

# “Conscious Contact with God”

## 12 Steps to a New Beginning - Step 11

Psalm 91:1-2, 14-16; Romans 8:26-27



Rev. Tom Campbell-Schmitt

November 18, 2007

Two Saturdays ago about twenty men from St. Andrew's had breakfast with Mark Forker and Mike Wille from the Willamette West Chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Many of you know that Habitat partners with the working poor to help them get into a house they could probably never afford on their own. Habitat's motto is, "A hand up, not a hand out." Families who will qualify are required to put in 500 hours of "sweat equity" at every stage of construction. The thought struck me that there are a lot of parallels between the process you go through in building a home and the process of building a life.

The 12 Step of Alcoholics Anonymous lays out that blueprint: You begin by laying a solid foundation (Steps 1-3); you need a well-designed superstructure (Steps 4-8); you have a plan in place for preventative maintenance (Steps 9-10); finally you inhabit your house and look forward to inviting others in to share its warmth. That's what Step 11 is all about – turning your house into a home. It's about the realization that you're really not built to "do life" alone. I mean, we've all seen what can happen when you're home alone, right? It's not a pretty picture. That's where Step 11 comes in. It reminds us of our need for something more. Here's what it says, "We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

I believe God has a very important message for those of us who are part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. What's fascinating to me is that God chose a group of alcoholics and addicts to deliver it. You see, back in the 1950's when AA first began, the Christian church in the United States was in it's hey day; St. Andrew's was one of hundreds of Presbyterian church "start ups" that were chartered in Portland and around the rest of the country. The church was at the height of her institutional glory. The Protestant mainline denominations: namely, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, etc. were like a General Motors brand. Business executives and politicians made weekly appearances at church services to demonstrate their brand loyalty. Wives in the Bible belt of the country dragged their alcoholic husbands to church, where they usually got a good dressing down, but not much freedom from their disease. In other words the church was culturally successful. But the fire in her belly was about to experience a fuel shortage.

God raised up this fledgling movement known as AA and sent it *outside* the camp of the church, under city bridges, in church basements (where drunks and addicts live) and into the wilderness (so-to-speak) where prophets sometimes hang out.

To quote Phyllis Tickle, whom I will mention again in a moment, Alcoholics Anonymous became "the first spiritual fellowship organized around pain, not prosperity." This gathering was not about institutional loyalties, finding business contacts or mixing with people of the same ethnic, social or economic group. This was a stripped down fellowship organized around common pain.

You could say it was a lot like the original fellowship of Jesus, which began with teachings like "Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn." Now, AA was not going to fly unless it actually worked; unless it delivered the goods. So it asked this tough question: "What is necessary to save an alcoholic from his or her disease? What does it take to transform a life? And lo and behold, the path became clear: work the 12 Steps each day, every day. And those who did so got well; those who worked the steps only half way didn't.

To say that this spiritual movement has challenged those of us who use the name of Jesus in our title would be a huge understatement. What I find especially interesting is that while AA started out as a Christian movement, early on it made a strategic decision to lower the profile of Jesus' name in favor of the phrase "Higher Power." Why would they want to do that? Because AA wanted to include people of all faiths – Christians, Jews, Muslims – and people of no faith whatsoever. But here's the amazing thing: AA did the Jesus stuff based on the wisdom rooted in the gospel; they just didn't use the name.

What was God up to here? Could God be speaking a prophetic word to a lukewarm church? Could God be saying, "You've got the Jesus Name, but you're not doing the Jesus stuff for hurting people. AA was doing the stuff, but not using the Name. And if it's a choice between these two options in terms of which works best to get more addicts saved from their disease, the answer is a no-brainer: hands down it's AA.

Now hear me, church. I'm not suggesting that our response to all this should be to dump the Jesus Name in favor of doing the right stuff. Far from it. The response I believe God is crying out for is that we Christians bear the name and do the stuff associated with the Name. That, friends, is not the task of Alcoholics Anonymous, but it is the task of the Church of Jesus Christ. So, with that little rant now out of my system, let's look at Step 11 again.

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.

What does this mean in practical terms? Imagine that your mind or your heart is like a battery. It has contact points that connect up to cables that start your engine and get your juices flowing. But what happens when dirt and grime and grease and corrosion build up on those contact points? You lose power. Your battery gets drained. It's hard to get started and hard to keep going.

Step 11 says the way we stay energized is by improving our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation. So how can we appropriate this for our lives?

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.

One thing you quickly notice about this step is that it's the longest of all of the 12 Steps. It's not only long in the number of words, but in the length of time you'll need to complete this step – a lifetime. Its purpose is to help you build a personal, life-long connection with the God of the Universe; so you can invite God into your house so you know the meaning of home: God's home. Maybe you never thought that was even possible but listen to what God promises us in Psalm 91:15: "You shall call upon me, says the Lord, and I will answer you. I will be with you in trouble. I will deliver you and honor you." When you spend time with someone on a regular basis what happens? You get to know that person better. You develop a relationship; a friendship starts to form. The same is true with God.

So how do you go about making in conscious contact with God? The Big Book of AA fleshes this step out with three concrete

recommendations: 1) Morning prayer, to start the day with an act of surrender; 2) Night prayer, to review the day, and turn over anything that is troubling you; and 3) Checkin' in with God, through the day as needed.

