

On Being Available to Another

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

Text: Galatians 6: 1-10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"...set him right again very gently... Help one another to carry these heavy loads... So let us never tire of doing good ...as opportunity offers, let us work for the good of all." Galatians 6:1-10

Our capacity to love reaches its full maturity when we "can look upon the twisted features of a fellow human being in pain and not turn away in fear or disgust but catch a glimpse of the face of the suffering Christ and minister to him in all simplicity and tenderness." (Timothy J. Gannon, *Emotional Development and Spiritual Growth*, p. 31, cited by Morton Kelsey, *Caring*, p. 181.)

Human maturity can be measured in one's capacity to love and one's capacity to love can be measured by the extent that one is willing to be available to another. Being available to another is what Step Twelve of Alcoholics Anonymous' Twelve Step Program for recovering alcoholics is about.

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

With this step the recovering alcoholic moves outward to engage in a caring, compassionate ministry to another person caught in the bondage of alcohol addiction in order to witness to the way of human transformation.

AA does not spend time and energy arguing over terminology and definitions and I suppose I should not either. Yet I must say that the mere statement of Step Twelve does not adequately convey what is involved. "To carry the message" is more than "telling one's story", although that is an essential element. Step Twelve Work for an AA member involves being willing to go anywhere, anytime and to do anything necessary in order to heed a call for help. The "message" is clear because it is acted out; it is lived. To use a good term from Christian theology, the

message is incarnated; it is clothed with flesh, the flesh of another human being. Step Twelve as it is stated might seem to involve no more than "witness" in Christian terms. To be sure, the biblical conception of witness also demands more than words - proclamation. Yet the danger of the phrase "to carry the message" is that it might be reduced to "mere words" as has too often been the case in Christian witness. To counter this danger in the Church we have come to speak of witness in word and deed, of "word-deed". There is probably not so much danger of misunderstanding in AA because again here, as at every other point we have examined, AA practices what it "preaches." It is what Christian faith should be for the Church - a way of life.

What the Church has forgotten, AA remembers because it will not continue if it forgets. What the Church has forgotten - that its witness must become action,

redemptive,
reconciling,
tangible, love in action,

AA remembers and practices. There is no more amazing or beautiful aspect of the organization we have been examining than its Twelfth Step Work: the willingness of the recovering alcoholic to go anywhere, anytime, to do anything in order to help a brother or sister in need.

Alcoholics Anonymous presents a model which the Church could well emulate.

The fellowship of AA practices unconditional acceptance, supportive love and total availability to anyone in need. In so doing, it has borrowed a page from the Gospel and has become in fact what the Church ought to be. And being true to itself - the incarnation of redemptive grace and supportive love - AA is growing. In fact, the growth is phenomenal when one remembers that its appeal is to only a limited group of persons.

I want to say a few things about AA's manner, method and motivation in its outreach program, its Twelfth Step work and then show from the New Testament that this is also the mission and ministry to which we are called.

*AA's **manner** is one of being available.* An AA member will go anywhere, do anything, anytime.

This is the response he makes out of gratitude for the recovery he has experienced. This is the action that flows out of his transformation. This is the outward expression of his new life. Having gone through all of the steps, finding himself and living in the flow of a Power beyond himself, his spontaneous response is ministry to others who are suffering what he knows only too well. The "circle of quiet" issues in a life of service.

I use the word *available* because it conveys the manner of AA's approach to the person in need. AA does not go where it is not invited. It comes with no axe to grind and no manipulative or coercive methods are used. Alcoholics Anonymous has found it is unproductive and fruitless to try to help someone who is not convinced he needs help. AA does not try to force its recovery program or its fellowship meetings on anyone.

But just let someone indicate the need and desire for help. Someone will be there. And they will stay there as long as they are needed. Obviously there is much Twelfth Step work which begins in the real hell of a sufferer's misery. There is urgency about it, a kind of emerging rescue work at the beginning and then a consistent follow through, sticking with the one who is seeking deliverance from bondage.

I do not want to create the impression that every time an alcoholic calls out for help and an AA member responds, there is a new member for AA and another person is on the way to sobriety. Many reach out but are never rescued. Many reach out and are rescued only to fall again and again before finally they arrive at a consistent sobriety. The success of AA is astonishing but success in terms of the growth of the organization is beside the point. Here I would simply lift up the posture of availability.

