

“Journeys of the Spirit” by Will Ramsey

April 6, 2014

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

I picked this Sunday to speak because the lectionary reading sparked waves of thoughts about the spirit filled life. My thoughts bounced between the promise in Romans that a spirit filled mind leads to a life of peace and the promise in the twelve step programs which states that as a result of these steps we will have a spiritual awakening. It has been my vision and calling, if you will, to build bridges for people in twelve steps program to step safely into the Seekers community. Today I would like to describe what the twelve step programs have in common with our church and why it is important for our community to pay attention to their needs.

My prayer for us as adapted from The 12 Step Prayer Book by Bill P and Lisa D, 1990: "Today is the dawn of a new day...Yesterday is gone, except for what [we] have learned from it, good or bad. Today [we] have the same choice, a Divine privilege, which swells [our] hearts with hope and purpose. Today [we] will do our best without thought of failures of the past or anxieties for the future. When this day is ended, [we] will have no regrets. On retiring [we] shall thank You, [our] Higher Power, for this wonderful day." P.13.

I would like to begin with our Lectionary readings:

From the Old Testament, Ezekiel: "Oh my people, I will open

your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Ez 36:12..."I will put my spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land.: v.14

Step two from the twelve step programs says, "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

Ezekiel hears God say, "I will put my spirit in you and you will live again."

Joel, 200 years earlier, hears God say, "Give me your hearts...Turn to me now, while there is time." "Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love." Joel 2:12,13.

Now, fast forward to Seekers Church. Every Sunday when the preacher for the day is introduced we are reminded that we believe that the Word of God comes directly to each of us from time to time.

Step three from the twelve step programs says, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."

When I was at my lowest point 32 years ago it was this step that challenged me to take charge of my relationship with God. When I was at a low point six years ago it was this step that reminded me, it is up to me to keep my connection with God as I understand him, which in my case brought me to Seekers Church, to a mission group and the list goes on.

So really, I think of the Bible as a collection of people who came to believe in the God of their understanding.

David in the Psalms today says:

"Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you. Psalms 130:3,4.

In step ten we, "continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

When I start putting the history all together we have an

inspiring web of metaphors, rules, exceptions, inspirational stories, challenges, cautions, promotional opportunities, attractions and ultimately hope.

Lets go on to the New Testament with our reading from John:

“Lazarus is dead (v14)...

Now some people take the stories from the Bible as facts. Others see the stories as metaphors. I am in the metaphor camp. Have you ever felt like you were dead? Perhaps been so numb with problems in your life or so discouraged you simply felt like you were dead inside?

Anyhow, he called Jesus and They told him, Lord, come and see(v34)...Jesus told them, Roll the stone aside(v39).,,,

Have your friends, family members, therapist or boss every told you to “Roll the Stone Aside? Stated another way in Step six we “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” And in

Step seven we “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

In Seekers Church, our call states, “For us, Christian servant hood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship.)”

Then Jesus shouted, Lazarus, come out!(v43)

Do you have people in your circles who say, “You can do it, You can do it?”

And the dead man came out, his hand and feet bound in grave clothes, his face wrapped in a head cloth. Jesus told them, Unwrap him and let him go(v43).” John 11: 1-45

Step four we, “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Then in

Step five “We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

Even in sobriety, however, people still struggle with the courage to take these steps. Within the safety of the rooms, people say things like:

“I’m a relapser. I can’t trust that I will change.”

"I keep doing the same things over and over."

"I'm tired of suffering under my own devices."

In the Seekers' call statement there is a paragraph which reads:

The Seekers community sees itself called into Christ's ministry of deliverance from bondage to freedom in every personal and corporate expression. We recognize the value of each individual and seek to heal any wounds of discrimination inflicted by our society and church.

In our mission group statement it reads:

A mission group is a place of safety in which you can share your inner journey, find forgiveness and understanding, ask and answer hard questions, and discern ever more clearly the ways in which God is calling you to embody Christ in your daily life.

Step eight—"made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."

Step nine—"made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

Finally, our lectionary reading goes to Romans where Paul explains:

"letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace (v6)...You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the spirit of God living in you(v9)... and the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God(v10). Rom 8:6-11.

It is interesting, with Jesus we get the metaphors, which can trigger tremendous creativity and freedom within each of us. Paul, on the other-hand, more rationally explains how everything works.

Paul explains,

- 1) let the Spirit control your mind and you get life (v6) and
- 2) if you have the spirit of God living in you(v9)...you are controlled by the Spirit and
- 3) the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God(v10). New soil, new roots.

In the AA Traditions, number eleven says, "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion."

Step twelve says, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to those who were powerless like us and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

Back to Seekers:

"A mission group is a place where you can find support and encouragement for your spiritual growth while engaged in a particular work of transforming service. A mission group is a place where both your journey inward to knowing God and your journey outward to service can be held together in loving community."

And remember what Jesus said to Lazarus' friends:

"Unwrap him and let him go(v43)."

Have you ever felt like you were trapped and there was no way out. Maybe you felt like you made so many mistakes there was no way to start over? Have you ever felt, at least emotionally, that you were dead? You just wanted to give up? Of course life goes on and you realize you are, in fact, still breathing and alive. Think of Lazarus, he was standing there with all his friends and relatives around him, people who cared. To his surprise he realized he was breathing, he was alive but his hands and his feet were tied up in bandages. And his face was covered in a head cloth. Have you ever felt like you were trapped behind a mask, which you could not remove?

