

## **Own Up: Healing Ourselves, Healing the World - Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath**

### Psalm 139

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways...Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well...Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

I grew up going to a Catholic school, and confession was always something I struggled with. About once a month we would line up outside a room in the school and wait to go in and do confession with the priest. I didn't like it. It felt uncomfortable and there was this pressure. I could never even remember what I'd done wrong to confess! Please don't be mistaken into thinking that I was a perfect kid. My two brothers and I fought a lot. I can remember my big brother Mark and I teasing little Josh until he'd totally lose it — and then we'd have to run like hell because though he was smaller, his rage was 10 x's the size of either of us! Anyway back to confession at the school. I'd be in line, and nothing in particular would come to mind, so I'd have to make something up. That's right, I would lie about my confession! I mean I'd make up something general that was probably true, but I don't think it's what the priest had in mind. (There's probably a special hell reserved for people like me!) 😊

We are in the middle of a series looking at the 12 Steps of AA and how they can help all of us. I liked how Bill Hayden, who spoke a couple of weeks ago, explained that we can see the 12 steps as 1) Give up, 2) Own up, 3) Make up, 4) Grow up!

Today we are looking at that second group: Own up. Steps 4-7 are all about acknowledging and facing and owning up to who we are and what we've done that perhaps hurt someone else, God or ourselves.

Here are the steps:

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

In the church we might talk about these steps as *Confession*. Roman Catholics are certainly more familiar with the practice of confession. Here we tend to have a group confession before communion, which isn't very often. However, there is more to these steps than the practice of confession, at least a surface level confession.

John Ortberg came out recently with a new book called *Steps*. I have not read it, but I heard him interviewed about it and, as I've discovered myself, he sees the 12 Steps of AA as being a valuable rule of life for *all* Christians. His book talks about the Steps as being rooted in the teachings of Jesus and how they can be used as a framework and guide for healing and transformation.

Do you remember in the story of the Prodigal Son how there are two sons? Ortberg points out that over the course of history the church has been far better at producing elder sons who are filled with resentments at everyone else, than we are at producing *Prodigal sons* who recognize their flaws and deep need for God. Or, in the case of the scripture we read this morning, the church has a tendency to produce pharisees who stand before God and say "*Thank God I'm not like those*

*people!”* We are not as good at producing people like that Tax Collector who recognized his need for mercy.

**But the opposite is true of AA.** You go to an AA meeting and the room is filled with people from all walks of life who understand their need for mercy. In an AA meeting everyone wears their imperfection on their sleeve. *“My name is Bob and I’m an alcoholic.”* And everyone says **“Hi Bob!”** in solidarity.

The story of the Prodigal son and the Pharisee and Tax Collector are both stories that Jesus told. He told them for a reason. Remember where Jesus sides. Referring to the tax collector he says: “I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Jesus tells these stories to illustrate a truth and a secret of the kingdom of God: that when a person is honest and vulnerable in the right conditions, a door can open to true healing and transformation. A door can open that allows God’s grace to come in. It’s not automatic. Many people have come out of churches or families where focus seemed to be on confession, on our sin and guilt, but all we heard was that *we were not good enough*. Instead of producing healing and a closer relationship with God and others, it has the opposite effect. But in the right conditions, having an opportunity to honestly share where you messed up can be incredibly healing.

AA has those conditions. AA, which typically meets in church basements, has a saying that when you come to church *“You can either go upstairs and hear about miracles or you can go downstairs and see them.”* We’ve been so blessed at this church to have some of that AA culture filter into the church, especially through our evening service. I’m especially proud when I hear a testimony from someone who isn’t in the recovery community that is vulnerable and honest and raw. It’s a sign of tremendous trust. Here’s the thing. We all need to know that deep down and through and through, we are loved.

I remember a long time ago inviting someone who attended this church regularly

and was in the program to help with serving communion on Sunday morning. He declined. He said to me “*Pastor Kim, if you really knew who I was, and what I have done, you wouldn’t even want me in this church, let alone serving communion.*” I’m sorry that individual had that thought. I wish he had felt the church was a place where he could safely say, “My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I really messed up in the past, and I’m so glad I can share it and be accepted.” Sadly, that wasn’t the case for him. I’m pretty sure his mistakes of the past had gone from something he felt guilty about to something he was truly ashamed of.

