

## “Having had a spiritual awakening”<sup>i</sup>

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Isaiah 38:16-17, 19

You have cured me and given me life, my suffering has turned to health. It is you who have kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, you have thrust all my sins behind your back! The living, the living are the ones who praise you, as I do today.

Luke 22:31-32

Simon, Simon, you must be sifted like wheat, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen these others.

Matthew 10:8

What was given to you freely, you must give away freely.

What is *not* optional in your life? I mean, besides food, family, clothing and shelter, what else is essential? What else must you do? (For me, it's being outdoors.) Bill W., co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, concluded that “service” or accompanying other alcoholics in their struggles was essential for him. In order to remain sober, he needed to serve others.

Today, we wrap up our sermon series on Spirituality in Twelve Steps. Through these eleven weeks (we combined Steps 8 and 9) we have faced the truth that we are all addicted to something, even if it's only to our own ways of thinking (though in truth, this is a big one!). We acknowledged that to escape our addictions we have to surrender our ways, and our mistaken belief that we can control our lives, to the only One who can truly manage what life brings.

Today, Step 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we... carry this message to [others], and... practice these principles in all our affairs.

Service is this important. We must serve. Otherwise, we are simply going through the motions, and likely sinking in our addictions. Listen to these words from Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water*, chapter 12:

“After trying to teach the gospel for over 40 years, trying to build communities, and attempting to raise up... leaders, I am convinced that one of my major failures was that I did not ask more of people from the very beginning. If they did not turn outwardly early, they tended never to turn outward, and their dominant concern became personal self-development, spiritual consumerism, church as ‘more attendance’ at things, or to use the common phrase among Christians ‘deepening my relationship with Jesus’” (106).

Throughout his book, Rohr speaks of our human tendency toward selfishness. Although I agree with him, I tend to avoid talking about selfishness from the pulpit for fear it will turn people off from the rest of the message. Yet we cannot leave today without at least addressing our selfishness.

We do not like to think that we're selfish. We tell ourselves we do lots of selfless things. Yet at our deepest level, we are all more concerned about ourselves and those closest to us than about anyone or anything else.

Until people's basic egocentricity is exposed and revealed for what it is and until our self-interest is redirected, from the roots up, church is little more than rearranging the furniture to suit preferences of those currently in leadership (106). In A.A.'s Big Book we read, "Our troubles are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves; and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he or she does not think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us!" (62).

Serving others is the means for escaping our self-absorption. When Jesus sends his disciples out, two-by-two, to heal people and announce to them that God's kingdom is near, he cautions them not to think about themselves, about compensation, food or money, but to put all their thought into service. He knows that they, and we, need to share his message with others before we can really understand it or appreciate it ourselves. "We don't really grasp any spiritual thing until we ourselves give it away (107).

As we begin our worship time, we slow our breathing and open ourselves to God as Spirit. We breath in what God might have for us this day, but before that we exhale to make room. If a person just kept breathing in, they would suffocate.

Maybe this happens in church. Think of all the folks who come to church each Sunday who make *attending* their one spiritual event. We can take in and take in but never give out. While Jesus expects his followers to go and serve others, the church only invites and suggests. In doing so, we create a passive membership which expects to have their needs met and sometimes passive-aggressive behaviors when things do not go their way (110).

We cannot view service as something we will get around to sometime. To grow an adult faith and to be the persons we're made to be, serving others is essential.

For too many generations, the church has seemed to see itself as a select group of insiders. We have the right stuff and we're better than everyone else. Think of the traditional language about salvation: "We are saved. They're going to hell." But Jesus never means for us to think he's talking about forming a new in-group or clique. He's talking about sharing a message that makes a difference in people's lives and in society. He's talking about Lifestyle Christianity.

The NT epistle James speaks at length about Lifestyle Christianity. James insists, repeatedly, that right living is more important than right words. "To listen to the Word and not obey it is like looking in the mirror, and after taking a quick look, going off and forgetting what you look like. [To] actively put it into practice is to be happy in all that one does (1:23-5). And, "if good works do not accompany faith, then it's quite dead" (2:14).

There are Christians, probably some here, who believe that all you need for faith and salvation is words. Jesus knows otherwise.

We need a vital spiritual experience. A good spirituality accomplishes two huge things at the same time – it keeps God free of our assumptions and tendencies to keep her in a box, and it also keeps us free. When these two freedoms come together, we experience a spiritual awakening. And we are in a differently place.

Without a vital spiritual experience, we will find ourselves constrained by circumstances, failure, limitations or tragedy. God's intention is for us to know this freedom. But, like any lover, God respects our freedom. So, God allows us choose this vital spirituality, or not (111-2).

“Keeping God free (from bad teaching, fear, and doubt) and getting [ourselves] free (from selfishness, victimhood, and childhood wounds) is [a] life-long task” (112).

As Bill W. learned in his journey with sobriety, "there is no real or long-lasting recovery, no real sobriety, much less emotional sobriety, without what he calls a ‘vital spiritual experience’ ... One gradually ‘realizes that [they have] undergone a profound alteration in [their] reaction to life, and thus that such a change could hardly have been brought about by [themselves] alone'" (112).

In order to know real-time salvation, we need a great love. A deep love. Think of a parent's or grandparent's love toward a child. In most cases, we are more patient and compassionate around our youngest ones. We need a love that will absorb the negativity and our frustrations with life and with ourselves. And we tend to be unsettled until we find and accept our connection to God and to all of God's beloved.

Rohr suggests that most people are called to marriage and parenthood and are even “saved” by such relationships. Close relationships reveal to us our own innate selfishness. Marriage and parenting are designed, he says, in order to save us from our selfishness. When we choose relationship, when we choose to fall into a love that is greater than we are, we grow (113-4). It's a given. We learn. We expand.

We learn how to love by falling in love – and recovering from it – many times. Love is too big and scary (Dostoyevsky called it “a harsh and dreadful thing”) to seek out otherwise. Yet it is what God calls us to do, again and again.

In our faith, we are called to choose, over and over, to fall into a love beyond what we experience with friends, lovers and children. These are the training ground for the falling into love with God. As we gradually grow into a profound relationship with God, this love spills over into all our other loves.

Addiction used to be called a weakness or moral failure. Though medicine now identifies it as an illness, maybe we would do even better to call it a spiritual illness, one resulting from “longing, frustrated desire, and deep dissatisfaction.” A.A. says that addicts are people searching for meaning and love but in all the wrong places.

What does this say about us – given that we are all addicts, whether to food or drink, to pornography or blaming, to gambling or our own ideas about how to spend our leisure? Are you seeking something you cannot find? Are you searching for meaning, purpose or love?

Addiction is what “emerges out of *a lack of inner experience of intimacy with oneself, with God, with life, and with the moment*” (115, author's italics). We need that intimacy. Like serving, it is not optional.

Use what you have been given to serve others, to teach others or let them teach you, to guide or strengthen others. Let your service and your relationships draw you ever closer to them and to God.

The Twelve Step Program call this recovery. The Bible calls it salvation (xv).

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, “Chapter Twelve: What Comes Around Must Go Around,” Franciscan Press, Cincinnati, 2011, 105-118.