

Wall Street United Church, February 2nd 2025

Isaiah 55:1-9

All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!

Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!

Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

Why spend money for what isn't food, and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.

Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful loyalty to David.

Look, I made him a witness to the peoples, a prince and commander of peoples.

Look, you will call a nation you don't know, a nation you don't know will run to you because of the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.

Seek the Lord when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near.

Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes.

Let them return to the Lord so that he may have mercy on them, to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness.

My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

Proverbs 3:5-8

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Over this season of Epiphany and New Year's resolutions we've been looking at the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous – which are rooted in Christianity - to see how our lives might be helped and transformed; and our faith deepened through this

journey.

We had a wonderful message from Bill Hayden last week. Bill is a recovering alcoholic— though he has not had alcohol for longer than I have been alive. He's been in recovery for 62 years — amazing!

This week we will look at step 3. Every step is important, but this is one of the most important. Step 3 feels like the beating heart of the 12 Steps to me.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God. It sounds easy but it's not.

We make decisions all the time. Do I go to swimming this morning? Do I eat oatmeal or eggs for breakfast? Who do I vote for in the next election? A lot of the decisions we make don't have big consequences. But this one is a **biggie**: Turn my will and my life over to the care of God. *My will and my life.*

It sounds like you are surrendering to a life of slavery or military service! We spend our growing-up life seeking to be more independent and to have agency. We really value independence in our society. There are so many obstacles to taking a step like this. The first obstacle comes down to that question **Is God good?** Can you actually trust God? That's a big obstacle for many because the answer in their life has been 'no'.

Sometimes the answer is no because they have experienced something traumatic — abuse, the loss of someone they love, some kind of accident or disaster, and the violence or the searing loss feels so random. In fact, we often call these events "acts of God."

Some people have wanted to experience God more and have turned to the church or to Christians who in theory have God. (You want God? Come here and we'll give you God!) But then they experience judgement for their tattoos or gender identity or neurodiversity, or they find the place is filled with gossipy, irritable people, and sometimes they end up being the object of that gossip or criticism. They think "If these people have God, then God must be like them."

I want you to listen to this profound insight from Richard Rohr.

"When religious faith does not move people to become transformed at the deepest level, in effect to reach out and touch the face of God, very often such faith

becomes more of a problem than a solution to any of life's struggles. Surface religion often finds enemies, creates anger, is quick to point a judgmental finger, and always, always excludes those who do not look, think and feel the same way they do. All outsiders get labeled as sinners."

Rohr concludes that religious faith that gets stuck on the surface level of doctrine and of principle, ("It's the principle of the thing!") will always be incapable of healing, of reconciling, of forgiving, and peacemaking.

Many of us want to make a difference but still never get to the point of surrender. But why would we do this? Well, it goes back to Step 1: We admitted we were powerless [over alcohol] – that our lives had become unmanageable.

It's because we are powerless and our lives and the world are unmanageable.

I thought the pandemic was destabilizing — and it was— but oh my!! Watching what is happening in the US is like watching standing beside a massive train wreck where you know the shrapnel is about to hit us and the wider world. I don't even know what to worry about anymore or focus on because it's all such a horrible dumpster fire. I still worry about the Middle East. I fear Trump's words of clearing out Gaza and sending Palestinians to other countries because this is exactly what the 1948 Nakba did. This is exactly what Palestinians fear, to be removed from land and culture.

I fear these coming tariffs and the trade war. I fear for migrants and Trans people in the US, but also in Canada.

I've almost forgotten that we're in the middle of a provincial election because I'm not sure I have mental space for it. And yet it's the province that has the power and authority to do something about the doctor shortage and the mess of health care and education too — but I don't hear people talking about this so much.

We are human and we are vulnerable and we crave belonging, we crave meaning, we crave stability, we crave life and adventure, we desire to be whole and full and resilient and at peace. But life is filled with instability, loss, death, insult, injustice.

How do we deal with this? To what do we respond to? How do we respond?

That's Step 2 and then 3. *Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

It's not an all-at-once thing but slowly we can come to believe that we're not alone. That God is real and God is good and God loves us and longs for the same things we long for deep down: life, peace, belonging, meaning.

It is so very counter-intuitive that if you want more of those things in your life, you *need to let go*. Give over the care of your life and your will to God — as you understand God. I like that last little bit “as you understand God” because it reminds us that we don't have to have God all figured out. We don't have to be theologians or super Christians; we can start exactly where we are with God. And God will lead us on.