AA does not force itself or its program on anyone. AA does not write off the person who makes many false starts. AA never gives up on anyone. AA is and remains *available*. That is the manner of its outreach.

*AA's **method** is a caring presence and humble witness.*

I link presence and witness. Presence is "being there" for the other. Witness is telling one's own story.

The adjectives caring and humble are extremely important. One is present to another not because of heavy obligation simply to render a duty. One is there *because one genuinely cares*. A recovering alcoholic who has moved toward health and wholeness and happiness has deep compassion for the one struggling in the hell of addiction. He has been there. He knows the hopelessness, pain, loneliness and despair that overwhelm the sufferer. He is present because he cares and thus his is a caring presence.

Humility. That spirit runs through all twelve steps. No one gets past Step One without a painful humbling which then is cultivated and nurtured with each progressive step. A recovering alcoholic lives a day at a time, moment by moment. He depends on a gracious power beyond himself. Apart from that, he cannot make it. He has nothing of which to boast. With genuine humility he tells his own story helping the victim he has come to help to realize that he is not alone, that his friend knows whereof he speaks, understands the agony he is experiencing and without judgment or condemnation accepts him just as he is.

The recovering alcoholic tells his own story in an effort to identify with the one who is seeking help, letting him know that there is no lost cause, no person beyond redemption's point.

Witness, not preaching!

Acceptance, not judgment!

As one of AA's co-founders counsels in the book *As Bill Sees It*,

Never talk down to an alcoholic from any moral or spiritual hilltop; simply lay out the kit of spiritual tools for his inspection. Show him how they worked with you. Offer friendship and fellowship. (P. 192)

That's the method: a caring presence, a humble witness.

*The **motivation** for Twelfth Step work is compassion for the alcoholic and self-preservation for the recovering alcoholic.*

One who has suffered the horrors of bondage to alcohol will most naturally feel compassion for another person caught in that bondage. The desire to help another person flows naturally from the new way of life he has found. To be delivered, freed, released and transformed again into a useful citizen with a measure of happiness and serenity will issue in a longing to tell others the secret and lead them toward health and wholeness. The one who goes to help will naturally suggest the AA meetings and witness to the effectiveness of the Twelve Step Program, but not for the greater glory of AA or its program. Fortunately, Alcoholics Anonymous has been able to keep the institutional aspects of AA in low profile. The meetings, the disciplines are not ends in themselves and no one is out to make a name for himself in AA or to build a super organization. Motivation is compassion for the alcoholic and a desire to see him restored to sobriety.

Nothing is asked in return.

Twelfth Step work is selfless service.

But there is another motivating factor: self-preservation. It has been the experience of AA and the testimony of countless recovering alcoholics that the best therapy in the world, the strongest defense against relapse is Twelfth Step work. Through his selfless service, in the paradox of grace, the recovering alcoholic finds his own life strengthened, his joy deepened, his own soul refreshed as he finds himself the instrument of restoration for another to whom he has made himself available.

There you have *the **manner**, the **method**, and the **motivation*** of the Twelfth Step of the AA program.

Does it not sound strangely familiar? Have you not heard it all before? Is it not precisely the biblical conception of Christian witness?

I have gone into considerable detail on this step because, once I have set forth AA's conception of outreach, I can simply say, "Go thou and do likewise." Nevertheless, this is a sermon, so let me take you to the Scripture lesson where I believe we will find the same manner, method and motivation for Christian witness, the same conception of what the Church should be and do.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is his letter of Christian freedom where he sets forth in all its radical glory the grace of God. In the course of his discussion, Paul describes the fellowship of the Church as a community of forgiveness and mutual support, a community of supportive love in a spirit of gentleness, a community of care, one for another.

Galatians 5:25 could well serve as a motto for the whole Twelve Step Program.

If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course.

AA would speak of "Power" or "God as we understand Him." The New Testament tells us that God active in our life is the Spirit. Salvation is effected by the Spirit and it is in the Spirit that we live the life of a Christian.

