

Luke 15: 11-24

*Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything.*

*But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father.*

*But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But 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 and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.*

We all have areas in our life and the world that we would like to see change. We’re still in the season of wanting to spend less, drink less, lose weight or be healthier in body ... and for the most part we approach these steps with a **can-do** attitude. We feel that with enough determination and will power we can achieve our goals. This feeds into the American Dream that any person, any immigrant, with enough hard work can better themselves and make it!

But this doesn’t always work.

There are situations in life where trying harder doesn’t always make things get better.

The founders of AA recognized this. How many alcoholics had white-knuckled and tried with all their might not to think about or touch a drink, only to cave and spiral with the next stressful situation? Instead, the founders of AA recognized that the way to lasting change didn't come through herculean effort, but by giving up and admitting that they were defeated.

We have begun a journey through the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Last week was the intro to the series. Today we are looking at Steps 1 & 2.

1. *We admitted we were powerless — that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Admitting defeat, admitting powerlessness is not easy. We'd rather fight!

Sometimes you fall and you can't get yourself up. Sometimes it's because of something self-inflicted: your spouse leaving you or an employer firing you because of something you've done or failed to do; your health failing after years of smoking or not managing your sugar levels or some other unhealthy habit. Sometimes it's not our fault at all, and yet we find ourselves knocked flat — a diagnosis of cancer or chronic illness, the death of a spouse; the breakup of a relationship; inflation hits and you don't have enough ... you tried hard to achieve something, and it just didn't happen.

Tomorrow is the inauguration of Donald Trump. I don't know about you, but I have a feeling of dread that has been welling up for what this will mean for the US, for Canada and for the world. I feel small and powerless in the face of a world that should know better and be better but seems to grow worse. I feel powerless in the face of Climate Change that we keep seeing played out in wildfires and other 'natural' disasters. I feel powerless in the face of people waiting 16 hours in our local ER because they have no family doctor and no choice.

Where do you feel powerless? Is it something internal or external?

I used Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son this morning because to me it sums up these two steps. Actually it pretty much sums up all the steps. It is a story of **epic failure, awakening, amends, forgiveness and new life.**

This is not a story that actually happened; it's one of the parables of Jesus. Parables were stories that Jesus told to give us a picture of what God and the kingdom of heaven are like. The Prodigal Son goes from a normal, good life — to having absolutely *nothing*. He had the audacity to ask (maybe demand!) that he get his inheritance before his

father was dead. Strangely his father complies ... and he is given more money than he knows what do with! He spends it like a happy fool — until he has nothing. No food, no friends. Nothing. Even the pigs have it better — and for a kosher Jew that is saying something! If you are lower on the totem pole than a pig, there is absolutely no lower you can go.

The story has the son's epic rock bottom as being solidly his fault. Sex, drugs, rock n' roll and dad's inheritance will do it every time. We focus on the son — in fact we call the story 'The Prodigal Son'. (Jesus didn't give us that title, we made it up.) But for Jesus the focus of the story is not the son, but the father. The point of the story is not so much about how pathetic we humans can be, but about how amazing God's grace can be. That even if and when we totally bring things on ourselves, God's love is still there. Like the verse in Lamentations 3:19-23

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.*

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:*

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

I get why Jesus told the story this way. If the son had fallen on hard times because of something that wasn't his fault — if he'd gotten sick or ended up with an abusive boss or was robbed at knife-point and lost all his money and the father was compassionate, we'd all say 'Well, that's nice!' We can understand that kind of love and compassion. Just hang out on 'What's Going on in Brockville' FB group for 10 minutes and you'll see what I mean! We humans seem quick to blame and shame people for anything that might be a tiny bit their fault.

But in this story, the father welcoming his son home, giving him shoes and throwing a party is unimaginable. That was Jesus' point. The most bleeding-heart liberal can't hold a candle to God's love and God's grace. (Some of my best friends are bleeding-heart liberals, and you could accuse me of that too!) But God's love of us where we are weak — at the bottom, in the deepest, darkest, most helpless places — is beyond surprising. No one wants to be in a place where you feel so weak, powerless and out of control. But when you find yourself there: Admit it.

*1) We admitted we were powerless — that our lives had become unmanageable.*

And then call to mind that God is there.