I remember when I was a teenager I had this little flash of a mystical experience. I was standing on the balcony of my aunt's apartment building in Ottawa. I can't remember what floor she was on but I'm going to say 15. It was high up and her apartment faced a big field and then there was a view of the city. High up, big view. I felt God asking me to surrender my life and my immediate reaction was fear. If I surrender my life the thought that came to mind was that I might end up in a fire and be severely disfigured. This represented, I realize now, my greatest fear. It makes sense that for a teenage girl the greatest fear was not actually quicksand or shark attack but disfigurement.

Again this speaks to a deep down fear of *can you really trust God with your life?* Thankfully for me I had had a lifetime of hearing that Jesus loves me. I had mostly good experiences with the church.

I did surrender my life, even with that little fear. I realize that that is ok. In fact it might be weird if you don't have a little fear. *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to work and to will for his good pleasure.”* (Phil 2:12-13)

In the end there is a leap of faith. In the end you can't be 100% certain what will happen. You have to walk through that fear — there's no escaping that. Any decision of great significance has an element of fear. Should I ask that person to marry me? Should I quit my job and go back to school? Should I sell my house and move to a retirement home? All of these decisions have fear because you've not done this before and you don't know what the future holds.

So little and so much is required on our end. I always think I need to be more, to be

better, to try harder to achieve more in order to succeed, in order to be worthy, in order to do what God calls me to do. I think this is my lifelong challenge. But the truth is God does not want me to try harder — God wants me to surrender. To radically trust that God is good. Not that I am good, not that the world is good, but that God is good. At some point we are called to make a decision. That decision is what leads to real transformation as individuals and as the church.

The Great Blondin was a tight rope walker and trapeze artist in the 1800's. It was on June 30 in 1859, that Charles Blondin first walked across the Niagara River on a tightrope. According to the records he used a three-inch thick hemp rope that was 1,100 feet long. It stretched from Prospect Park in Niagara Falls, New York to Oaks Garden in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

“There were hundreds of people examining the rope,” reported one witness, “and, with scarcely an exception, they all declared the inability of M. Blondin to perform the feat, the incapacity of the rope to sustain him, and that he deserved to be dashed to atoms for his desperate fool-hardiness.” Mark Twain later dismissed Blondin as *“that adventurous ass!”*

He began his walk from the American side. He went slowly. The rope swayed a great deal. It took him twenty minutes to complete the crossing. The watchdog crowds cheered themselves into a frenzy. He didn't just do it once. He crossed over many times. At one point, about 25,000 people were there watching on both sides of the Falls. He actually pushed a wheelbarrow in front of him as he walked over the rope, high above the swirling river. The crowds went wild.

By the time he gave his final performance, in 1896, it was estimated that Blondin had crossed Niagara Falls 300 times and walked more than 10,000 miles on his rope. At one point, surrounded by adoring fans, he apparently approached a woman who was ecstatic about his skill, his daring, and his nerves of steel. Blondin said to her, “Do you truly believe that I can walk over the falls today?”

“O yes!” she said, “I am certain!” “Completely certain?” he said. “Completely!” she replied. “Then hop on my shoulders,” he said “and I’ll take you across.” Well it turned out she wasn’t that certain! So he took his manager instead. He carried his manager, Harry Colcord, on his back all the way across.

Blondin gave his manager the following instructions: *“Look up, Harry.... you are no*

longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death."

Listen to how one person described what he looked like: "dressed in pink tights bedecked with spangles. The lowering sun made him appear as if clothed in light." Blondin was an entertainer with an incredible gift, but the story can't help but remind me of Jesus.

Throughout our lives, we all have to cross chasms of incredible fear or issues and situations which to us are as wide as any Niagara river. The good news is we don't have to swim, or walk a high wire with our eyes shut. Jesus invites us to join him. He is the master. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. If we invite him to, Jesus walks with us, leads us on the most incredible adventure that will not only lead us to be transformed, to be healed and to have peace, but that will lead us to offer that to the people and places in this troubled world that need it most.

I pray that you will make a decision today to follow Jesus.

The following prayer is Wesley's Covenant Prayer and if you are willing, I invite you to say it with me.

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.
And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
You are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.