

“Pentecost Magic”
12 Steps Series – 1 & 2
Romans 7:14-20; 1 Timothy 1:15-17; Exodus 2:23-25
Andrew Foster Connors
Pentecost Sunday
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On my fifteenth birthday, my father gave me a birthday card with a check inside for \$500. This wasn't just a huge amount of money to a teenager in '80s. It was a huge amount of money in my family. Written in the subject line were the words, “for agreeing not to use alcohol or drugs.” The check was postdated for when I would turn 21. I wish I could say that my first thought upon receiving this gift was to ask my father why this particular issue was so important to him, but I was 15, so naturally my first thought was, “my dad is an idiot.”

The trouble is that as a 15 year-old, I was attracted to people who abused alcohol and drugs and not just because I was one of those kids who learned what was fun by my parents' opposition to it. I was attracted to them – I learned much later - because they were the people in pain. I was a young person in pain. And when you are a person in pain I think you look for people with ragged edges. People who seem like they don't have it all together. People who might have a chance of relating to you instead of just judging you. You look for people who acknowledge that pain, who don't judge it, who aren't afraid to hear it.

When Tim and I first concocted the idea for this sermon series we both were concerned that we not come across somehow as experts on recovery from alcoholism or experts on the content of the 12 steps. Rather, we wanted to share our conviction that the theology that undergirds the 12 steps is the sort of faith that many of us hunger for. As the church once gifted addicts with this form of the Gospel and helped Bill W shape it into AA, perhaps those in recovery could now serve to remind the church of who we are supposed to be in the world – the place the world can count on to find real people sharing the depth of the pain that's really going on in our lives and in our world.

The first step starts with brutal confession – we are powerless over alcohol. This is true of course only for alcoholics. But Richard Rohr, in his book *Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*,¹ argues that it's true in a larger sense for all of us. Until there is a person, situation, event, idea, conflict or relationship that you cannot “manage,” he writes, you will never really know God. Even people who profess belief in God will just use the idea of God to sustain their own false image of themselves, their own ego. Rather than living as a community open to God, Rohr says, we become a community gathered around a particular moral issue over which we can feel “triumphant and superior,” an issue that usually asks nothing of us personally.² The very Gospel that brought us into relationship with God and each other becomes a tool that separates us from God and each other.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, (Cohimpati: Franciscan Media), 2011, p. 3. Tim Hughes Williams and I are indebted

That's kind of what Paul is arguing in this section of the book of Romans. "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Some theologians have said that Paul is saying that he is incapable of following the law. That Paul was arguing that the law was so rigid that it was impossible for any human being to uphold. That no matter how hard Paul strove to keep the law, its demands exceeded his ability to keep it. The law was the problem that the Christian Gospel came to fix. But Paul did not think there was anything defective about the law. He seems to have believed that the law was good and that he could and did keep it perfectly. The law wasn't the problem. The problem was sin - that active, aggressive power that takes even good gifts like the law and twists them toward death. And if an entirely good gift like the law could be twisted by sin to produce the opposite of its intended effects, then no religious system and certainly no human being was exempt from its deforming grip.

In Bible study there was some pushback on this idea. "Our lives are not that unmanageable," one person said. "I'm doing fine, I think." I heard similar pushback in some of the youth faith statements. "The idea of sin," Yari Armand told us in his faith statement, "doesn't make sense to me. It's like telling someone their dog died and then giving them their dog back a week later. Why would you make them go through that pain unnecessarily?" I once roomed with a Methodist pastor at an ecumenical retreat. After we established some trust he vented to me that his senior pastor boss forced all of his employees to practice individual confession with him on a monthly basis. Confessions that were skimpy on sin were not acceptable. "I got to where I just had to make things up," he told me, "in order to satisfy his expectations of my sin." If you leave here with the idea that the primary object of church is to convince you that you are diseased so that we can peddle our antidote, then I've failed you.

