

“Wanted: A God Who Can Help”

Theme: 12 Steps to a New Beginning, part 2

Isaiah 12:1-6, Mark 10:46-52



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Last week we began a sermon series called, “Experience the Power: 12 Steps to a New Beginning.” Using the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a model for the Christian walk and as a helpful spiritual discipline, we examined the meat of step one—our powerlessness. It is difficult for any of us to accept the fact that we are powerless. And yet there is so much of life that we are powerless over—all kinds of different addictions: alcohol, drugs, food, compulsive spending, gambling, destructive relationships—and we are all powerless over the realities of human pain and brokenness and our own human limitations. Finally, we are also powerless to really change others, even those closest to us.

But what is even more troubling is that we are so terrified of this powerlessness that we humans have created a myth. We have entered into a kind of delusional thinking that tells us that we can be in full control of our lives and our destinies; that we can control others, the universe, and even God.

Now the Bible calls this kind of thinking—this desire for life to be the way we want it to be, this tendency to put ourselves at the center of the universe—the Bible calls this our human sin or our sinful condition. It is all the attempts we make to play God. And for this sermon, I would like to call it our sin-

disease. It is all that prevents us from living a peaceful, joyful life of serenity with God and others.

All authentic turning to the living God, I believe, begins with an acceptance of our powerlessness to solve the most basic problems we are facing. Once we can break through our denial enough to admit that we are powerless, and we can accept that even our best efforts won’t solve our deepest problems, we have taken the first step toward spiritual healing and wholeness.

I was exposed to the 12 Steps of AA in my fifth year of parish ministry. I believe today that if I had not come to understand this concept of powerlessness I would not be in parish ministry today. In those years I was operating as a pastor with an underlying belief that if I just worked hard enough and was smart enough I would be able to transform the church I was serving at that time. I know now that if I had continued much longer with that belief I would have certainly crashed and burned. Learning to accept that I was powerless over many things that occur in a church community, and that God, not I, was in control was absolutely necessary to allow me to continue to be in parish ministry these past 33 years and for the most part really enjoy this work. But this acceptance of my powerlessness and relinquishing of my desire to be in control is something that I need to work on daily.

That is what Isaiah was pointing to in his song of deliverance that we just heard read. His words might sound like a call for personal deliverance, but it is really a song for deliverance of the nation and a call for a reunited world. The nation of Israel had suffered terrible disasters at the hands of the Assyrian army. It was this time of trouble that led God’s people to the willingness to stop drinking from their own well and seek to drink from God’s. It was a disaster, in this case a national disaster, that convinced them they could no longer depend on their own power, but had to depend on that power of God which is so much greater. The people of Israel were pushed to rely on God because their national life had become unmanageable. That seems to be what it takes for humankind to turn to God. The more confident we become of our own power, the less inclined we are to turn to that power of God greater than ourselves.

Now this is the tremendous good news that comes to us in the second step—that comes as a cup of cool water for the

thirsty. The second step assures us that there is a power greater than ourselves than can overcome our human pain and brokenness, our addictions, and our sin-disease, and this power can help us see life as it can be lived. Step Two says that after admitting our powerlessness, all that is required to begin this faith journey is a willingness to believe—no content, no creed, no church affiliation—just a willingness, a sense of openness to a “higher power”—to something greater than ourselves.

The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous who were Christians, and who had Episcopalian and Catholic priests as their friends and advisors shared a very profound understanding of how people come to faith. They realized that the key to unlocking the doorway to authentic faith is the willingness to believe. Their experience convinced them that if they used this “key of willingness,” the doorway to a specific faith in a living God and a new life would swing open.

So people who enter the 12 Step program, who admit that they are powerless and that their lives have become unmanageable, they are encouraged to trust in a power greater than themselves who will give them the strength and the insight they need to unsnarl their lives. If they admit honestly that they don’t know if they can believe in God, 12 Step people calmly say, “It doesn’t matter. Start with whatever you have that is a power greater than you. Try your support group or an experience of nature, like a sunrise or even a doorknob.”

A doorknob? Now that really bothers a lot of Christians. I came into the 12 step program as a Christian with a graduate degree in theology, five years experience in pastoral ministry, and a serious commitment to Christ I had been trying to live for over 15 years. I had some serious doubts and concerns about this “higher power” or “doorknob” approach to God. I was concerned that people might be led astray or settle for an inadequate god. But upon the urging of friends, I agreed to undergo several weeks of training as a clergy consultant for a 12-Step alcohol treatment center in Vancouver, Washington. I let my supervisor know that I would listen and watch during this time of training and then decide whether to stay with the work at the center.

As the weeks went by, I had a very humbling experience. As I watched the higher power reveal itself to various people in the center, its personality always had certain familiar char-

acteristics. I knew that if everyone were “making up” their own higher power, this wouldn’t happen. It couldn’t. The personality of the higher power revealed in that center was always loving and forgiving; it gave people however many new chances they needed to start getting well; was rigorously honest, moral and strong, but never abusive; and was loyal beyond belief whether people deserved it or not. In fact, as I looked carefully at the higher power in the 12 Step program, I realized that it had a haunting familiar resemblance to Jesus Christ.

