

# The Grace That Enables Us To View Ourselves Honestly

Fourth sermon in the series: What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers

*Text: Psalm 139*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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Thoreau said that all men live lives of quiet desperation, and I often believe that he was right. One evening this week the telephone rang and the person on the other end told me of a young man who had entered this sanctuary some months ago. Being in his 30th year and never being a part of the Church, he was amazed at what he heard and what he felt here and was one of the most sincere and serious seekers with whom I had ever dealt. In a number of sessions I developed a real fondness for him, the reality of his questions, his search, his struggle to find meaning, his reaching out after God. The voice on the other end of the telephone line informed me that last week he committed suicide.

And so, one recognizes that Thoreau was right. All over this community churches gather, congregations assemble to worship very much as we have done here with our Sunday clothes, our respectability, and our cordiality. We meet one another, but we do not really meet. We manage to keep things on the surface and we major in trivialities. We major in trivialities because any deeper probing might unmask us and reveal the quiet desperation and the storm that rages within. Churches meet, people singing hymns and saying prayers and going forth from the sanctuary still bleeding and bruised and wondering what to make of it all. And not only in the churches, but also in the streets of the city, the throngs go to and fro, carrying within the raging storm.

How can we penetrate the thick armor with which we shield our deepest hurts, our anxieties, our fears? How can we learn to live lives of health and wholeness? How can we come to an honest self-awareness that is the prelude to human wellbeing?

Today we make a significant shift in our study of the parallels between the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous and biblical faith. In the terminology of the Church we begin at Step Four to speak of the Christian life. To use the doctrinal term, we begin now to speak of sanctification or the way of holiness, which I would like to translate as the way to wholeness.

Step One was a step of diagnosis - Our lives had become unmanageable.

Step Two took us beyond our misery to a Power beyond ourselves - We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step Three was the watershed moment - We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.

With those three steps we have admitted we have a problem - or better, we are a problem - and we are powerless to help ourselves and we have committed our lives, turned ourselves over to God. In biblical terms, we have entrusted our lives to God.

Where do we go from here?

I have entitled this series "What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers" because AA is actually doing what too often for us in the Church is only a way of life acknowledged but too little lived. AA is responsible for the transformation of millions of lives that once were broken and miserable. Human transformation is what we in the Church are about. We must learn again our own faith in order again to be effective in changing human nature, bringing healing and creating wholeness.

Step Four calls for a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. For the alcoholic, sobriety has been won through the admission of powerlessness and the commitment to the Power of God. But now that sobriety has been achieved, how can one go on to a new life? How does one appropriate the power of God on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment basis not only to stay sober but to find the fullness of life? Step Four calls for an honest self-appraisal - true self-knowledge - as the way to a transformed life.

Self-knowledge is not an end in itself. It is, however, a necessary first step toward the goal of accepting responsibility for our own lives and beginning to work at behavior modification. The Gospel too calls us to an honest appraisal of who we are and sets before us the model of Jesus Christ as that fully human existence to which we are called.

My thesis in this message is that the *Grace of God enables us to view ourselves honestly*. Knowing that we are loved unconditionally and accepted just as we are gives us the courage to accept ourselves, own our own behavior and take responsibility for our lives.

Let me suggest first of all that *seeking self-knowledge takes courage*. We must admit that we avoid self-knowledge both because we are proud and we are afraid. By self-knowledge, I mean a knowledge of who I am, an understanding of myself, why I react as I do, my strong points and my weak points, my deepest desires, my greatest fears. I mean a knowledge of how I react in given situations, how I affect

people and how other persons affect me. By self-knowledge I mean understanding myself, understanding the past which has shaped me and the present which conditions me and the future which determines me. By self-knowledge I mean an honest appraisal of my strengths and my weaknesses. In a word, self-knowledge is knowing who I am.