*... but this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*

I'll never be good enough, *but this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*

Donald Trump wants to take over Canada, *but this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.* There's a ceasefire in the Middle East, but will it hold? And how can they possibly rebuild? *But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*

For a second, I want you to name in your heart where you are feeling powerless. "I feel powerless over..." *but this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*

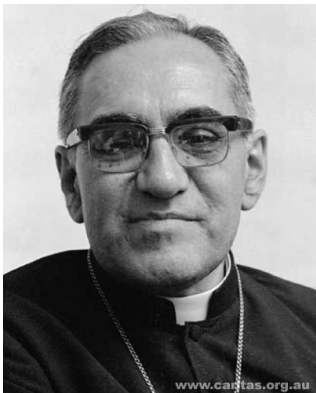
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

When **we recognize that we are there — and name it, acknowledge it, a gift comes to us.** It's not just that God loves us in our weakness. It's that **this is how God shows himself.**

This is our faith. Whatever you want to call it: weakness, powerlessness, failure ... Richard Rohr calls it "**God's greatest surprise and constant disguise**". I love that! I don't entirely understand it, but this is the way God works. Remember when God chose to become human, God came in the form of a helpless newborn baby. **Jesus was born utterly helpless as we all are, but he was also born in poverty and began life as a refugee under threat from an occupying government.** Talk about powerless! And throughout his life he did not have the security of social standing or education degrees or titles. He was a nobody. And where did his ministry end? At a cross. It ended in torture and death; in the ultimate defeat, humiliation, failure and powerlessness.

They tried to bury Jesus, but he rose filled with life to bring new life to you and me and all creation.

There is something about waking up in our place of absolute vulnerability that helps bring a new day of grace. I'm not sure true transformation can take place until there is that letting go and surrender. It starts in the hearts of people, but I believe there is something to this even when we are facing dictators or disasters — a transformation that can change nations and the world.



The story of Oscar Romero is an example of this. For three years he served as the Archbishop of San Salvador.

During the late 1970's and 1980's, El Salvador was torn by civil unrest and the poor were violently suppressed. Government right-wing death squads were torturing and killing hundreds and thousands of innocents if they showed any sort of sympathy for leftists. Meanwhile, left-wing communist guerrillas were

convincing the poor to join them in their struggle to overthrow the government and sometimes torturing and killing them when they weren't willing to join them. The Catholic Church was officially on the side of the Government. Romero was made Archbishop because he was seen as a conservative — a moderate who was not likely to make any waves or question what the government was doing. But Romero underwent a conversion from accepting the status quo in El Salvador to championing the rights of the people, and especially of the poor, to be free from violence and oppression. Romero ended up being assassinated in 1980, gunned down while consecrating the Eucharist during mass.

Romero's conversion was in some ways gradual. (Incidentally you notice that the 'conversion' of Step 2 of AA is also gradual... 'Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves ...' Sometimes like the Prodigal Son, the transformation is in an instant, but more often it is a process. The process for Romero began when his close friend and fellow priest Rutilio Grande was murdered less than three weeks after Romero's installation. This tragedy opened his eyes to the violence and injustice all around him in El Salvador.

Following Grande's death, Romero demanded the government investigate. Because of the state's refusal to do so, Romero famously refused to attend any state functions involving the President until such an investigation was conducted. It never was.

There is a movie called **Romero**. In one of the more powerful scenes Romero walks to the intersection where his friend Grande was killed. Falling to his knees, Romero prays:

***I can't...***

***You must...***

***I'm yours...***

***Show me the way.***

That is an incredibly simple but powerful prayer. That prayer sums up Steps One and Two in AA.

I don't know where your life is unmanageable. It is tough to do, but my prayer is that you will admit where you are and feel powerless. I know that there are many unmanageable, hopeless situations in the world.

The thing is this: when you admit powerlessness, it becomes a gateway to seeing God and to realizing you are not alone. And then you begin to see others who are also powerless. Together you can do small things that bring about powerful change.

The daily meditation this week from Richard Rohr included this:

*“In a homily given in 1978, Archbishop Romero urged communities and individuals to recognize how their actions had the power to convert and transform the world:*

A Christian community is evangelized in order to evangelize. A light is turned on in order to give light. “People do not light a candle and put it under a basket,” said Christ. “They light it and put it up high so that it gives light” (Matthew 5:15). That is true community. ...

I said once before and I repeat today, sisters and brothers, that if some sad day they silence our radio and stop us from writing in our newspaper, then all of you who believe must become microphones, radio stations, and loudspeakers—not by talking but by living the faith.”

**It is when we as Christians are willing to admit that we are powerless, that we can’t do it alone, that we can be born to something far more powerful and more beautiful.**

Something that is not afraid of weakness or even death itself, but that allows love to be reborn. That is when we will be transformed and that is how the world will be transformed.

***I can’t...***

***You must...***

***I’m yours...***

***Show me the way.***

The prayer of the powerless is the beginning of a mighty life.

Thanks be to God.