

**“Learning How to Love from Evangelicals, Recovering Alcoholics, and Jesus ”**  
**Luke 4:21-31; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

It’s often said that the God of the Old Testament is an angry, vengeful God while the God of the New Testament is loving and kind.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is the loving, gentle, caring one; the flow-y-haired father-figure from the children’s Bible holding a lone sheep under his arm and laughing with children, while the God of pillar and fire is striking down wrongdoers, sending plagues, burning things down. So I was so glad to see Jesus acting like a complete jerk in the gospel reading today right before the choir sang “Where there is charity and love, God is there.” The fact that 95% of churches in our country would probably fire me for saying that Jesus was acting like a jerk only confirms for me how we want Jesus to conform to our expectations rather than dealing with him as we find him in scripture.

In his hometown synagogue Jesus is pointed, arrogant, and rude. If you re-read this whole scene substituting someone you really don’t like for the character of Jesus, you would have no problem classifying this behavior that way. Jesus basically says to his hometown crowd, God’s justice isn’t about you, chosen ones. It’s about God getting to make the choices. And God so often chooses to heal the people you consider unworthy, enemies, other.

It’s a great text to read just before Paul’s letter to the Corinthians describing love that is “patient and kind” since the love that Jesus exhibits is neither patient nor kind. It’s blunt. It’s direct. So blunt and direct that it leaves the congregation that knew him as a boy ready to hurl him off a cliff.

Maybe love as scripture understands it is a lot more complicated than most of our notions of love. Maybe sometimes love is patient and kind while other times it’s hard and direct, even angering. Or maybe love that is patient and kind is different from the sappy, sentimental notions of love that we’ve learned to connect to those words.

This is especially easy to see on a day when the Episcopal Church recognizes one of their priests, Samuel Shoemaker, who was considered the pastor of Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>2</sup> Bill Wilson, whose own struggle to survive alcoholism led him to the creation of AA and the 12 steps, called Sam Shoemaker a “co-founder” of AA because the spiritual principles on which AA is built are directly influenced by Shoemaker’s pastoral teaching and preaching.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The “Marcionite heresy” has been consistently refuted through the history of the church, but it consistently returns, most notably with the “German Christians” of the Hitler regime who declared the Old Testament “too Jewish” to be a part of Holy scripture.

<sup>2</sup> Shoemaker appears in *Holy Women, Holy Men*, the Episcopal Church’s book that recognizes saints throughout the year.

<sup>3</sup> <https://liturgyandmusic.wordpress.com/2011/01/31/january-31-samuel-shoemaker-priest-and-evangelist-1963/>

Named as one of the top ten preachers by Newsweek in 1955, his greater claim to fame is as the father of our own Sally Shoemaker Robinson.

AA and the twelve steps have saved the lives of millions of people. And those twelve steps, though non-sectarian in the way that they are used, are deeply rooted in evangelical principles - admitting that we are powerless, declaring our faith in a higher power, confessing our sin, working to change the defects in our character, making amends with people that we have harmed hoping for reconciliation but recognizing it is in God's hands, and living these principles in all aspects of our lives.

AA teaches that love that is patient and kind is different from sentimentality. It's tenacious love, demanding love, exacting love built on grace that isn't cheap. Anyone who has survived alcoholism or loved an alcoholic knows what I mean. Love sometimes requires you to say no to the people your heart tells you to say yes to. Love requires forgiveness to become concrete in order for it to be true. Love, real love, sometimes makes us suffer because that kind of love isn't defined by our feelings; it's always defined by the wellbeing of its object.

There's some irony in the fact that million of people around the world have become part of AA fellowships including the one that meets here every Thursday, while the church in North America continues to shrink. It's as if AA has done a better job of nurturing the heart of the gospel than the church in recent years. Perhaps foreseeing this development, Dr. Shoemaker published a pamphlet on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of AA entitled, "What the Church Has to Learn from AA."<sup>4</sup>

Shoemaker said that the great shame of the church is that it had become the place where we withhold the truth of ourselves from God and each other instead of confessing it. "In a bar, yes," he says quoting Jerome Elliot, but "in a church, no." Shoemaker presses on. "The AA people see themselves just as they are," he writes. "I think many of us in the Church see ourselves as we should like to appear to others, not as we are before God." Speaking of one of the twelve steps, Shoemaker asks the church, "how many of us have ever taken a 'fearless moral inventory' of ourselves, and dared make the depth of our need known to any other human being?"

