

“Step by Step”

Matthew 7:7-11 & 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

Fairlington Presbyterian Church - January 28, 2007

Part of a series on the Twelve Steps of AA. Today:

- 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

To hear Jesus preach it, it sounds so easy. It sounds like all we have to do – if we want something, if we seek something, if we pound on God’s door– is to ask, seek, and knock. All we have to do is pray.

We’ll receive what we want. We’ll find what we seek. The door will open wide. It sounds so easy.

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But what if. . . we’ve prayed every day? What if we’ve begged God? What if we’ve pleaded for something only to find our prayers unanswered?

What if we’ve been wracking our brains in search of God’s will for us, but as far as we can tell – no doors have opened and no answers have been received?

God loves us. God is more willing to give good things to those who ask than even human parents are willing to give to their children.

Are we doing something wrong? Are we praying for the right things?

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The sermons all this month have been related to the Twelve Steps of AA and as in most journeys in life, we find the route is not a straight shot. We take a step forward, two steps back. We might try to skip a step. We might stumble a little.

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Several years ago, there was a case covered in the newspaper about a drunk-driver who had collided with a bicyclist.¹ The driver was a 45 year old suburban mother of two

¹ Smith, Leaf, “Virginia Traffic Tragedy Takes Turn for the Worse,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2003, page B1.

boys named Cynthia. The bicyclist was a graduate student from Taiwan named Ya Wen. Ya Wen who lost part of her right leg in the accident and her other leg was severely injured.

What the article didn't say was that Cynthia had prayed for years that she would no longer want to drink. I only know this because I used to pray with her pastor. One Thursday in March, several years ago, he couldn't come to our monthly group, because he was conducting Cynthia's funeral.

Cynthia had worked very hard through the Twelve Steps of AA. She had become devout in her prayers and her life had changed while being an active member of her church. She had even become an officer - an elder.

Cynthia had not had a drink in five years, but holidays remained especially hard for her, according to her family, and over Christmas and New Years of 2002, she had started to drink again. Some of her old friends said it seemed to be under control. She could drink a little and be fine. But her new friends feared she had given in to the evil within her (an evil within all of us). They feared she had given up on prayer.

We often try to take short cuts, but find that they usually don't work – especially in the spiritual life. And so we take a step back and start again.

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Nobody knows exactly what happened with Cynthia but just after 5:00 one March afternoon, she was driving her SUV and hit Ya Wen on her bicycle. She was arrested for drunk driving but by 2:30 in the morning, was released on bail. She went home to her house in McLean and, sometime during the night, she took her own life.

This was not a person who didn't know she was loved. This was not a person who had nothing to live for. We can only imagine that she couldn't endure the pain of what she had done. She could no longer face the pain of the past and the pain that was coming.

At least for a moment, she was no longer sure that even God had the power to get her out of this.

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These 12 Steps are not just a good spiritual practice. They can save our lives. Especially Step #11 – *conscious contact with God* – can save us.

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The last three steps of The Twelve Step Program of AA require some spiritual maturity. If we've reached these steps, it means we've already dealt seriously with some life-changing decisions. Some terrifying truths.

But the point is not – however – that we are done with steps 1-9. That we’ve fine-tuned those steps and never again have to reach them. In the Twelve Step program, we find ourselves advancing, but we also have to track-back. Perhaps every day.

In the spiritual journey, all of us begin with baby steps.

Think back to time when you watched a little one learn to walk. At about age one – more or less – a child takes her first steps. Often, she’s still unsure she can do it. Maybe he’s trying to grow into his head, which is bigger than the rest of his body. He wobbles. She staggers. He moves in the direction of a safe place: a piece of furniture to hold onto, a smiling face to move towards.

This is a little bit what prayer is like. We move towards something we can hold on to. Something sturdy and safe and good.

If you’ve never prayed before, of even if you have – remember Jesus taught us to start like this²:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

In other words: we recognize that God is our heavenly Father, and God is holy. Our higher power.

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By the time we reach the 10th Step . . .

*Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong,
promptly admitted it . . .*

we are almost at the point of “review.” This step isn’t new – admitting we are wrong, assessing how things are going. Steps 4 and 5 have previously addressed this.

By this point, by this step – we know we’ve got some defects that only God can manage. And so we pray. Step 11.

And we pray and we pray some more. Bill W. – the founder of AA – suggested that we pray first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening, every day. Recovery is an ongoing process that spans the rest of our lives.

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We are sinners for life, just as alcoholics and other addicts never fully recover in this life. Even devout believers can stumble and fall. And many of us never get past the earliest steps along our spiritual journey.

² Matthew 6:9

For example: Many of us pray for the same thing over and over again – for years. We ask. We search. We knock. But we never seem to get what we want. Why is that?