But then Paul deals with the Church as a community of mutuality and support. Restoration of the fallen is counseled:

If a man should do something wrong, ...set him right again very gently.

Gentleness and humility are counseled because you may be tempted, too. Recognizing that life is not easy, Paul goes on to say,

Help one another carry these heavy loads.

And in the 10th verse he says again,

Therefore, as opportunity offers, let us work for the good of all. . .

There are so many points of contact between this letter and the Twelve Step Program, but I must limit myself to the spirit of this passage as it relates to AA and its posture. The spirit is one of kindness and gentleness as we deal with one another, sharing each other's load and walking in humility.

Grace must permeate the fellowship of the Church. Unconditional acceptance and supportive love must be its hallmarks. The concern that comes through strongly is the restoration of the person to wholeness and Paul pleads that we will never tire of doing good.

I submit to you that the spirit of this passage permeates the fellowship of AA and the practical counsel is what is acted on in Twelfth Step work.

Now let me apply this to the outreach of the Church. If Step Twelve is AA's outreach program, why did I select Galatians 6 as my scripture rather than a passage dealing specifically with Christian witness? I chose this passage because I want to say that *effective evangelism happens through compassionate ministry*.

Earlier I said the phrasing of Step Twelve does not convey the manner and method of Twelfth Step work. "Carry the message" might sound like "witness to Jesus Christ" and be thought of in terms of "words." Words are important. It takes words to tell one's story. Yet that is only part of the outreach. The caring presence is that which puts flesh on the words. The story is told in the context of a humble, gracious presence. It is being available, being present to another in unconditional acceptance and supportive love that creates the environment where the words, the witness, can be heard.

This is what the Church has forgotten.

This is what AA remembers and puts into effective practice.

The Church has been too "word" oriented, forgetting that God's great move toward us was a Word made flesh. There are too many words. We are too wordy. We print tracts and we talk ceaselessly. But in the final analysis, it is the compassionate, caring presence of a community of persons that is the most effective instrument of evangelism. And what we need in this church and every church is not more committees on Evangelism, but more Stephen Ministers, persons who will carry out a ministry of care, persons who will provide a caring presence in a spirit of humility with kindness and gentleness.

This is not a new note being struck here at Christ Community. It has been our posture over the last decade. We are probably the only congregation in the world with a Minister of Evangelism and no Evangelism Committee, and no formal program of outreach. Gordon has always maintained that the best evangelism is a happy congregation. This is what I meant earlier when I said that AA is growing by simply being true to itself. So the Church will grow if it is really the Church - if it is a community of compassion, care, humility and grace.

As an interesting sidelight, Gordon just gave me a note. The statistics of the Reformed Church for 1981 are just out:

In 1971 we numbered 678 members; at the end of 1981 we numbered 2430.

In 1971 we were 130th in size in the RCA; at the end of 1981 we were 4th.

In 1971 we were 36th in size in Michigan; at the end of 1981 we were first.

I share that not as a matter of pride. Even to share it is dangerous because it so easily leads to pride of institution. But I share it as the best evidence I know next to the phenomenal growth of Alcoholics Anonymous that a community that cares about people cannot help but prosper.

There is an Institute of Church Growth in California where they have stressed the imperative of the New Testament that the Church grow. They have approached the matter scientifically and set forth certain sociological principles for church growth. But I have never been impressed. Church growth smacks of institutionalism. Church growth smacks of competition. Church growth smacks of pride.

What matters is not church growth, but people, people touched by grace; people accepted, loved, healed; people forgiven and given hope.

Church growth is an accident, a byproduct of the Church being true to itself, being a community of compassion and care.

We really do not need more evangelistic tracts, or crusades, or evangelism seminars.

We need a whole army of people who have been touched by the grace of God who are willing to be available to another. In such a church, the Word becomes flesh and the love of God becomes tangible and the grace of God flows out to embrace, to forgive and to renew.

Numbers are not important but the human beings for which they stand are all important and I do believe that where persons are primary - primary over all institutional considerations, primary over all doctrinal definitions, primary over all rules of order, primary over all confessional loyalty – there the Church will grow, and the grace of God will flow, and Christ will be magnified.

It is as simple as being available to another.