

## “Deciding to ‘Give It Over’ to God”

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Joel 3:18

In that day  
the mountains will drip sweet wine,  
the hills will flow with milk,  
and all the streambeds of Judah  
will flow with water;  
a spring will come forth from the Lord’s house  
and water the Shittim Valley.

Philippians 2:12-13

Work for your salvation with fear and trembling. It is God, for God's own loving purposes, who puts both the will and the action into you.

Matthew 7:7-12

Ask, and it will be given you. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever searches, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Who among you will give your child a stone when they ask for bread? Or give a snake when they ask for fish? If you then, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your God in heaven give good things to those who ask! Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

### *Tie flag while talking*

Billie did not really know what Al Anon was when she showed up for her first meeting, but she was pretty sure she needed it. It wasn't Jeff's drinking; it was his unreasonable expectations, his yelling. The way he sucked the energy out of her. She needed help. What she discovered that day and in the months that followed was that more than a fix for Jeff, she needed to change the ways she responded to him. She learned about codependence and enabling behaviors. She found out that sacrifice – not the good sacrifice they talked about in church but the way she acted like a martyr was unhealthy for the whole family.

She'd been going to church for sixteen years but she noticed that she sensed God more in meetings than she did on Sunday morning. It was really hard to let old patterns go, but she didn't give up. And slowly she started to do better. We're in week three of our sermon series based on Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.<sup>i</sup>

The first week we talked about our unmanageable lives, about how we were powerless to control them. Something will control them, but only God will do it well. Last week, we learned that we all succumb to the universal addiction to our own way of thinking. Even when things are out-of-control and all our efforts are ineffective we resist giving up control. Only God can restore us to sanity. For that, we have to open ourselves to God – heart, mind and body.

Today, we examine Step Three of the Twelve Steps: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. Once we have accepted that our lives are unmanageable and that we cannot stabilize them on our own, the next step is to give ourselves over to God. *wave flag*

The word for this, *surrender*, has a bad reputation. When people hear *surrender*, they usually think: “giving up.” But today I’m asking you to wipe that definition from your mind and insert instead, “giving to” the moment or the person. Giving over to God. Surrender can feel like dying as we yield our control of the way we think life should be. Yet by then, we trust that God will lead us better than we can lead ourselves. And it’s a necessary step in our spiritual journey.

We struggle to accept just about everything – ourselves, others, the past, our mistakes and imperfections, change. We’re much better at fight or flight but they don’t offer us deep, lasting results.

Jesus tells us to offer the wicked no resistance, but to accept what they demand of us. The ones who truly practice acceptance – Oscar Romero, MLK... – are raised as heroes precisely because we are so bad at this.

Society does not respect those who don’t take control. So we learn. If you’ve spent any time around two-year-olds, you know that people practice taking control from the beginning. By the time we are adults, we expect to think and act as suits us.

The struggle to surrender our will to God is mastered only by a decision. Our will has to be transformed and no idea, feeling or scripture will do this for us. Giving our will over to God is not easily. Usually we will do it only when it’s demanded of us, by others or by circumstances. That’s because we have our own plan for what will make us happy. We don’t accept that our ideas won’t work for us in the long-run unless we become ever more controlling. Something has to break our primary addiction to our own ideas about happiness. Only then, will we find ourselves resting on God’s grace.

Without a firm decision to turn our lives over to God’s care, church is ineffective. Sure, we can still be active in UMW or the Memory Café, but we are not open to God’s transformation. Rohr says that in his experience the percentage of people who have actually handed over their will to God in most churches is about the same as at secular gatherings.

By saying “If any want to follow me, let them renounce themselves,” Jesus is calling us to a radical surrender of our will to another whom we trust more than ourselves. Bill Wilson, founder of AA, made *surrender* a clear Step 3. But for Jesus, surrender is Step 1. I once knew a woman who said she gave up her teeth – meaning health – to bring her children into the world. She did everything for them, even into adulthood. Her ways kept them feeling guilty and forever close to her.

Maybe you’ve known someone who seems so dedicated that they give up their own happiness.

Rohr calls this the “myth of heroic” sacrifice. With heroic sacrifice, people can renounce the self while not really renouncing it at all. They seem generous and loving, but, in the end, it’s still about them.

Personal sacrifice creates the Olympics, and many great efforts. But it is not the gospel. There is a love that sincerely seeks the spiritual good of others and there is a love that seeks superiority, admiration, and control. Suicide squads are sacrificial, as are most resentful people and manipulative parents. Codependents are sacrificial.

Codependency is the disease of supporting others' disease through our enabling behaviors. It is so well-disguised that it's hard to recognize. Codependents think they are being generous, strong and loving, yet they come to be as unhealthy as addicts.

When Jesus says, "Unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," he's talking about an early stage holiness – sacrificial religion – that looks like the real thing but is not. Sacrificial religion seeks the moral superiority and approval. Think of the Pharisee who prayed, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like everyone else." Pharisees are Jesus' example of what we are to surpass. He himself is the example for true love at its best.

Through the 12 Steps, group members learn not to reward what looks like worthiness or willpower. AA starts at unworthiness. The ego prefers a way of merit and sacrifice so we can feel worthy. God's way is one of grace and unmerited love where we have no control. Heroic sacrifice avoids truly renouncing the self while looking good yet Jesus mocks the people who give bags of money to the temple.

We fail to turn our lives over to God because we think God's love is merit-based. We say, I'll do it when I'm good enough. But as long as spiritual growth is a contest, no one feels worthy. Like the prodigally-loving father in Jesus' parable, God will wrap us in love when we finally accept being radically accepted. Isn't that what we need?

Mack is a cradle Methodist. He and Sally were married in the church. Matthew was baptized there. Intellectually, Mack understood about giving his life to God. His marriage was good. He helped at the church's food pantry. But lately, things had been going badly. The doctor said he needed to change his lifestyle. Sally's job was downsized. Matthew was struggling in school. And Mom...

He resisted Sally's suggestion to try Al Anon when he was having trouble coming to terms with his mom's addiction. He finally went grudgingly. Later Mack said it was Al Anon that helped him accept his need for control. He knew now that he was addicted to his need to keep his life, and the people in it, neat and tidy. And he saw that this was unsustainable. At church, no one really expected him to surrender. Al Anon did.

Sunday church is too large a circle for everyone to notice if you are not growing spiritually. We may notice that you have not joined a class but we cannot tell if your life is a mess. We don't know if you are caught in quiet desperation, or a spiral of depression. You do though.

If you hear nothing else today, hear this: Giving your will over to God will not fix everything, but you will be better off. With God, you will have a guide you can trust beyond all others who will lead you better than you can lead yourself.

Isn't this what you need?

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2011, 17-27.