I was taught – as maybe you were – that God answers our prayers in one of three ways: *Yes*, *no*, and *wait*.

We usually want a swift and clear “*Yes*.”

But what if we think we are asking for bread and God knows that the bread will turn out to be a stone? What if we ask for a fish, but God knows that if we receive it, it will taste more like snake.

God sees what we cannot see. And so sometimes God says, “*No*.”

The hardest answer, however, might be “*wait*.” With time, we see God’s hand upon a situation. We realize that it looked like God was absent; but with time, we see that God was simply in disguise.

Maybe the point is not in the answers but in **never giving up**. To keep praying, to keep that conscious connection to God.

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Many of us never mature in terms of our prayer lives. Many of us never get past the step when we treat God like our personal valet: *serve me, get me what I want, could you pick up my things for me?* – this is how some people pray throughout most of their lives. But those are the prayers of a selfish child.

We graduate – so to speak – perhaps with prayers prayed in emergency situations:

God, if you will get me out of this . . .

God, I know I haven’t talked with you lately but I need your help. . .

God, I’m at my last thread. Save me and I promise I’ll do anything you want . . .

Lord, I’m begging you. Help me . . .

If we only pray in emergencies, then our connection with God won’t sustain us. These are also the prayers of an immature believer, someone who admits they are powerless, but it never gets very far from there.

These last three steps require a maturity that recognizes the lifelong nature of this process. We never “graduate” from needing a daily, constant connection with God. We never overcome our sins, our addictions. We never fully recover – in this life.

But there is a last step that points us toward the future. In the 12th Step – there is a new feature: Not only do we continue to address our own spiritual needs, but we also have the responsibility to carry this spiritual message to others.

Paul – who knew something about the lifelong struggle to overcome personal defects³ – said it this way:

*Blessed be the God of all consolation who consoles us in all our affliction,
so that we may be able to console others.*

It doesn't stop with us. God doesn't give us strength, God doesn't allow us to discover the truth, God doesn't fling open the door and welcome us home just so we can have a personal party with The Almighty.

If we have been consoled by God, if we have been comforted or cared for in any way, the next step – for all of us – is to reach out to someone else.

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Our elders and staff just returned last night from a retreat at the gorgeous new grounds of the Presbytery's camp in the hills of Middleburg. And we looked at this church, at where we are now and we realized that we need to change some things – the biggest being that spiritual transformation doesn't end with us. It's not enough to want this congregation to know the consolation of being loved by God. God is calling us to transform our community, to transform the whole world.

For generations, the institutional church has been more like a club. People joined. They received benefits (You can get married and buried from here! You can have your babies baptized!) And then, we will serve all your spiritual needs. All you have to do is sit back and receive. Knock and the door will be opened.

Oh, of course, we wanted our members to keep the institution going. We valued “church workers” who did behind the scenes work. And we still do value them – there are many things to do to keep the doors open.

However . . . we have stressed Churchianity instead of Christianity, and the institutional church is dying because of it. We have failed as followers of Jesus Christ if ministry has been all about us. If we have prayed only for ourselves. If we have only serve ourselves. If we are only interested in consoling ourselves.

We are called to – in the parlance of AA – *sponsor others* who also need to be consoled, who also need a spiritual awakening.

If Cynthia had remembered that there is someone who would be there for her no matter what, even if she fell, even if she tumbled to the pits once again. . . If only she

³ See Paul's letter to the Romans, especially 7:19.

had remembered that there was someone with arms outstretched who was ready to catch her if she stumbled . . .

If only she had not felt alone . . .

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It's not enough that we go through this life living only for ourselves. That's not – in any way – what God calls us to be. We are to be a force of love in the world in the name of Jesus Christ aiming to transform the world into something that looks more like The Kingdom of God. Think back again to the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray:

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth . . . as it is in heaven.

This is the last step. This is our Great Commission⁴ -- that we would go out of this sanctuary, this safe place and be out in the world serving others. Not just in this building serving this Institution.

We are called to console people out there in our offices and in hospitals and schools and playing field, in stores and coffee shops – anywhere we notice people whose lives are unmanageable, who are searching. And when we notice them, when God sets us in the right place at the right time – we are called to speak clearly and lovingly the Truth in our own words: that we know of a Power that is stronger than evil, a Power greater than ourselves. We can simply ask, “Have you tried to pray? Have you thought about asking God for help?” We might be the very people God has sent to console them.

And so we go out from this place today, and our spiritual work begins. We can ask. We can pray. And we can be there when someone else is asking.

Let us pray:

Awaken in us a spiritual understanding and us to live our lives seeking what is good and holy. You are our hope and our consolation. Help us to spread that hope and consolation to others in the name of Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 28:18-20