Paul's confession about sin isn't the center-point of the Gospel. It's a brutally honest confession about human beings and the world we live in. So we mess up our environment with no shame even when we know it's the home that supports our living. We mess up our lives even when we know it's the home that supports our living. Rohr argues that addiction is a modern name for sin and that our attachment to our habits and ways of thinking even when they don't work for us is the universal addiction in our time.³

The center-point of the Gospel, the 12 steps argues, is not the bad news of our sin - it's the good news of God's power to save. The good news that can only be seen, much less accessed, when we find the courage to let go of illusion that we are capable of saving ourselves. Letting go of the idea that our intellect, or our effort, or our intentions can heal us on its own. Otherwise we just end up doing more of the same with even greater intensity and expecting a different result. "The reason we do anything one more time," Richard Rohr writes, "is because the last time did not really satisfy us deeply." That's the definition of an addict and I think it's what keeps us from really knowing the full freedom and release of the Gospel. If we're always working so hard to preserve the illusion that we are in control of our own destiny,

³ Rohr, p. xxii-xxiii.

then we can never know the fullness of God's power in our lives. We cut ourselves off from access to the very power that we need, that could change us.

I've seen where that approach leads. It leads to people giving up on relationships before they've ever asked God to transform them. It leads to people giving up on Gospel dreams for themselves or for the world because they would rather maintain their control over a small set of things than open themselves to the great possibilities that God promises for all of us. or it leads to a shallow faith that looks good on the outside but never touches what's deep. It leads to an arrogance that's always noticing what's wrong with other people but never coming to terms with your own stuff. It never really makes it to the desire that's named in the second step – believing that a power greater than ourselves could heal us – because the real emptiness, the real brokenness, as the root of your being has never been acknowledged.

It wasn't until I was older that I thought ask my father about what had led to the \$500 check. He told me about his uncle who was an alcoholic. How his aunt had to stay over at their house sometimes to avoid a drunken beating. How this uncle couldn't hold down a job, leaving his wife and children without enough to pay the bills or put food on the table. He told me about the night his father got a phone call to go pick up this uncle at the bar and told my father to come along. "It's important that you see this for yourself," he told my dad. They drove to the local bar where his uncle had been on the losing end of a drunken fight. Bloodied, bruised, and too drunk to stand, they put him in the car - a child who had never grown up. This is why my father never used any substance, why my mother kindly obliged, and why I got a check at age 15 for agreeing not to use alcohol or drugs. Hearing this for the first time, I realized the story was so much more important than the check. Perhaps if I had better understood my own father's pain I would have had less of a need to go searching for it elsewhere.

Maybe the same could be said about the church. If we could really be honest with each other about what's broken us, what grieves us, where we are desperately in need of God's grace, maybe we'd rediscover the magic of church. That rare place in our image-conscious world, where we can be real with each other about what we crave in life and find people who want to do the same. That place where God can be found not because of our effort to be better, but because God has a way of showing up anytime people call on God for help.

That's why we're here, isn't it? Driven by the deep need for God's intervention in a world that seems like it's coming apart at the seams? In a city that can't seem to find peace? It our lives that with all of our connectivity makes it harder and harder to know each other?

The conviction of the Gospel is that God does come to us, even if it takes us time to understand this as God's doing. God's arrival is certain. Our ability to notice is the only thing in question. That's why the second step is written as "*we came to believe.*" It doesn't often happen all at once. We have to see the fruits of God's work in our lives over time. We have to learn to notice God's fingerprints on our lives and the lives of others. We have to cultivate a new awareness of God's presence and

activity. Richard Rohr quotes Paula D'Arcy the spiritual writer and retreat leader who says, "God comes to us disguised as our life."⁴

The 12 steps carry that hope in a very accessible, unpretentious way. The Church can, too. Bishop Shoemaker, who was to the founder of AA, Bill W., and Sally Robinson's father, once told a crowd of church folk that the attraction of AA is that "alcoholics (and others) can go and hear recovered alcoholics speak about their experiences and watch the process of new life and take place before their eyes." "This attraction," he said, "begins when you see people with problems like your own, hear them speaking freely of the answers they are finding, and realize that such honesty and such change is exactly what you need yourself."⁵ That's what Bishop Robinson thought church ought to be. I think it's what church can be when remember the hope that drew us here and the pain that needs God's healing.

⁴ Rohr, p. 15.

⁵ <http://www.a-1associates.com/aa/LETTERS%20ETC/WhatChurches.htm>