In those early weeks of my work at the treatment center, one man stands out. For this sermon we’ll call him Stan. Stan was a marine biologist, a brilliant scientist who began his alcoholic drinking 25 years earlier following the death of his young wife from a painful, debilitating form of cancer, a woman who was a deeply committed Christian. His wife’s death not only left Stan drowning his grief in a bottle, but also left him with no hope of ever believing in a caring, compassionate God. In our first meeting together, Stan admitted that he needed help from something beyond himself, but there was no way he was going to call his higher power “God.” Instead he chose to describe his higher power as a “cosmic force.” Two weeks later I met with Stan again. “Patty,” he said, “I’ve discovered that the cosmic force wasn’t enough for me. In this last week I’ve discovered that my higher power is a Divine Being, a loving God who everyday seems more and more like that man from Nazareth.”

After ten years of work in that treatment center, and after hearing hundreds of conversion stories like Stan’s, I am now convinced that the “higher power” concept is one of the most profound discoveries of the 12 Step movement in helping people move into the faith process—in helping so many people find an authentic faith in the God of the Bible and a new life in Jesus Christ.

I think it works so well because the very act of believing changes the focus of a person’s life. By act of believing I do not mean a thoroughly worked out belief system; I mean a willingness to step out in the faith that God is real. This willingness to believe removes the focus of a person’s life from an ever tightening cycle of self-absorption, from attempts to control unmanageable problems alone, and from immersion in self-centered emotions like shame and fear and helplessness.

ness. Creative and healing power is released when we make that simple shift from the self-willed, self-centered, “I’ll do it myself, thank you,” attitude of the sin-disease to the belief that God can give us the perspective and strength we need to solve our problems. The simple act of believing relieves the confusion and fear and moves us into the process toward healing. It gives God a little crack in the door to get through to our hearts and then this beginning leads to much, much more.

The spiritual process I am describing is not so different from the evangelism used by the late Rev. Sam Shoemaker, the Episcopal priest in whose church Alcoholics Anonymous had its first meeting in New York City. Sam suggested to people who didn’t believe in God that they enter “a thirty-day prayer experiment.” He told them, “Don’t pay any attention to whether you believe or not. Just pray every day for thirty days that God will meet you at the point of your greatest need and see what happens to you.”

Literally thousands of people have become committed Christians doing that 30-day prayer experiment. It seems that as one becomes involved in the action of faith, some of the objections to the content of a specific faith evaporate and one is led quietly into a belief in the living God, and to seeing the face of God in Jesus Christ. The miracle that happens for many people who first take God as a doorknob is that faith, that simple act of trust, opens the locked doorway of isolation, enabling them to step out into a new light, into a new world, into a new family of faith, and into the presence of the living God.

This is what happened to the blind man, in the gospel story we read. Bartimaeus really had a very inadequate concept of Jesus. He kept insisting on calling him the Son of David. Now that was one of the titles for the Messiah, but it had in it all the thoughts of a conquering Messiah, a King from David’s line who would lead Israel to national greatness. That was a very inadequate idea of Jesus. But what Jesus accepted was not the title Bartimaeus used, but Bartimaeus’ willingness to turn to him and ask him for help. What made Bartimaeus well was trusting in a power to heal him that was higher than his own power. In that one instance, Bartimaeus turned to the higher power of Christ and his life was forever changed. And that is the way it works.

I want to touch briefly on the second half of Step two—the part that states that God “could restore us to sanity.” It is very difficult for a person who is coping at all to accept the notion that he or she may in some way be “insane.” But listen to this dictionary definition of what it means to be “sane.” It is “to be free from hurt or disease...wise, mentally sound, without delusion or prejudice, logical, rational, sensible.” The primary synonym for sanity is “wise.” We need to gain enough humility to face the fact that it’s not wise or “sane” to be in emotional turmoil all the time, to be fearful, anxious, resentful or critical. This sort of turmoil results from our compulsive need to control, from our sin-disease.

If you do believe your behavior is always “sane” or wise then think for a moment about these questions. Do you ever feel a kind of uncontrolled anger? Do you use silence as a weapon with which to hurt people? Are you a compulsive shopper or eater? Do you sleep too much or do you have difficulty sleeping, even though you are tired? Are you continually stressed? Do you have excessive worries or fears? Do you drink or work to excess? Do you procrastinate or try to control others? And do you continue to have the illusion that you really are in control? Honestly admitting that these thoughts and behaviors are insane is the beginning of really owning our powerlessness and turning toward the living God—a God who desires us to be healthy and whole.

The mark of conversion in the Christian faith is the statement that “Jesus is Lord!” That means that there is a new occupant on the throne of our lives. There is a new center other than self. Jesus becomes the way, the truth and the life. Christ is revealed as being our higher power, our God who has come to redeem and restore us to a new way of life in the midst of our pain, brokenness and limitations.

This morning I want to encourage and invite each of you to deepen your journey of turning to the living God in Jesus Christ. No longer do you need to live the burdensome illusion that you are in control. Today, you can give God power over your life and when you do, you will discover the greatest power, the deepest love, and the most profound peace in the universe. Thanks be to this wonderful God. Amen.