I asked an AA friend, "Do people in AA, actually do this?" She said, "Yes! Morning, Day, and Night. Because if they don't; they don't get well, and their recovery won't last." Prayer is one of the active chemicals in the recovery laboratory of AA. It's a kind of Survivor reality show, a survival of the fittest, or should we say, a survival of the humble-ist? AA tell us: This is what works. This is what's necessary.

AA understands what it's taken me 30 years to verify in my own life. I've been a Christian for a long time. I was baptized when I was only six months. As a small child I was taught the habit of praying when I woke up, saying grace at meals, and praying before bedtime, why?, because that's what a good Christian should do. What I didn't discover until years later was that I needed prayer like I need food and fresh air; it's something I can't live without. So I started thinking about prayer more like a recovering alcoholic—as something I needed to survive.

Another thing that has convinced me of my need for regular prayer has been the fact that I'm not getting any younger. I'm now 61. About a dozen years ago I went through a health crisis that continued for several more years. My mid-life crisis didn't result in a new wife, (thank God), or new sports car (darn) but it did make me aware that my natural powers were diminishing. It presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime: to become more deeply connected to God.

They have a saying in AA: "Keep it simple stupid." There are many products out there you can find to clean the contact points on a battery and there are different ways to pray as well. You can pray the Lord's Prayer which we use every week in our worship services. Or you can pray the time-tested *Serenity Prayer* written back in 1926 by the American pastor and theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr. Twelve steppers have the first part of the prayer memorized:

*God, grant me the serenity to  
accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

This part of the prayer is less familiar but no less important:

*Living ONE DAY AT A TIME.  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.*

*Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.*

*Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will.  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.*

Millions of people recited this prayer every day. But there are other prayers. Often people use a prayer like this as they get ready to start the day:

*"My Creator,  
I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad.  
I pray that you now remove from me  
every single defect of character which stands in the way  
of my usefulness to you and others.  
Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding."*

At the end of the day they pray a prayer like this one, -

*"God, I offer myself to you  
– to build with me and to do with me as you will.  
Relieve me of the bondage to self, that I may better do your will.  
Take away my difficulties,  
that victory over them may bear witness  
to those I would help  
through your Power, your Love, and Your Way of life.  
May I do Your will always."*

I recently came across another great resource: a manual of prayer by Phyllis Tickle called *The Divine Hours*. I hope it will be available in the upcoming Book Faire here at the church. *The Divine Hours* take you through each day and each season of the year, and it follows the same pattern as the Big Book of AA: morning prayer, mid-day prayer, and nighttime prayer. There are all kinds of prayers that can be effective. When it comes right down to it there is no magic formula. As Shirley said in the children's moment, you don't have to worry about whether you're kneeling or bowing or folding you hands in a certain way, or putting your body in some pious posture to get God's attention. God is already attentive. A wise pastor once told me, "All you have to do is sit down, put a chair in front of you, and imagine Jesus sitting right there opposite you. Then talk with him, just as you would talk to your best friend."

But listen to this: the central, foundational, seminal thing about prayer according to Step 11 is that we should really prayer for just one thing.

Notice again the wording of this step, "Praying only for the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out." There is that word "only." In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us when we pray.

We don't have to know all the details in advance. God will intercede on our behalf to express needs that may escape our awareness, or that exceed our ability to put in words. The Holy Spirit is like a FedEx or "big brown" delivery service; it carries our requests right to God's front door.

I hope that's a comforting thought rather than a frightening one for you. Because one of the stumbling blocks people sometimes have with praying for God's will to be done is they think that something awful will happen to them. God will ask them to quit their job and become a missionary in Sudan. They think their life will take a terrible turn instead of a beautiful turn. That's because they have a negative image of God as some grumpy old man. But the God of the Bible; the God of Jesus, is a loving God. Our *Brief Statement of Faith* as Presbyterians says, "Like a father who welcomes the prodigal home, like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, God is faithful still."

So we can pray with confidence; we can simply say, "God help me know what your will for me is *in this situation*, then give me the power to carry that out."

When this is the pray of our hearts, day in and day out, God begins to gently nudge and reshape us. That's not an overnight fix; it's a daily spiritual discipline. Over time we begin to sense more clearly God's path for our lives and we are energized to follow it.

In his book "A Hunger for Healing," Keith Miller imagines himself walking alone by the Sea of Galilee. Let me invite you to do that now. If you're comfortable doing so you might want to close your eyes and image you're there by that Sea. Suddenly it starts to rain so you seek shelter in a nearby cave. You notice a simple camp fire in the cave – the coals glowing, radiating warmth and light. A man is sitting on a rock on the other end of the fire; he motions to you to come closer and warm yourself. You notice that his hands are pierced. There is a winsome expression on his face as he calls you by name and he says, "I love you. I want the very best for your life. But to get it, you need to trust me and follow my lead."

We need to do what Jesus himself did when he prayed with his heavenly Father in the garden. Step 11 gives us a way to build that relationship—through conscious contact with God; to help us experience a deeper, richer, fuller life. So what do you say? Will you pick up the challenge of AA to the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Will you say, I want to be part of a community of faith that is committed to healing and transformation? Will you build the foundation of your life on Jesus Christ so you're no longer home alone? God is handing you the key. Will you take it? Let's pray...