

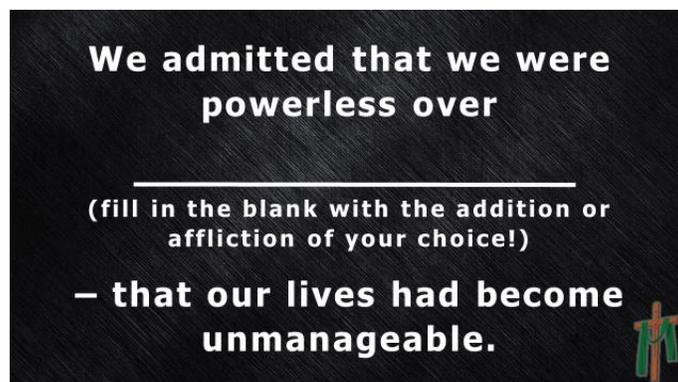
3 PENTECOST
JUNE 4/5, 2016

FIRST, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER
PRODIGAL SON, ZACCHAEUS, WOMAN AT THE WELL

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.



The English language offers us some beautiful word pictures to convey many types of feelings:

- a happy person, we say, is walking on...cloud nine.
- one who's terribly frightened, is said to have been scared to...death
- someone who seems content with life, is said to be as happy as a...clam

At the other end of the spectrum, the word pictures are just as apt:

- one who is powerless is said to be up a creek...without a paddle,
- they say that a person who's angry is as mad as a...wet hen/hornet
- one who's gotten into trouble, has painted themselves...into a corner.

It's these latter feelings we dislike, despise, detest, feelings that we fight against with every fiber of our being. We like our options – and we like to be in control. Yet feeling powerless, angry or trapped is inevitable and, at times, inescapable...for people whose lives are marked by sin...which means you and me and everyone else everywhere else.

In this month's newsletter article I introduced our current preaching series and referenced a quote by Richard Rohr, author of the book, Breathing Underwater – Spirituality and the Twelve Steps. He makes the assertion that *sin* and *addiction* have a lot in common.

Says Rohr, *How helpful it is to see sin, like addiction, as a disease, a very destructive disease, instead of something merely that was culpable, punishable, or that simply "made God unhappy"* (p. xv).

We know the destructive power of sin, and the powerlessness and anger that comes from our failed attempts to say NO! to IT (to whatever IT is):

-alcohol and/or other drugs,

-overeating or being overbearing,

-lying/cheating/stealing, or

-feeling superior to your fellow human being – you fill in the symptom of sin that fits your story best...

To set the context for my sermon, I'm going to piece together our Gospel Story of the Prodigal Son with the very first man I met who was being treated for alcoholism.

¹¹ Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.



The words of the younger son to his father sound to us a little selfish and rude, yet, in reality we can't even begin to appreciate how selfish and rude they really are. In that culture, where respect of one's parents was held to be sacred, it's more like the younger brother says to his dad, *Listen old man, you're dead to me – I don't care about you, my brother*

or the farm – this place is driving me crazy – give me the money I'd get if you were dead so that I can go somewhere and enjoy my life!

In my chemical dependency rotation at Seminary, we were assigned to a treatment program to do one-to-one interviews with a client. In my case it was a 28-day in-house program, so I got to see the same man once a week for the four weeks he was there.

A high-powered attorney from another state, it was clear from our first very short and...not very sweet visit, that the man was used to having things his way – and only his way. He was obviously wealthy, smart, determined and...self-absorbed.

He was as mad as a hornet at everyone and everything. His family, his partners at the firm, his friends all *bushwhacked* him, as he called it. They'd created an intervention in which everyone close to him stood together, professed their love for him, and then told him in no uncertain terms that he had to go through treatment, or he could no longer be a part of their lives.

I'll do my time, he muttered...then uttered this promise – *and then I'll show them...* The anger poured off him, like heat waves that rise from a hot tar road. He was planning to make some changes regardless of who it hurt, and he was going to enjoy his revenge.

¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had & traveled to a distant country & there he squandered his property in dissolute living.¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country & he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went & hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating & no one gave him anything.

To no one's surprise in Jesus' story, the younger brother spends his inheritance on *dissolute living*. Again, those words sound kind of sterile, don't they? Can someone fill in the gaps for us? **What does "dissolute living" mean in good, old-fashioned, Marshall American English?**

Short and sweet: the phrase that comes to mind for **this** baby-boomer is *Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll*.

His money gone, his friends disappeared, his plans for a care-free life up in smoke: a famine strips away the last few coins from his pocket, and this selfish, self-absorbed, self-pleasing so-and-so must now work for a living. Which, to his credit, he does.

He's no quitter – which is probably a testimony to his parents who raised him on the farm...he knows where he has to go to find work. It's just ironic that he's right back in the lifestyle he so desperately wanted to escape. But work he does – he takes a job feeding the pigs, and hopes to start over once more. He's not happy about it, but his options are limited.

Somewhere between my first visit to the treatment center and the next one the following week, the lawyer had had an epiphany...

Needless to say, I was a little reluctant to see this angry man again...but I'm very glad I did. For the man who greeted me at the door...was the mirror image of his former self. His anger...had abated! His rage...had been receded! His fury...had faded...for now, he had a plan...

In place of his resentment, his wrath, his rage, I saw what seemed to be a sense of determination, a can-do, pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality – an attitude that had helped him earlier in life.

He had decided to buy into the program... He admitted that he'd been drinking too much, that he'd hurt some people, and, though he didn't

agree with the methods they used to get him into treatment, *he* was going to make the program work. He wasn't happy about it, but his options were limited.

¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough & to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up & go to my father & I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven & before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰So he set off & went to his father.

Let's take a moment to vote on the validity of this young man's *pig-sty conversion*. The question is whether or not it's real or just another attempt to scam his dad into getting what he wants.

Because he's dying of hunger, the man comes up with a plan and rehearses his speech to his Father. In it he confesses his sin, acknowledges that he has squandered his family ties, and plans to simply ask to be hired on as one of his father's workers.

Raise your hand if you think that this conversion is from the heart...
Now raise your hand if you think that it's just another scam...

On my third visit with the lawyer, I saw another significant change in the man...

- gone was his anger at those who had bushwhacked him...and
- gone was his optimism that he could fix his troubles by himself.

Instead, the man who greeted me at the door to his room, evoked the words of Psalm 51:

**The sacrifice acceptable to
God is a broken spirit; a
broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.**

Psalm 51:17

It was family week at the treatment center... a time for a reunion, a time to be re-introduced to one another... alcoholic to co-dependents, former drinker to non-drinkers, one who had been massively self-centered, to those who were massively other-centered, always careful to not rock his boat.

I asked the humbled man about his upcoming meeting, *How do you feel about seeing your family?* He shook his head and said, *For years now, I've told my wife: if you don't like it, there's the door!* He was silent for a moment, then said, *For the very first time, I'm afraid that she's going to take me up on my offer.*

But while he was still far off, his father saw him & was filled with compassion; he ran & put his arms around him & kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven & before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger & sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf & kill it, and let us eat & celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead & is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

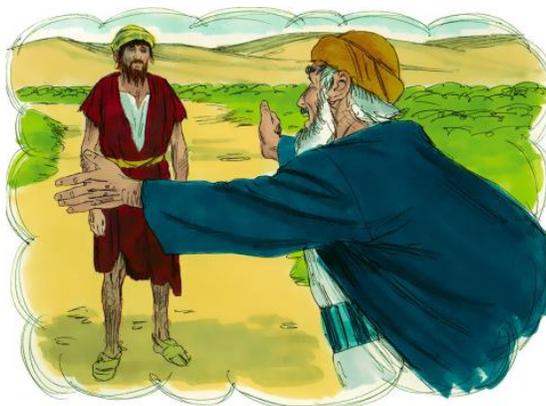
The reunion between selfish son and scorned father is a surprise to us all. Before the wayward youth is even within ear-shot, the eagle-eyed father sees his lost son limping home and runs to him...throws his arms around him...and receives him with the kiss of welcoming love.

The son tries to start in on his speech – think of how often he’s rehearsed it on his long journey home. What does the father do? Ignores him! Won’t let him get a word in edge-wise. The old man snaps his fingers, calls out, *Lights! Camera! Action!* and kicks off the greatest show on earth – he’s welcoming back a child who, for all practical purposes, had been dead and is now alive again, had been lost and now is found.

Unfortunately, I don’t have the skills of Paul Harvey, which means that I can’t REST OF THE STORY for the lawyer I’d met. Nor am I Walt Disney, who, as our 3½ year old granddaughter Sophia already knows, ended every story with the words...*and they lived happily ever after*. I can’t even tell you how the family reunion went for this man in whom I’d seen some significant changes occur. The final week that I went to see him, they’d scheduled him to meet with a doctor, so he was unavailable.

I’ve thought about him a lot over the years, and I’ve found myself hoping that he and his wife were able to work through all that had happened. I pray that they were able to put to death the terrible part of life that they’d endured, to let go of the past, and let God lead them into a resurrected life, one of honesty, humility and sobriety ...

I do know that in the case of my lawyer friend – a part of him hoped that his **wife** and *her love* could be the *power-greater-than-himself* who could restore him to sanity... But as anyone who’s been involved in a recovery program of any kind will tell you – that’s not a job that any human being is able to fulfill.



Let's go back to our Bible story of the Prodigal Son. **Who's the only person in the WORLD able to help restore the younger son to sanity?** His father... And this son, who has acted with such selfishness, rudeness, and *dishonor* to the only EARTHLY father God had called him to HONOR...appears to *get it* about what he's done.

We can't see into his heart when he's standing in the pig sty wishing that he could eat the slop fed to the pigs...either he meant it or not...and, as it turns out, that's not the issue.

The father's DOESN'T CARE whether the heart of his prodigal son is *broken and contrite* – he only knows what his eyes have seen... In Jesus' words, the father says: *This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!!*

Remember that this is Jesus' story... So take a moment and put yourself in the place of the young man's father. Scrub away the emotion. Wash out the sentimentality. Rinse off the bubbles of any Walt Disney ending...and put yourself in that FATHER'S place at that very poignant moment.

Picture yourself wondering about your wayward son who told you that **he wished you were dead**...who took your money and headed off to

Las Vegas, or New York, or Los Angeles...or Sioux Falls (!) and spent it all on a way of life that you could not even imagine!!!

Would you have accepted him back with such grace, such forgiveness, such love??? I won't ask you to raise your hand, but I'll tell you this: as much as I love my children, I think that at the very least, I would have wanted to hear my son's entire speech before I dared to call out, ***Lights! Camera! Action!***

The point here is that...no one, none of us, no person on the face of the earth would have so eagerly waited to welcome home such a scoundrel of a son, or daughter, or father or mother, or sister or brother...



**WHICH IS EXACTLY THE POINT OF THE SECOND STEP in AA—
NO PERSON CAN BE THAT POWER GREATER THAN
OURSELVES WHO CAN RESTORE US TO SANITY...**

The only one who can fill that roll...IS GOD Almighty!!!!