

“Service”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 18, 2019

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

I Peter 4:8-11

Mark 10:35-45

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” In other words, Jesus asks James and John, *are you able to be crucified like I am to be crucified, to suffer and be rejected?* And these two dreamers, these knucklehead disciples reply, “Sure! We are able!”

You almost expect Jesus to say, *You idiots! You have been with me all this time and you still don’t get it. Based on what you are saying, you don’t have the foggiest idea of what I have been talking about, do you?*

And maybe, Jesus was thinking exactly that. But instead, what Jesus said was, “You will drink the cup that I drink, you will be baptized with my baptism.” Jesus promises his disciples not that they will be in glory with him, comfortable and sitting in a place of honor. He promises that if they follow him, they will share with him in his sufferings and his challenges.¹

This is a message that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, maybe because we in the church are reluctant to hear the message ourselves. Jesus is not offering a technique for getting what we want from God; instead, Jesus is the way that God chooses to get what God wants out of us. God loves the world; and wants a world that is saved, restored, and redeemed to God. And the way that happens in through ordinary people like us who are willing to serve: to speak and act like Jesus, and even – if need be – suffer like Jesus.

And so, Jesus references those who are regarded as rulers in the ancient world; those who ‘lord it over’ their subjects. They exercise authority like tyrants; rather than saving or restoring, they tear down and divide. To be great, Jesus says, is to be a servant. That may challenge the expected norm, but even in those days, there was appreciation for rulers who provided public service to their subjects. And yet, Jesus pushes this idea to a new level when he says that to be first is to be a slave of all. Servants were at the absolute bottom of the social ladder; there was no honor or reward in working for others as a slave. But Jesus reminds his

¹ William Willimon, “Good News?” from *Day1.org*

disciples that he came to be nothing more (or other) than a servant; to give his life for many.

We have now explored, by walking step-by-step throughout this summer, the spiritual principles behind the 12 Steps used by many recovery programs. At the same time, we have been testing the thesis that recovery is something like the Christian concept of salvation; that it is both a gift that comes to us from God while also a journey that we make, a process we undertake. Changed along the way, we gain new understandings, new ways of thinking, and new patterns of behavior. We are, to use biblical language, reborn; a new creation.

Step 12 says this: *Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

This is therefore a step that has two parts: 1) practicing the principles, which means the active maintenance of a sober life; and 2) carrying the message, which entails sharing what has been experienced and learned with others who might be ready for change. Now is the time for telling your story, which – for someone on the journey of recovery; someone in the process of being saved – has three parts:

1. What it was like – I was addicted and my life was miserable
2. What happened – I recognized that I need to pursue a sober life which means abstinence plus fundamental internal and external changes
3. What it's like now – as a result of working the 12 steps, I have become a different person who has found meaning and purpose in my existence²

Step 12 begins by admitting that addiction is, at its root, a spiritual problem – one that has significant emotional and physical consequences. In order to recover, then, a spiritual experience is necessary; salvation comes when there is a change not just in thinking and action, but a change of heart; a different person; a new creation.

Jesus knew that before we could fully understand or appreciate the message of good news that he came to offer us – that our minds, bodies and spirits could be healed – we had to share it. Although he spent nearly all of his ministry moving back and forth between preaching and teaching, with healing validating his preaching, for most of church history, we have done a lot of preaching and relatively little healing.

Healers tells us that addicts – whether the addiction is alcohol or drugs, smoking or sex or gambling or eating – tend to confuse *intensity* with *intimacy*;

² Terence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*

they think that doing something more and more will make things better. Addicts develop a love for and a trusting relationship with a substance or a compulsion; but this is a god who cannot save. The momentary *intensity* is over quickly and fails to offer the *intimacy* that they really want.

But the truth is, if something really works for you, then less and less – not more and more – will satisfy you. Think about the foods that you really love, not the ones that you crave and eat to fill some void, a perfectly ripe peach, for example. Or the best music that doesn't have to be played on volume 10. Or the lightest touch that can express the deepest love.

If we are to follow Jesus, we must be willing to go where he would go; to serve and not be served. As people in recovery often say, 'in order to keep it, I have to give it away.' When your hands are full, you can't pick anything else up. When you give something away, you free up one of your hands to pick up something new.

When James and John ask Jesus to promise them a guaranteed seat in glory, Jesus asks them, "Are you able?" Sometimes, when we hear this question asked of Christians, we believe that in all times and at all places we must answer, 'yes.' But as we all discover on our particular roads to salvation, following Jesus is not some pre-determined category of serving. Instead, it embodies, in all human particularity, the able-ness to follow in a particular moment. The first or second or third person that hears the message we have to share, or sees the ways we serve, may not respond; but that does not mean that we should give up.

In seeking to serve, if we are truthful, we often fail. We fall short at parenting, with our friends, in our work and in our relationship with God. We miss the mark; we get it wrong; we sometimes try too hard, sometimes not hard enough. We often do not live up to the example given to us in Jesus; nor to the expectations of God.

But there are times and places for each of us when, called to serve, our experience and gifts make us able to respond to the needs of others with wisdom and compassion. In these situations, we can offer to help if help is wanted; to serve and not be served. In so doing, we drink of the cup of Jesus and are baptized into his ministry of healing. For, as addicts – or any person on the road to recovery/salvation – often discover, we are able to help when we are wounded healers: a pathway on which the injured and the healer are both transformed.³

³ Philip Z., *A Skeptic's Guide to the 12 Steps*

Leslie Jamison, in her book entitled *The Recovering: Intoxication and its Aftermath*, describes the first time that she sponsored another addict named Monica, and how helping someone else to recover from alcoholism impacted her:

*Maybe she could have been anyone, and I could have been anyone; maybe those coffee dates only meant something because we wanted them to. But her trust, her belief that talking to me might help her get better, meant everything to me. What does that mean, everything? It means I was drawing on every part of my life that had come before, every blindfolded night and every sour-mouthed morning... This wasn't about epiphanies of the lightning strike variety. This was more like, 'what was your answer for 12A?'*⁴

Because Jesus gave everything, we are also asked to offer our whole selves, even those parts of us that we struggle to accept and understand, in service to God and one another. We may, at times, want – like James and John – to know that our efforts are going to pay off; that when we share the message, it will always be heard. But instead of offering guarantees to his disciples, Jesus simply asks, “Are you able?” If we have been walking the journey of salvation; taking the steps necessary for recovery from the gods that cannot save us, then when the time and place are right, we will be able to say yes; and be a healer not just in spite of, but even because of our wounds and scars; and find our true purpose in serving.

May God bless all people who are seeking a true spiritual awakening – a healing of body, mind, and soul; thus seeking to practice the principles of recovery and share its message – and may God bless all who seek not to be served, but to serve. AMEN.

⁴ Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering: Intoxication and its Aftermath*