What did Jesus say? "Unwrap him." It is like your friends, family, mission group or therapist, saying "Let go, everything will be ok. You don't have to carry those bandages?"

Eventually, even with all of Jesus' words of insight and inspiration, "most of the people still did not believe in him." John 12:37. As a result their hearts became hardened. Their eyes could not see and their hearts could not understand.

So I ask myself, "What does it take to soften a heart? After Jesus left the crowd, he "went away and was hidden from them." V37.

Step eleven says, "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with god as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

Back to Jesus

The stories and parables continue and eventually Jesus returns before the Passover celebration and meets with his disciples. He knows the end of his life is near. He knows how things are going to play out. They are all together. He has their attention.

What would you do if you were in His shoes. What would you say? Remember, In Galatians two, It says, "It is no longer I who lives, it is Christ who lives in me."

"He got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around his waist. (13:4-8). When he got to Peter, he protested, "You will never wash my feet." He goes on and explains why then finishes by saying, "Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet."

We know the rest of the story. Jesus is convicted and killed on the cross and was eventually raised from the dead. After he died the disciples were meeting behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Have you every been so afraid that you would only talk behind closed doors or not at all? There they were and Jesus showed up and what did he do? He said, "Peace be with you," and as he spoke he showed them the wounds in his hands and his feet. (John 20:19,20).

With another group where he showed up he also said, "Peace be with you." They were startled and He asked, "Why are you frightened? Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my

hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it is me...As he spoke he showed them his hands and his feet. (Luke 24:37-40).

As a result of our spiritual awakening we tried to carry this message to those who are powerless like us. The best way to keep your obsessions from returning is to carry your message to another who suffers from the same problem.

"A mission group is a place where you can join with a few others who share a commitment to God's call on their lives to do some particular kind of transforming work in the world."

In twelve step meetings people share their wounds and they remove their masks.

So why am I making all of these comparisons? In our daily devotional time Teresa and I listen to Jesus talk as described by Sarah Young in her book,

Jesus Calling, Devotions for Every Day of the Year. On March 3, 2014 He said, quote "I love you for who you are, not for what you do. Many voices vie for control of your mind, especially when you sit in silence. You must learn to discern what is My voice and what is not. Ask My Spirit to give you this discernment. Many of My children run around in circles, trying to obey the various voices directing their lives. This results in fragmented, frustrating patterns of living. Do not fall into this trap. Walk closely with Me each moment, listening for My directives and enjoying My Companionship. Refuse to let other voices tie you up in knots. My sheep know My voice and follow Me wherever I lead." Unquote.

For me, the question continues to stir my heart:

How do I or we build bridges for people in recovery programs to walk safely into the Seekers community?

Some are seeking for a spiritual community even though others are content with what they find within the 12 step community. Recovery, it seems to me, puts people in a place of seeking. Whether it is an addiction or some other reoccurring problem questions arise such as:

- 1) How would participation in this church contribute to my spiritual awakening? Or
- 2) How will this community help me maintain and enhance my spiritual condition?
- 3) Why would I add church activities to my already long list of meetings I attend every week?

Tradition two in the AA traditions says, "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He/She may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern."

It is commonly agreed that getting sober is the easiest part of joining a twelve program. The challenge, as one person painfully stated, is "how to not go insane when I am sober." And the practical solution is to work steps one through eleven until the Miracle happens.

Then I ask myself over and over, why do I think Seekers Church is the place we would want to build bridges for people in recovery. I realized that my earlier experience with the Retreat Mission Group at Dayspring Church thirty plus years ago was easy for me to step into a church community for a spiritual home. Five years ago it was also easy for me to step into Seekers Church. I want the same ease to be available for other recovering alcoholics who are in search of a spiritual home.

But that was just me. It didn't fully answer my question. but I finally found my answer when I learned why we were named Seekers Church many years ago. Part of the explanation centered around a person named Greenleaf, who wrote about Servant Leadership, which reads:

"Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away. It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and

responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.”

~Greenleaf, Servant Leadership, page 8

They went on to say, in part, I quote:

“This passage spoke deeply to the founding members of Seekers Church. They decided we should take our name from it, because we are a people who are intentionally on the way and committed to bringing forth prophetic leadership from contemporary sources. □□We are committed to structuring our worship and mission life to support this seeking response to the voices of prophets of our time...Part of our spiritual practice as a community is to listen to the prophets among us in ways that make the reality of the Realm of God more evident to us, and to the world around us, the world God is calling us to care for.” Unquote.

I believe we listen to the prophets among us because we want to make the reality of the Realm of God more evident. Perhaps if we can expand our vision to see each person in recovery, each homeless person who comes our way, each person who is in pain and all, for that matter, who are in our path as possible prophets we will be motivated to make each person truly feel that they are needed to help us live a life of peace. Whether we call it a Spiritual Awakening or letting the Spirit control our minds we are all learning how to love our neighbor as our self, love our enemies and perhaps most importantly learning how to give and accept love for ourselves.

Perhaps we can develop language in our conversations and worship which will encourage people to feel at home in our community. So many have found church or religion to be part of their childhood or family trauma. We, on the otherhand can show that we also have but one ultimate authority—the Holy One which is expressed by our understanding through our stewards, our servant leadership team and each one of us at the point of our call.

I celebrate this church, which honors so many paths for loving

others. Even if my passion does not resonate for you my prayer is that you are inspired to live your call with all your breath and spirit. On the otherhand, if this peaks a yearning within your spirit join me and a few others as we work step eleven; "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with god as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Amen.