

“Completing the Cure: Giving It Away”

12 Steps to a New Beginning - Step 12

Isaiah 61:1-4, Colossians 1:10-14; Mark 5:18-20



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All of us are addicted to something. Some of us are in recovery and some of us are not. That was one of the underlying themes of the conference on the gospel and the 12 steps that several members of St. Andrew's paths of recovery team attended a couple of weeks ago in Dallas, Texas. Let me say it again. All of us are addicted to something. Some of us are in recovery and some of us are not. We live in one of the most addictive societies on our planet, a society that produces a high percentage of addicted people. I think that most of us could agree that people can become addicted to alcohol, to drugs, to gambling, to sex, to nicotine, to pornography, to compulsive eating and shopping, and to violence. But people can and do become addicted to less obvious things...like work, or to controlling others, or to being right, or to finding security, or to experiencing pleasure, or even to helping others.

So what is an addiction? One definition of an addiction is an attempt to fill a gaping hole inside of us (which cannot be filled by anything human), and to fill it in ways that don't work. Another definition of an addiction is that it is a dishonest relationship with any mood altering substance, or object, or person, or event. The key to this definition is the word "dishonest." Almost anything, even good things, can become dishonest when we expect them to do something for us they have no power to do. For example,

just listen to TV for a couple of hours one night and see how many times you are told that if only you buy that perfect car or perfect home, or wear those perfect clothes or perfect perfume your life will be transformed and you will be fulfilled and live happily ever after. But that won't happen and that is why we try again with a new home or a new car and another and another and another.

Now this has radical implications for the community of faith. In a society of people seeking all kinds of things to fill that hole, to anesthetize their pain, to make them feel valued and loved, it is easy to get side tracked from the only One who can fill the emptiness, from the only One who can heal the pain, from the only One who can convey true value and love. Several months ago I met with a bright, talented young pastor in our Presbytery. She was struggling with some tough things happening in her church, and during the course of our conversation she said something that has troubled me ever since. "Patty" she said, "When it comes right down to it I don't think very many people either inside or outside the church really care very much about having God in their lives. I am having trouble finding anymore very passionate about God anymore. I see so little spiritual desire, curiosity, or longing for God. People are so busy filling up their lives with other things that there just doesn't seem to be much space or time for God." What a sad commentary on our society.

I'd like to ask each of you right now to do a little exercise. Take out the blank piece of paper in your bulletin. I am going to ask you to write your responses to two questions. 1. One a scale from 1-10, where would you put yourself in terms of your passion for God and God's work? How much time during the day do you think about God and about doing God's will? How great is your desire, your longing for God? Write down a number from 1 to 10, with 10 being the greatest. Now think about what you do fill your life up with. What do you spend the most time doing or thinking about each day? Do those things draw you closer or further from a vital, passionate relationship with God and with the Christian community. Write down a few things that fill your life.

Now listen to Jesus. He tells us that he has come to seek and to save the lost, not those who think life is going pretty well for him, who have it all together. He makes it clear that the only prerequisite to a relationship with him is desire. And spiritual desire can only be stirred up in the life of a powerless one, a defeated one, a hungry one. Jesus is not upset with sinners. He is only upset at people who don't think they are sinners, who don't think they are broken and poor and in need.

That is why many of us who have been exposed to 12 Steps groups have come to see this movement as a great reform in the Christian community. People in 12 step groups know that they need God. In many cases their very survival depends on nurturing that vital connection to God. They have stopped pretending about their lives. They have unplugged that hole that had been filled with their addiction and the love of God is now flooding into their lives. And every day they are discovering miracles of healing and their lives are being transformed to the glory of God. The absolute honesty in these groups brings about an absolute surrender to God, and that is marked by an overwhelming joy and peace that is contagious. Hence the tremendous growth of 12 steps groups all over our country.

A wonderful story is told about the Italian traveler, Marco Polo. When he came back from China in the 14th century, he told stories of the wonders he had seen and the incredible cities he had visited. Because these things were beyond the comprehension of the people of his own city, they began to accuse him of lying. They even ridiculed him. Later, when he was dying, some of his friends urged him to confess his lies since he was soon to face God. But Marco Polo firmly stood by his stories answering his accusers with the words, "I never told the half of it."

When we have been touched by the living Christ, when we have been transferred from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of light that Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians, we too may find it hard for others to believe us. The kind of life-changing transformation that can occur in us as we commit ourselves to a spiritual discipline like the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous that we have been exploring together these past months, is a true miracle of spiritual resurrection. Someone who has never seen or experienced the honesty, love, healing and peace of the Christian walk may have trouble comprehending it. Yet, we, like Marco Polo, "Never tell the half of it." It is so much greater than what we can put into words.

The twelfth step that we are looking at this morning calls us to celebrate our new life in Christ, our spiritual awakening, and to do all we can to make that new life believable and accessible to others. This powerful step states, "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." A "spiritual awakening" in twelve step terms is a mystery. But almost all the authors who write about Step twelve agree that the power that boosts us into a new orbit of life comes from a spiritual awakening.

There is no one way of describing a spiritual awakening. There are as many different kinds of spiritual awakenings as there are people. For some people parts of it happen quickly; there are those who go from loneliness, fear and chaos to a great deal of serenity, courage and self-acceptance after doing Step one or Step Two, and many after doing Steps 3,4,or 5. It takes others much longer to have a spiritual awakening.

