

“Skillfully”ⁱ

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
January 19, 2020

Matthew 5:23-24

“If you are bringing your gift to the altar, and there remember that your sibling has anything against you, go first and be reconciled to them, and then come back and present your gift.”

James 1:22-25

Be doers of the word, and not just hearers who deceive yourselves. To listen to the word and not obey it is like looking at your own features in a mirror and then, after a quick look, going away and immediately forgetting what you look like. Instead, study God’s perfect law, the law of liberty, and continue to live into it, putting it into practice each day. And you will be blessed in whatever you do.

The law of conservation of energy, also known as the first law of thermodynamics, states that the energy within a closed system is conserved. Barring changes from beyond the system, energy neither increases nor decreases. The universe is a closed system, so the total amount of energy in existence has always been the same. While the total energy remains constant, though, this energy is regularly changing form.

Faithful people have noticed that this law of physics applies to theology and spirituality as well. Nothing that God loves ever ceases to exist. Though it may change form, it is eternal. Nothing just goes away.

God’s economy is one of grace and forgiveness. And yet while God forgives the residuals of our mistakes linger. Since nothing simply goes away, consequences of our words and actions remain. We still have to repair the bonds we have broken. God forgives – fully and in real time – yet we, and the people around us, need “a clear accounting” so that we can go on with our lives (70).

Even if we never raise our hand in anger, we commit violence – with our words, our manner, our actions. We speak or act with impatience. We scold. We gossip. We break trust. Sometimes the violence is unintended; sometimes it’s chosen as the lesser of two evils. But most of the time, we do this because we are more concerned about our own ways of thinking and being than we are about repercussions.

Today we continue our sermon series on spirituality. Using Richard Rohr’s book *Breathing Under Water*, we are working our way through the Twelve Steps used by A.A. and other programs.

Step 8 is “quite programmed, concrete, and specific.” “Make a list,” it says of “all those *we* have harmed” (italics mine). Rohr says “A.A. is the only group I know that is willing and honest enough to just tell people up front... until you get beyond your massive narcissism you are never going to grow up” (71).

Step 8 echoes Jesus when he tells us that we must renounce ourselves if we expect to follow him. We have to say no to ourselves (Mk 8:34). If we only talk about following Jesus’ way, if we don’t model our lives after his example, the only one we fool is ourselves.

Christians tend to gravitate toward one end or the other of a spectrum. Either we expect ourselves to be socially correct. We enable people, supporting their addictions and offer very little truth-telling. Or we threaten folks with God's coming judgement (and our own). We don't talk about healing and don't teach, or learn, how to heal or make amends. As Christ-followers, our goal is to grow toward the middle of this continuum – practicing compassion yet also justice, healing yet also expectation. We do this in relationship with others. This is part of why family, church and friendships are so important.

We need to learn how to embody our faith, as Jesus did. Fully human (while also fully divine), he is the blueprint we are to follow. Step 8 is a tool, a practical means for keeping our faith “grounded, honest, and focused on saving others instead of just ourselves.” (72).

Step 8 speaks of being “*willing* to make amends” (italics mine). It can take us a long time to become willing. But it's a necessary step. And naming it helps us recognize that making amends is a process.

Have you noticed that sometimes when people apologize, they seem more concerned in recapturing their self-perception than in mending relationship? And when they accept apologies, they make it clear that they're on the moral high ground? They're not thinking about restoring a relationship. Christianity is given a bad name by the many who forgive this way – whether to a gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual person, a child, an addicted person, or somebody who just said something dumb. It remains to be seen if we will be able to dig ourselves out of this hole.

We all need to do inner clean-up work. Being willing to practice grace take years. As we come to willingness, we then make lists, not of what others have done to us but of those we may have hurt, failed, treated unfairly. After this, we pray and we wait for God to guide us. Do we call or visit, write a note or give a meaningful gift? Do we offer an out-and-out apology? As long as we pay attention, God will show us the best way. The best time and place. The best words (74).

Moving on, Step 9 tells us how to use *skillful means* both to protect our humanity and to free others in their humanity, directly – through “specific, personal, concrete” means (77).

This skillful means is a term often used in Eastern religions to refer to the wisdom of discerning the best, most practical and effective way to accomplish something. It's more than just a heady thinking we often associate with wisdom. Maybe you've been fortunate enough to learn skillful mean from someone.

Jesus is a master of teaching skillful means, teaching commonsense spiritual wisdom. We are so eager to hear his God talk that we sometimes miss his “daily and constant declarations about how to be human and how we [are] to imitate him in his humanity” (76).

Do you realize that Jesus refers to himself as “Son of Man” or “Son of Humanity” more often than anything else? He wants us to know that he is one of us, a real human being. Part of his pattern is that he capitalizes on face-to-face encounters. He is forever touching people as he healed them. Yes, his context is different from ours. And, yes, looking into someone's face is hard when one of us is hurt. Still we need not to dismiss his example. In the long run, face-to-face will do the most good, even if someone rebuffs our first attempt at mending the breach.

Interestingly, though, there is a “but” in Step 9. We should make amends “except when to do so would injure them or others.” We often need time, wisdom and guidance in order to know when, how and where to make amends. Our efforts can worsen the hurt or the situation if not done skillfully.

Although we have this “myth of ‘total disclosure’ in our culture” we don’t need to tell everybody everything (78). We all realize that truth is about more than just the facts. A person may not be able to handle what we want to say. They may not have the right to hear it, or we to say it!

How many times do we complain to others who are doing their part as best they can? How often do you or I go to a school, hospital or bank administrator, a pastor or manager, to express a concern when really all we’re doing is finding fault with people who, again, are doing their part the best they can? How often do any of us do harm because society has told us to let it all spill out? We need to discern our reasons for wanting to share and then pray and discern the means to speak with grace and skill.

Too often we *want* to hear the juicy details when they are not part of our story. Our questions have more to do with morbid curiosity than any thought of healing. We have no business asking or sharing such gossip (that’s what it is!). Even though such talk has become the norm in society, gossip is a hindrance to love and relationship. In fact, Paul lists gossip right up there with jealousy, murder and greed (Rm 1:29).

Truth is not just what happened. It’s also what each person has the right to know, and can handle. Micah might have the right to know something but if I know they can’t keep things to themselves then, in love, I cannot share it with them. I don’t have authority to out anyone. Nor do you.

When you’re talking to someone and they ask about... Pat, let’s say. If it seems the most caring thing, you might say that you’ll let Pat know you asked about them. Anything beyond this is not loving dialog.

If you’re on the phone and they ask to speak to Pat, it might even be the most true and loving thing to say that Pat is not available – even when Pat is standing right there. As faith-filled people we recognize that there are deeper truths. And one deeper truth might be that though Pat is physically present, “Pat is not available for you.” There’s actually a word for this; it’s a mental reservation. And sometimes it’s not only good to practice; it’s “the more moral thing to do to protect yourself or others, or even the party seeking the information” (80).

We are all called not only to make amends but to practice skillful means so as not to harm or further injure anyone. Living in truth requires us to consider not just words and actions but also “context, style and intent” (80).

The 12 Steps are about two things – making amends and keeping from wounding anyone further. In what ways might you begin doing that this week? Who needs to be on your list? What will be the most right and loving way to approach them? Pray this week. Ask God for guidance. And then pay attention for God’s response.

ⁱ This sermon is taken from and draws heavily from Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, “Chapter 8: Payback Time” and “Chapter 9: Skillful Means,” Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2011, 67-82.