



“Sacred Bonds”

February 14, 2021

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11; Isaiah 38:16-17, 19
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

Lex orandi est lex vivendi. Richard Rohr’s variation on a common Latin phrase points to an important truth of faith: “How you pray is how you live.”¹ Prayer is essential for a life of faith. It shapes us and deepens our relationship with God, though we may not always understand how or why. Alcoholics Anonymous recognizes the importance of prayer, too. Their teaching can be instructive to all of us.

Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood [God], praying only for knowledge of [God’s] will for us and the power to carry that out.

We use the terms prayer and meditation somewhat interchangeably, though there are important distinctions between them. We often think of prayer as a conversation with God, in which we thank God for our blessings and seek God’s guidance and help. Meditation, on the other hand, is intentionally creating space for silence or contemplation. Both are essential.

AA’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions teaches that self-examination, meditation, and prayer each provide benefits on their own; taken together, they result in an “unshakeable foundation for life.”² Martin Luther is often quoted as saying, “I have so much to do that I shall have to spend the first three hours in prayer.” We’re conditioned in our society to focus on action and productivity, measuring value in output and achievement. Self-examination, prayer, and meditation don’t seem to bring much to the table in terms of external measures. But unless we do the essential interior work, our external achievements will amount to little.

I recognize that, for some people, the concept of meditation sounds too ethereal, too “woo-woo.” You don’t have to have a yoga mat or a prayer bowl to meditate, though it’s perfectly okay if you do! The Christian mystics made a lifetime of meditative contemplation. Meditation is creating intentional silence where we can be attentive to God’s presence. By opening ourselves, we can find deeper connection with God and the world around us. Meditation may involve contemplation of an experience or idea, a way to visualize truth in a deeper way. Or it may be less active, slowing our thought processes and opening our minds to new revelation.

Our imaginations were once captivated by stories, like Jonah being swallowed by a giant fish, David in a den of lions, Jesus walking on water and feeding thousands with just a few loaves of bread and a fish or two. As adults, we’ve exchanged wonder for more serious matters: liturgy and theology, immersive Bible study and intercessory prayer, meeting our congregation’s goals and benchmarks. But in the process, we’ve lost something essential. Meditation can help us reconnect to imagination, the realm of the Holy Spirit.

For some, prayer is intimidating. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard someone say, “I’m not very good at praying.” If your point of comparison is a public prayer offered by a seminary-trained pastor or a spiritual giant, then that’s understandable. But some of the best prayers I’ve ever heard have been very simple, a few honest words offered in humility. The disciples themselves didn’t think they were very good at praying, so they asked Jesus to teach them. His model was simple and straightforward, seeking God’s will and relying on God’s way.

If you get lost for words, it’s okay to lean on those who’ve gone before us. People have been praying for hundreds of years, and they’ve passed many of their prayers down to us. The prayer we know as the

¹ Richard Rohr. *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media (2011), 99.

² *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Eighty-fourth printing. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (2019), 98.

Prayer of St. Francis is an excellent example. It expresses a desire to be used by God to bring reconciliation. The conclusion of the prayer is especially notable: *for it is in giving that we receive, it is in self-forgetting that we find, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are raised to eternal life.*

These words beautifully capture paradoxes of faith – receiving by giving, pardon through forgiveness, new life through death. But most beautiful of all to me is “finding through self-forgetting.” It’s only when we surrender our stubborn insistence on self that we can truly seek God’s way and, in so doing, find our truest selves. Great is the mystery of faith!

Step Twelve: 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.

Addiction is a disease. It is not a moral failing or a lack of willpower. *It is a disease* – a physical disease with spiritual roots. Bill W. rightly understood that any successful treatment of alcoholism must address the spiritual as well as the physical. Addiction is the manifestation of spiritual “longing, frustrated desire, and deep dissatisfaction.”³ The problem stems from attempting to fill that longing with the wrong things. Alcohol or other controlled substances cannot fill that longing – nor can shopping or food or violence or any of the other ways we try to compensate. It’s only when we recognize both the source of the problem *and* the strength to overcome it that true healing begins. Step twelve speaks of a spiritual awakening, the result of opening the heart and the mind through following the steps. The twelve steps offer a path of honesty, unselfishness, forgiveness, surrender, peace of mind and heart. In a word, *grace*.