A spiritual awakening means different things at different times to us as we walk the 12 steps and as we live out our Christian faith. It's like a series of dawning insights that move us from confusion to an awareness that the world makes sense and that we are going to be all right in it, no matter how bad things look on the surface. Our spiritual awakening brings us peace. This doesn't mean that our lives will become trouble free. Life is difficult, filled with problems which can cause us doubt and confusion, turmoil and pain. To the extent, however, that our spiritual awakening gives us a new way of perceiving the world, we are released from much suffering. We have peace in spite of our problems.

A spiritual awakening may dawn early one morning as we wake up and feel a breath of hope after being under the wet, dark blanket of despair. It may come as a gradual awareness of our own self-worth after years of feeling unacceptable and inadequate. The change for many is that God is not some distant figure on a mountain or another planet, but a presence with, within and among us wherever we are, guiding, leading encouraging and comforting us as we move on toward wholeness and the giving and receiving of love.

But most important we find that we are now able to do, feel and believe that which we could not do before on our own unaided strength and resources. We find ourselves in possession of a degree of honesty, tolerance, unselfishness, peace of mind and love of which we had thought ourselves quite incapable. We have been touched by the living God, and because we have been touched we now want to touch others.

To want what is best for others is what this 12th step is all about. That's what it means to carry the message to others. When we begin to experience healing in our lives, we want others to be healed also. When our life has been changed, we want to tell others what has happened. Our new life in Christ is too precious to hoard. It must be given away. One of the paradoxical bedrock truths of the Christian faith is that we can stay spiritually alive only by giving away what we have received. One of the great truths expressed in the oral traditions of 12 step recovery groups is,

“You can't keep it unless you give it away.” This is exactly why Jesus asked the demoniac man he healed to go home to his friends and to tell them how much Jesus had done for him, and the Scriptures tell us that this is exactly what the healed man did. He began to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him and everyone who heard was amazed.

We, too, are called to be living, walking, vivid, unanswerable demonstrations of what Christ can do for a person. Step 12 urges us to tell the story of our healing and recovery. I'd like to share with you a very simple three-part way to share your story with others. First, you tell people what you used to be like—before you became a Christian or when you lacked commitment or the assurance of God's love. Then you share what happened (the crisis or low point) that brought you to God or that challenged you to deeper commitment and trust, and then you tell a little bit about your life now—how God is continuing to love and change you.

You might want to think about your self-image and ask yourself how you perceived yourself before you became a Christian or as a young Christian, and how you perceive yourself now. You may want to look at your perception of the world and the goals and values you hold and ask whether there has been any changes in how you perceived the world then, and your goals and values now. Or think about your relationships and what love meant to you before you became a Christian or as a young Christian and what your relationships and what love means to you now. Or what about your purpose or motivation in life? How has that changed over the years? And what about your hopes before you became a Christian or as a young Christian and your hopes now? Has there been any change?

This kind of sharing of our faith journeys helps us and the people we are sharing with. In reaching out to those who are struggling we are reminded of our own vulnerability and need for God. As others hear about our former distress, our controlling or our self-destructive or self-centered behavior, they will feel less alone and less different. As we share how God has been healing us, they will be given hope and encouragement to seek God's help for themselves.

The final part of Step 12 is to practice these principles—these 12 steps in all our affairs. There is a well-known joke about a man who rushed up to a cab parked on a street corner in New York City and asked breathlessly, “Quick, how do I get to Carnegie hall?” The cabbie looked up, smiled and said, “Practice, man practice.” While the joke is old, the principle is timeless. We cannot

make progress in our spiritual lives, in our journey toward spiritual wholeness and healing—unless we continually practice the Christian principles imbedded in these steps in all our affairs.

For example, let's say your problem is a deep resentment of your brother. You can take Step One and apply the concept of powerlessness and unmanageability to this relationship saying, “I admit I am powerless over resenting my bother and my life is unmanageable in that area.” This can lead you to see the insanity (a principle from step two) of your attitude toward your brother, which is absorbing much of your time and energy and making you sick while he remains unaware of all the “down time” he is causing in your life. This awareness may lead you to the pint of making a decision to turn the relationship with your brother over to God along with your life and your will. This is using the principles of Steps one, two, and three on a specific issue in your life.

Someone once said that the twelve steps are a lot more like a bag of “spiritual golf clubs” than they are a book concerning the philosophy of gold. Think about it for a minute. The step or steps you use depend on where you are and where you're going—where the hole is. As you would in golf, you look at the situation before you and you see where the hole is and where you are, and then you choose a certain club that's going to most nearly get you where you want to go. Some of the old-timers in the 12 step program are, in fact, rather like seasoned golfers. They walk through their days and nights and when they walk into a troubled situation, they eyeball it and then look at the 12 steps. They say to themselves, “That's about a nine shot.” So they pull out a principle from Step 9 and perhaps go make amends to someone to heal the problem.

As you apply the principles from the 12 steps in your life and work, a security concerning problems that crop up, comes with knowing you have some tools and a source of support to deal with the problems. A gracefulness can come into your daily being. God will begin to calm the troubled waters of your inner space and to reshape your thinking toward surrender, honesty and redeeming love. As you live out this new life you become a beacon of hope to others. As a Christian you know what hope is all about and you are called to bring that ray of hope to an uncertain world and to many struggling, broken people. Let us thank God for this tremendous privilege of carrying the message of God's love to others. Thanks be to God. Amen.