your way of thinking. Don’t refer to this book or any other resource, *The Big Book* says. Don’t use spiritual jargon – use everyday words. Don’t talk about theological terms or concepts or even what church tradition you belong to – that puts the focus on something other than God. No, do none of those things. Instead, when the time is right, and you’ll know it, the book says, simply and truthfully *tell him or her exactly what happened to you.*⁴ That’s the secret of AA which I believe is the origin of evangelism. If God has transformed your life then people will see that in you. Some people will want that. And they will learn it by your testimony.

Perhaps if we get right down to it, the idea of sharing good news with anyone else is frightening because some of us are not sure that we have encountered God sufficiently enough to have anything to share. But really that makes us no different from the very first disciples. “We do not truly comprehend any spiritual things,” Richard Rohr writes in his book on Spirituality and the 12 Steps, “until we ourselves give it away. Spiritual gifts increase only by ‘using’ them.”⁵ It’s like love itself. You can’t really understand it until you find yourself living it. And you can’t really find yourself living it without risking that it might not be true.

Jesus sends his disciples out to share good news: the kingdom of God has come near. It’s early in their training – it’s only the 10th chapter of Matthew after all. They testify to that good news with their whole selves by healing people, bringing life where there is death, and sharing freely whatever they have. But the hitch is that they can take almost nothing with them. None of the usual stuff we rely on to dress up our humanity into something less vulnerable than it really is. Nothing to protect us from the awkwardness of intimacy with other people. Nothing to hide behind. Just themselves and good news. They are supposed to be carrying the good news, but it’s almost like Jesus knows they themselves can’t fully experience it until everything they’ve relied on in the past – their family, their image, their resources, their careers – that’s all mercifully taken away so that it’s only a person speaking to a person. Nothing but a human exchange. Love, in its purest form, is found there.

Rob Tracy gave a tremendous guitar concert here on the steps Friday night. The electricity went out but he kept playing. I learned something new Friday night as Rob was introducing a John Prine song. He told us how his father used to play his guitar and sing to him to get him to go to sleep every night. Almost every night it was a John Prine song that he fell asleep to. So I got John Prine in my bones, he told us.

³ Ibid, p. 89.

⁴ Ibid, p. 93.

⁵ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media), 2011, p. 107.

I thought to myself, what if that's the way we shared our faith? Not this programmatic stuff that involves me trying to convince you that my conception of God is better than yours. Not right wing legislative power plays to try to force prayer or religion into spaces where you don't want it. But a father sharing a gift that has changed him, and is still changing him. Like an addict sharing his own experience of redemption with a sister at the end of her rope, a brother who is drowning. A gift that's given - not as a ploy, not as a trick, but just as a gift. A gift that gets fuller and deeper for everybody the more that its shared. Like a son drifting off to the dreams of his father singing "Only love, love only, only love will do."⁶

⁶ John Prine, "Only Love," *Aimless Love* Album, released May 11, 1989.