Step twelve is an outward turn, taking the personal experience of spiritual awakening and sharing it with others. New life comes on the road to recovery. That recovery is more lasting and real when it is shared. The joy of sharing is reflected in A.A.’s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

Practically every A.A. member declares that no satisfaction has been deeper and no joy greater than in a Twelfth Step job well done. To watch the eyes of men and women open with wonder as they move from darkness into light, to see their lives quickly fill with new purpose and meaning, to see whole families reassembled, to see the alcoholic outcast received back into his community in full citizenship, and above all to watch these people awaken to the presence of a loving God in their lives – these things are the substance of what we receive as we carry A.A.’s message to the next alcoholic.⁴

The same things are true of Christian experience, too. There is nothing like the privilege of helping someone find hope and new life in Christ when they experience God’s grace and forgiveness. And there is great comfort in being part of a community of people who are genuine and compassionate with one another, knowing we all fall short of God’s hope for us and yet are called and claimed by grace as part of Christ’s family. So why is AA so much better at this than the church? Maybe we’re afraid that if we don’t have just the right words or if we can’t provide all the answers, that we have no business sharing our faith with others. Or, perhaps we’re afraid that talking about our faith would lump us in with people we don’t agree with or that we will come across as judgmental and rigid. But sharing the Good News (which is what evangelism means) shouldn’t be about politics or judgment. It isn’t about having all the answers or demanding compliance with dogma or lifestyle. At its best, evangelism is simply, as D.T. Niles once put it, like “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”⁵

Or could it be that our hesitancy to share our faith is because we don’t really expect faith to bring about transformation? Have we exchanged a life of radical discipleship for a culture of belonging and

³ Rohr, 114.

⁴ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 110.

⁵ D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 96.

assimilation? Unfortunately, it is easy for communities of faith to become inward-facing societies of self-preservation. We may have come to Christ because of an invitation, an offer of hope in a time of despair, or an encounter with the Gospel that stirred our hearts through God's life-saving grace. But somewhere in the tangle of routines and committees and peer expectations, we can lose sight of what brought us to Christ in the first place. When we stop expecting transformation, church becomes just another organization, a place of comfort and preference instead of a place of healing and challenge.

Conversely, when we reorient ourselves outwardly, amazing things happen. We experience the joy of introducing others to the grace of God in Christ and the life-giving, life-affirming message of the Gospel lived out in community. We also see our own lives of faith in a new light, more clearly recognizing the difference Christ makes and appreciating the shared journey with others. And when those things begin to happen with greater frequency, watch out! The Holy Spirit is on the move!

Over the past six weeks, we've explored the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and the spiritual wisdom they impart. We began with the 1-2-3 waltz, as it is often called: *I can't. God can. I think I'll let God.* We learned the value of honest confession to ourselves and God, steps that led to readiness for God's reconciling grace and the courage to ask for it. We discovered that forgiveness removes the effect of sin but not the consequences, leading us to acts of reconciliation and amends. We reflected on the value of staying the course, repeating the steps that lead to life. And we've thought about prayer and meditation in a new light, a holy conversation that shapes our relationship with God and propels us to share the healing power of God's grace with others.

I hope this series has been helpful to you. It certainly has been for me. My exploration of the 12 Steps and honest and courageous transparency from recovering alcoholics have deepened my own faith, even as I set out to share those learnings with you. Though this journey in worship concludes today, you may want to continue the exploration and go deeper. The 12 Steps aren't something you intellectually master and move on. As any recovering alcoholic can attest, you need to continue to work the steps to make them a way of life. Step 12 concludes: "to practice these principles in all our affairs." That takes time and patience. You may find it helpful to further explore resources used throughout this series: Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water* is a brief but wonderfully instructive overview of the 12 Steps and Christian faith. A book I have found very helpful and often quoted in this season is *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* of AA. It's led me to reflect and ponder some of the foundational tenets of our faith. You can find it in most public libraries and pretty much every bookseller. If you know someone in recovery, talk with them about their spiritual journey as well as their battle with substance abuse. If you are in a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon, share your story with others so they can learn the healing you've found along the way. Don't be afraid to be honest about the challenges, too. We learn best when we're honest and transparent. Regardless of your experience with 12-Step programs, make a point to talk about your faith with people you care about. Don't pretend to have all the answers or assume some kind of spiritual superiority, because neither of those is true for any of us. Simply engage in an honest dialogue about your spiritual journey and listen to theirs. It's great practice.

When asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus named two: love God, love others. The 12 Steps in many ways expand on sacred bonds between us and God and between us and one another. By establishing stronger, healthier, loving relationships with God and with those around us, we can realize the healing and wholeness God longs to bring.

Let us pray: God, I thank you for the spiritual wisdom and guidance we gain from our sisters and brothers in Alcoholics Anonymous. Remind us that we are all saved by grace, not by our own merits. Help us to offer grace to others. And when we lose our way, call us back to your heart through people who love and care for us, who know the meaning of grace because they have experienced it themselves. In your holy and merciful name we pray. Amen.