Guilt and shame are two different but related emotions. Guilt says: “I have done bad” and shame says “I am bad.” Do you hear the difference between those two things? Humans all experience both guilt and shame (unless you are a sociopath). Dr. Brown sees guilt as a good and helpful emotion. We experience guilt when something we have done or participated in clashes with our core values and causes psychological discomfort. Guilt is a warning signal that says ‘Hey, this is not ok’. Guilt is like the rumble strip on the highway that warns us to move back over.

As a Christian we are called to regularly confess to God when we have crossed over. At Celebrate Life I often talk about how we need to ‘*take the garbage out.*’ At any time you can pray and say: “God I messed up, forgive me” and you can start over. Start the day over, start your life over.

The dangers of not acknowledging the things we’ve done wrong and seeking forgiveness is that as we attempt to bury those faults and mistakes and things we are ashamed of, *they begin to bury us*. Guilt can turn into shame. While guilt is a helpful emotion, shame is not. Shame is destructive. Shame tells us that not only have we done wrong, but that we are not worthy. We are not worthy of connection, we are not worthy of blessing, we are not worthy of love. Shame blocks love in your life. It blocks God’s love, it blocks your love for yourself and it blocks being able to love others.

Confession is a good practice. I think an even better practice was one taught by the Roman Catholic, Saint Ignatius of Loyola. He taught about doing an Examen. There are different ways of doing it, but the essence is that ***at the end of the day, you review your day with gratitude.*** As you review your day you think about what

parts were life-giving and what parts were life-draining. You call to mind the moments when you felt close to God. Or, another way of putting that, in what moment were you leaning into your true self — the person you were created to be— a person rooted in the knowledge that you are loved? And when were you far from your true self, far from the person you were created to be? Saint Ignatius used the words ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’ to describe these two states of being. While the Examen is used most to look back at the day, I think it could be used to look back on your life.

The most painful experiences in my life revolve around the breakup of friendships. In one instance my best friend since high school asked to get together and proceeded to tell me why I was a terrible friend. She had prepared a long list of my flaws spanning several years. This (in a public place!) was long and awful. The thing is, she was partly right. And it was incredibly painful. It undid me. Later that same year some newer friends in the community ghosted us. No explanation, just done — which of course is painful because to this day I have no idea what happened. When these things happen, it’s usually less about you than it is about what is going on in *their* life. And I knew this with my head, but your broken heart and crushed ego plays tricks and you start believing the worst.

A lie started to grow inside me that if people got to know ‘the real me’ they would not like me and not want to be my friend, and that who I was, was not enough. If I was going to have friends I’d have to try harder and be better, which is exhausting and basically not possible. When this happens, we just put up walls to not being hurt again, and we bury the shame of the hurt. We tell ourselves that we are fine, and we find fault in everyone else and the world.

I wasn’t overly aware of my shortcomings as a child. I was blessed with a good childhood and with parents who loved me. I was certainly disciplined when I did something wrong. But I grew up confident that even when I messed up I was still loved. Children need that security. It’s not just children who need that, we all do. As I grew, I became far more aware of my failings and wrongdoings for better and for worse.

Here's the thing. I believe steps 4-7, making a list of shortcomings and then sharing

them in a safe setting with someone you trust and with God, is healing. Not so much because our sins are forgiven in some factual way (though they are) but because we discover that even here, we are loved.

*Where can I go from your Spirit and where can I go from your presence?  
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night around me become dark,  
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness  
is as light to you.*

The 'Own Up' steps remind us of what is so easy to forget: *you are not perfect and you are loved*. Some people in AA say that it's after a step 5 that the urge to keep drinking goes away, and the anger at the world that has treated them unfairly also goes away. I believe it, because **knowing that you are loved makes a difference beyond measure**.

That great pain in my life is mostly healed. I say mostly because as with many great hurts in life they sometimes resurface and are tender to the touch, or resurface and still truly painful. But time spent talking about it, in counselling, in journaling as well as practicing forgiveness — which we'll talk more about in a few weeks — and with sharing it in safe and loving spaces like the evening service, makes a difference. Instead of feelings of guilt and shame, I accept in love that I'm not perfect, and that my friends are not either.

It is never too late to recognize the gift in you and to begin to live like you are the loved child you were created to be.

Being honest with ourselves, being honest with other trusted humans and being honest with God in a safe and loving setting is how we end up feeling truly loved, from the tips of our hard and ugly toenails to the top of your fabulous hairdo or your shiny bald head.

*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

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