In the case of AA, it is obvious why the new life begins with a searching and fearless moral inventory. Alcoholism is a disease and for some persons there is an immediate chemical reaction, which leads to addiction. But for most people alcohol is first of all a way of escape from life and its realities. It is a cover for fears and anxieties, feelings of resentment or frustration, a compensation for feelings of inferiority. The first requirement was the admission of powerlessness and then the willingness to turn one's life over to the power of God. Thus sobriety is achieved. But the problems that lie behind the turning to drink in the first place remain. It is those problems that need to be named, owned and dealt with.

But the alcoholic is not unique. He is not the only person with problems. We are all alike. Our problems differ. The way we handle our problems differs. But we all devise some method of coping with life. We may choose some escape mechanism that does not lead to an addiction such as alcohol, but we all have our ways.

Some of us chain smoke.  
Some of us bite our fingernails.  
Some of us keep on a merry-go-round of activity.  
Some of us overeat.  
Some of us withdraw into ourselves.  
Some of us overwork.  
Some of us play too hard.  
Some of us know it. Some of us don't.

Self-knowledge is painful, but living without self-knowledge is pitiable.

AA is very serious about the moral inventory. As I have mentioned in each message, AA is a spiritual organization but it is not a religious organization. It is not precise in the definition of its terms. It leaves to each person to form his own conception of God and, in regard to the moral inventory; it leaves to the individual the freedom to define the problems of his own character. The biblical term would be sin. That term is expressed by several biblical words meaning missing the mark, or transgressing the bounds, something twisted or distorted; sometimes it refers to rebellion. Sin is not a popular word. If one prefers, as one approaches the inventory one can speak of character defects or maladjustments. However one speaks of it, what is being asked is to be completely candid about those attitudes and actions and behavior patterns in one's life which are the roots of the disruption one experiences within one's self and in one's relationships.

AA is not only very serious about this process; it is very practical, as well. It calls for a written report. The inventory is very concrete and specific, naming the fault,

how one behaved in light of the fault and the consequences of that behavior. For example, from the outstanding clinic for alcoholic recovery, Hazelden, comes this pamphlet, "A New Fourth Step Guide", which is an instrument to help one do the Fourth Step meaningfully. In the instructions it says:

Step Four (like each of the Steps) marks the beginning of a new way of life. It says that today I will begin to take a realistic assessment of myself. We hope this guide will help you begin to learn to know yourself.

Three attitudes are important: To be searching, fearless and moral.

- 1 . Are you searching? Are you really digging into your own self-awareness and describing your behavior as it really is?
- 2 . Are you fearless? It takes courage to face yourself in terms of what has really been going on in your life.
3. Are you moral? Take a good look at the "good-bad" implications of your behavior, your own values?

How does it size up with your own values?

Then there are some thirty pages, most of which are blank spaces for one to write in response to questions raised at the top of the page. Let me cite just a couple:

#### FALSE PRIDE

What we mean is excessive pride; being so thin-skinned that we have trouble admitting any human weaknesses at all. Another word for this kind of pride is grandiosity. Describe how your pride has kept you from looking at your own behavior.

#### HUMILITY

Now that you are learning that it is safe to admit your powerlessness and unmanageability, do you find it easier just to be human? Being humble doesn't mean being weak. It means accepting ourselves - our strengths as well as our weaknesses. Do you know something now about what humility really means? Are you able to be less defensive? To enjoy the peace that comes with genuine humility? Explain.

#### SELF-PITY

This is hard to recognize, and it's something no one likes to admit. It's a matter of feeling sorry for ourselves. Maybe because we feel people just don't understand us. Or maybe it's feeling that people don't respect us or don't love us enough. It means feeling hopeless, feeling like a victim of

circumstances. Have you ever felt self-pity? Do you feel sorry for yourself right now?

After each brief statement, it is your turn to respond. Sounds scary, does it not? That is why I began by saying that honestly to seek knowledge of ourselves takes courage. As I said earlier, self-knowledge is painful. Yet I also said to live without self-knowledge is pitiable. That brings me to the second point I want to make -

*Self-knowledge is freeing.*

As much as our pride and our fear resist self-knowledge, there is nothing more freeing than the honest admission and acceptance of who we are. So many of us expend so much energy covering up who we are. We spend our days in self-justifying behavior. We explain ourselves and excuse ourselves and when we are cornered, we strike out in defensiveness.

