

I wanted to be just about anywhere but in that room. Sinking deep into the chair, I tried to be invisible. I didn't want anyone to see my tears. I felt a little better when the woman sitting next to me introduced herself. When it came my turn to speak I heard myself say, “Hello. My name is Rebecca, and I am an alcoholic.” Those few words started a journey, the miracle of which I could never have imagined.

The scene that I just described was my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was a Monday morning. May 4th, 2009. I was tired, hung over, and scared. I was in a room with at least 50 strangers. I had known, or had been afraid, that I was an alcoholic for some time. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. Having grown up in an alcoholic home, I had sworn that it would never happen to me. Yet there I was.

My decision to tell my story today was not an easy one. In fact until about a month ago, I believed that I didn't need to share this. It was a matter of privacy, anonymity. What difference did it make if you knew that I was in recovery? But then, as life as a way of doing, it became abundantly clear that if I were to truly love myself, and you, to the best of my ability, I had to share my whole self with you. I had to shine the light on the areas that I most wanted to keep hidden.

I stand here today, one of your ministers, and one of you, on the side of love. No one ever promised us that love would be easy. And just to get everything out on the table, I am also allergic to sugar. One cookie, one glass of wine, neither was ever enough.

I was thirty-six years old when I became a daily drinker. Before then I drank on special occasions. Weddings, holidays, funerals. When I did drink, I rarely had one glass. Uncomfortable in social settings, and certainly in family gatherings, I would either get a good buzz, or get drunk. It should have been a sign. But I missed it. Fortunately, I hated beer and got sick on any hard liquor, so wine was my beverage of choice.

Alcohol served one primary purpose for me. It numbed the pain. Pain that resulted ironically from being raised by a mother who was an acute alcoholic. By day she was a caring person, even though she was also controlling and a perfectionistic. When she drank, she became someone else –rageful, resentful and mean. I loved my mother. I couldn’t reconcile the fact that she didn’t love me in return. What had I done wrong? If my mother didn’t love me, than how could anyone, including myself? I look at pictures of myself now as a young child, and I see innocence. Who would know from looking at me what was going on in our home, or within my heart? *Secrets*. “What would it be like live to live in a ‘normal’ family?” I used to wonder. I now know that there is no such thing. But I also know that even in the most difficult situations, everyone deserves to be loved. To be told otherwise is a crime. *(Music comes on; “How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply you’re connected to my soul.”*

Being raised by an alcoholic didn’t make me an alcoholic. The predisposition was in me, waiting to be activated. I just knew that I had a lot of pain that other people didn’t appear to have, and that when I drank it went away.

So one day, twelve and a half years ago, the idea of buying a bottle a wine so that I could have a glass after dinner sounded like a great idea. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? That set off the progression. It started with one glass of wine after dinner. Totally fine, right? That continued for a few years. Then as managing kids, work, and life became more stressful, one glass of wine became two. I deserved it, after all. My divorce rationalized a third glass. The first time that I drank an entire bottle of wine in one night, I knew that I was in trouble.

Stopping at the package store became a regular errand. I started to have a glass of wine before we went out to help me relax. When we traveled, I would bring a bottle of wine, just in case it wouldn’t

be readily available where we were going. In subtle but powerful ways, alcohol was taking control. For one year, I tried to slay the dragon myself. I would set goals - I won't drink for a month, or, I will only drink on weekends.

The year that my drinking was at its height was from all outside appearances, a year of great accomplishments. I started my own business and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. But I couldn't stop drinking. I got defensive if my husband said anything about it, I tried using a physic to stop and I read far too many self-help books.

The turning point came one night when my family and I were clearing the table after dinner. My daughter who was fifteen at the time, picked up a glass that had just a little wine left in the bottom. She swirled the wine in the glass, tilted her head back and laughed. In that moment, it was like I woke up. What was I teaching her? That drinking red wine is glamorous? Not likely with her genes.

The path I was on was going nowhere good. I thought about where things had been just a few years earlier. What would things look like seven years from that night? Twenty years? My mother lost a lot to alcoholism including her relationships with children and grandchildren, and ultimately her life. It was time to break the cycle.

I went to Alcoholics Anonymous to stop drinking. What I discovered was a new way of living. I am here today in this pulpit because of the love that I've received and the friendships I've made in the rooms of AA. The thing that I thought was so wrong about me, that I was an alcoholic, turned out to be the thing that saved me. I'm not here to be a spokesperson for AA. I am here to advocate for healing, and for love. My daily drinking lasted for seven years. It might have been different.

Raise your hand if alcoholism or addiction has affected your life. Whether it is you, a family member, loved one, friend or colleague. Look around you. We are in this together. Addiction knows no

boundaries. It doesn't matter whether you have two cars in the garage or are living in a shelter. If you have a PhD or never finished high school.

Statistics vary but suffice it to say that at least 18 million people in the United States are addicted to alcohol. Millions more struggle or on the path to addiction. Up to 40% of beds in any one hospital are being used for reasons related to alcohol abuse¹, not to mention the devastating loss of life from car accidents involving the use of alcohol. The devastation on families and our society as a whole is immeasurable.

Alcoholism and addiction is a national health problem and therefore it also a national responsibility, and our responsibility, to deal with this. We need to address the oppression around addiction, just as we do any other oppression.

There are over 20 million people who are living successfully in recovery. We don't talk about this enough. We see the celebrities going into detox. Do we hear about them when they are living a life of recovery? I'm coming out because it's important for me not hide.

Too many people hide. Every day. Thank you, Karen for your beautiful singing this morning. There's a reason I asked for that song. It's in honor of a dear person in my life named Mike. John Denver was hands down Mike's favorite singer. In addition to knowing the words to every John Denver song, Mike loved to bake chocolate chip cookies, and read poetry. He also lived with secrets. Mike had been sober, we all believed, for many years. One day, I received a phone call that Mike had died in his sleep. He was 51 years old. A few weeks later his wife and I were cleaning out their home and we found vodka hidden in coke bottles everywhere. In closets, drawers, under beds. How long did he suffer? How many years? Mike died too young and alone. It doesn't have to be that way.

¹ National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence

Rev. Susan Ritchie challenges us to be a radically inclusive community, where no one has to hide. Where it's safe to be struggling, and it's safe to be human. A community where we hold ourselves accountable and root out the places in ourselves that are judgmental or unaware. Places that may keep us from the radical hospitality that we profess. We all have blind spots, not just to issues of race and gender, but also to issues of addiction, recovery, mental illness.

I want us to be the people that say to everyone who has ever been told that they are anything less than beautiful, anything less than whole --- It is not true. Regardless of what we have done, or not done, said or not said. Regardless of if we are alcoholics, take antidepressants, or struggle with our self-esteem or intimate relationships. Secrets grow in the dark. The knot of struggle gets tighter when we try to go it alone.

Too many people die in that aloneness and pain. My friend Mike, Robin Williams, John Denver, my mother, your friend, family member.

May this be a place where perfection is mistrusted, and authenticity admired. May we hold ourselves not to the standards of wealth, prestige or power, instead let's hold ourselves accountable to love, honesty and connection. Let us stand with our whole selves on the side of love.

Here at All Souls, where all Souls are welcome.

Amen and Blessed Be.