That, Shoemaker argued is what a real kind of love looks like. The kind of love that that hopes and prays for radical transformation; transformation that comes as a gift from God but also demands a radical reorientation of our lives. That's the gift of the confessed alcoholic, Shoemaker observed, a gift the church had been offered through their witness.

Now if you're saying to yourself, wow this sounds a little too evangelical for me - good. You're hearing right. Shoemaker was an evangelical who also stayed true to the liturgical traditions of the Episcopal Church. He believed that transformation was something that ought to be part of the life of the church at every moment. "At each [AA] meeting," he wrote, "there are people seeking and in conscious need. Everybody is pulling for the people who speak, and looking for more insight and help. They are pushed by their need. They are pulled by the inspiration of others who are growing."<sup>5</sup> He was a committed evangelical, something that many of us

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.a-1associates.com/aa/LETTERS%20ETC/WhatChurches.htm>

<sup>5</sup> "They are a society of the 'before and after' with a clear line between the old life and the new. This is not the difference between sinfulness and perfection, it is the

could use a little more of. Now hear me out, inclusive language using, New York Times reading, Prius driving, Brown Memorial folk.

Today “evangelical” has become almost the opposite of the word “open minded,” “liberal,” “progressive.” But historically, the evangelical movement was a movement against the staid, rigid dogmatism of so many of the mainline churches. Harry Emerson Fosdick’s historic sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” is rightly remembered as the clarion call against fundamentalism, but hardly any progressive Christian remembers that Fosdick described the church to which he belonged as “evangelical” seven different times in that very sermon.<sup>6</sup> “Evangelical” used to mean Christians who believed that faith was more than ideas, that it was about the transformation of people and communities. It was about the way news of God’s love for our world, love confirmed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection could change a person’s entire outlook on life, could radically reorient them away from destructive, hurtful choices toward a deep love in the world. Could cause them to change their career choices, be freed from baggage of so many kinds, resist addiction, claim their identity in God as more than sufficient to withstand our judgmental, cruel world. The way it could cause people to give up their own safety for the wellbeing of their neighbor, risk themselves for something intangible but more real than anything they had known.

In short, evangelical used to mean a person whose encounter with the living God had changed their life in ways that made a difference for the world, in ways that made God’s love for the world concrete in our lives and choices. An evangelical faith was one that actually had a foundational impact on life. And if the church is afraid of hosting or nurturing or sharing a faith that actually has an impact on our lives – a faith that has us stop and think what does love require from me when giant snow piles and chairs in the street are causing people to yell and fight; a faith that equips me to dig into the divisions in our city precisely at a time when police brutality, and drug wars, and unrest are causing others to flee; a faith that invites me to confess my own complicity in those divisions while simultaneously trusting God’s intention to heal those divisions and heal me, too; a faith that encourages me to see my own disabilities not as something to be hidden but the place where God is most welcome; if the church is afraid of nurturing or sharing that kind of faith then it’s no wonder that so many are dying. Why would you waste your limited time on religious posturing that had nothing transformative to offer a world in desperate need of transformation?

Recently I asked some of the folks I know who are in recovery what AA has meant to them. And one person told me the most extraordinary thing. He said, “I went to AA at a time in my life when I was searching for the answers to two huge questions in my life. “Why can’t I stop drinking?” and “Who is God?” AA has given me answers to both of those questions and those answers have saved my life.

Maybe we need to rediscover the evangelical faith. Not the anti-gay, anti-immigrant, pry my gun from my cold dead hand rhetoric that we’ve come to accept

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difference between accepted wrong- doing and the genuine beginning of a new way of life.” Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>

as evangelical, but the one that see's God's love for us and for our world as the defining factor, the game changer, the foundation of our lives. Maybe the church needs to become a little more like AA, inviting us all to bring our wounds and our experiences into fellowship to share so we can all be pushed and pulled to learn, and grow, and heal, and love.<sup>7</sup> So we can learn what it means to love from the God whose love doesn't stop at sentimentality. The God whose transformative love is there to grasp us and change us and our world forever.

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Hirsch, in her "Why Can't Church Be More Like AA?" blog outlines three ways the church should become more like AA: 1) In AA you come as you are, 2) in AA, people come with their wounds and their deep life experiences on display, 3) In AA, people's voices are heard. <http://www.cruxnow.com/faith/2015/10/01/why-cant-church-be-more-like-aa/>