To some degree we all play roles. We wear masks. We hide the person we are behind a cloak of respectability. The roles we play, the masks we wear depend on where we are and with whom we are. We tend to live up to others' expectations and so much of human relationship and human society occurs on a very superficial level. We have surface contact and we major in trivialities.

What a relief it is to be able simply to be ourselves in the presence of someone with whom we feel safe, not worrying that we will be discovered for what we are rather than known for what we project as our facade.

This brings me to the Old Testament lesson, Psalm 139. This magnificent poetry sings of the sovereign and gracious presence, power and knowledge of God. After reciting the completeness of God's knowing, His inescapable presence, His limitless power, the Psalmist concludes with a morning prayer for God to search his inmost being, to make him transparent and to lead him in the way of truth.

I submit to you that *only one who has found God to be gracious would dare to offer such a prayer*. Obviously this is the prayer of one who knows God intimately and has been convinced of His steadfast love for he cries out, "How precious are Thy thoughts to me!"

To be known completely, and to take comfort in that, is to know that God is gracious.

But does the recovering alcoholic necessarily know God in the intimacy of His love and grace? Not necessarily. He may still be at the stage of speaking of an Anonymous Power.

Whence, then, comes the Grace?

In the AA experience it comes from another person, perhaps his sponsor, and from the AA group. The mediation of grace comes through persons who know where the recovering alcoholic is coming from and who reach out without judgment offering total acceptance.

*The AA fellowship provides the tangible expression of God's grace to the person who has finally come to seek help much as Jesus mediated grace to the woman at the well.*

That fascinating narrative which John has written into his Gospel for his own purposes of telling the story and significance of Jesus is a beautiful instance of the Grace with which Jesus dealt with persons. Jesus, gracious Jesus, able to engage in conversation a woman of Samaria. Every word is loaded; for him to talk to a woman, for him to talk to a Samaritan woman - all of that immediately spoke volumes, which he did not have to say in so many words. Jesus, gracious Jesus, reaching out to a woman living in quiet desperation, communicated to her that kind of grace that enabled her to come to self-knowledge.

It is an interesting little story. Starting out at Jacob's Well, a drink of water, Jesus moving directly to the point...

"Bring your husband."

"I have no husband."

"You're right, you have no husband. You have had five husbands, and the one you are with now is not your husband."

She says, "My, you must be a prophet. Let's talk about worship."

But he had gotten to her. Not an unmasking that left her denuded, but a gracious peeling away of the facade that opened her up to the healing of his acceptance and unconditional love, enabling her to go back home to say,

"Come, meet a man that told me everything that I ever did."

Honesty can only happen in the context of grace. I wish the Church could learn that. The Church is the last place in the world you would want to be honest. A sinner wouldn't be caught dead in church, for the Church is for the righteous, for the religious, for those that need no physician. But Jesus said, "I came to call not the righteous, but sinners, sick people, people with problems, people with fears, with resentments, wallowing in self-pity, people with self-destructive tendencies. People who are poor bets and high risks, bleeding people, bruised people, people beaten in the game of life. I've come to help people say, "That's who I am, and God loves me anyway" - the prelude to movement toward wholeness.

It is grace that enables us honestly to look at ourselves. Apart from grace we keep our defenses up and go on our self-justifying way, expending tremendous energy to avoid the reality we would rather not face.

Grace enables the courage of self-knowledge.

Grace, enabling self-knowledge, creates the possibility of freedom.

Grace alone provides the climate for healing and the fullness of human existence.

When we have seen the Father in the face of Jesus and experienced His grace in the acceptance of another in whom the Word becomes flesh, we can view ourselves honestly, accept ourselves and take responsibility for our lives and find the flow of God's power, which moves toward wholeness.

Thank God!

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.