

Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles

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

Mark 10:46-52

Religious historians say that the 12-step movement, beginning with Alcoholics Anonymous, is the first authentically American addition to Christian theology. Almost everything else Protestant Christians believe has its roots in another part of the world, mostly Europe. There is something about this path, though—12 steps to freedom from addiction—that is peculiarly American.

Last week we talked about Step 1. Acknowledging that we are powerless: that there is something that keeps each of us from living fully the life we would choose for ourselves. It may not look like an addiction, but there are lots of ways you could find yourself in that picture:

You worry, constantly—maybe about your children
 Your anger is uncontrollable—whether you throw tantrums or are prone to grand exits
 You use silence as a weapon
 You talk compulsively
 You are stressed—all the time
 You eat things you know are not healthy for you
 You work all the time
 You procrastinate about important things
 You try to control other people

Doing any of these things is unhealthy. It's unhelpful. Doing them over and over again, even after you know they don't help, is what might be called insane. Step 2 in the 12-step program says, "We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." *A Power greater than ourselves.* That sounds like church, right? But it's actually right here, at Step 2, that church and the 12-step program have taken different paths.

Both traditions would say the same thing: that "salvation"—healing, wholeness, peace with yourself and with God—comes through a relationship with God. The way you get to that relationship, in the Church's practice, is to focus on God. Learn the stories of the Christian tradition; study the teachings of the Bible and the Church.

The 12-step movement says: The obstacle to a relationship with God — what keeps you from finding faith — isn't not knowing enough about God. It's about not knowing ourselves. Do you remember the Prodigal Son story? For the younger son who took his father's money and ran, there was a moment when he was so desperate that he "came to himself", the Gospel says. That's when he turned around and headed home. Surrendering to God—to any power greater than ourselves—can't happen until we "come to ourselves."

You hear it in the first few words of this step: We "came to believe..."
 12 step folks would say you have to find the longing inside of you before you can absorb anything about God. That there's a process, a gradual letting go, before you're ready to hand

over anything to any god. AA folks say, “We came...we came to...we came to believe.” We woke up to the fact that our lives were not working; that we need something bigger, more powerful, to move in us, to give us the freedom we are looking for.

The critical part of this process—the part that takes time and attention—isn’t researching the right God; it’s letting go of all our internalized myths about independence and will-power, and all those old resentments that keep the same tapes playing in our heads. Before your heart and mind can be filled with something new, they have to be emptied of what they’ve been carrying around. In 12-step language: “First of all, we had to quit playing God. It didn’t work.”

Somehow over the years, most of us have accumulated things that are not serving us well: too many opinions, a closed-down heart, a body we’re defensive and defended about. Space has to open up inside of us before there’s room for anything like God. You have to put down your defenses, all those false programs for happiness, hurts from the past. These are the things that keep us from seeing clearly, and from finding healing.

That message is buried in the story we heard today about Bartimaeus, the blind man. Bartimaeus had been blind for a long time. It was hard, but it gave him something to complain about. Every day, for years, he’d positioned himself on the side of the road and begged passers-by for money. It was the only thing he could do to survive, right? Bartimaeus had almost completely alienated his family and friends with his neediness, but he couldn’t see that. All he could see was that he was doing what he needed to get by.

He knew he was unhappy. But what choice did he have? He was blind. That was a given. So what he worked on was getting the money he needed to live. How to do that wasn’t obvious, or easy. The regulars who came by had pretty much stopped noticing him. Strangers on the road found him a little obnoxious. Bartimaeus tried to make some changes to make himself more effective. He crossed to the other side of the road. He tried standing up instead of sitting. He tried lying down. Moved down the road to a new location. No change. No more money. He still wasn’t OK.

He wasn’t looking for Jesus, or religion, or even healing. Just enough money to get by. But Bartimaeus was close enough to the end of his rope that when a healer came walking down the road with a group of followers behind him, he took a chance. He shouted out to the name he’d heard: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

I’m pretty sure Bartimaeus had no idea, really, who he was calling to. He couldn’t see. He hadn’t read any newspaper reports about Jesus, or heard his speeches on television. He was taking a stab in the dark, knowing nothing other than his frustration with the situation he was trapped in.

Shouting out like that wasn’t easy. All around him (out loud and in his head) were voices shushing him, telling him to be quiet, to act more dignified, less needy. But he was exhausted. Discouraged. Sick and tired, and sick and tired of being sick and tired. And so he came to himself. Which is to say: he stopped listening to all those other voices, so that he could hear for himself what he really needed.

“Jesus, Son of David (whoever you are, he might have added), have mercy on me.”

He asked the right person. Because Jesus didn't just flip a coin into Bartimaeus' cup. He didn't look at Bartimaeus and see just a life-long beggar. Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” I imagine Bartimaeus had to stop a minute and think about that. And then he said something I wonder if he'd ever brought to consciousness before. Something he'd never even thought to ask, or allowed himself to wish for. “I want to see,” he said. I don't just need enough money to fund the same life I've been living. I want to see.

“OK,” Jesus said. “Your faith has made you well.”

What did Jesus know about Bartimaeus' faith at that moment? What faith did he have? We know nothing about his religious background. He hadn't been traveling around the country trying to catch up with Jesus. The way the story is told, Bartimaeus sounds more like an opportunist, throwing himself on the mercy of a passing faith healer.

So what was the faith that led Bartimaeus to healing? What's the faith that might lead us to healing?

All the faith Jesus knew about, maybe all the faith Bartimaeus had, was contained in one sentence: “Teacher, let me see again.” That wasn't a statement full of knowledge about who Jesus was and what he had the power to give. It was a statement about what Bartimaeus was ready to receive.

God's invitations to us to change our lives—the offers that wake us up—don't usually come on soft pillows. They happen when we “come to ourselves”; when we confront our own deformities: the suffering or failures or habits that we finally know we can't fix ourselves. Funny, how grace comes when our own resources are exhausted, when we are ready to admit that we're not in control of our lives and our destinies. When we have faced honestly the bad news of our own experience.¹

Addiction has been called a misdirected search for God. One alcoholic said, “I often thought my thirst was simply for alcohol, but it was not. It was for *what alcohol did for me*. It had the power to change my self-perception and my perception of the world. It made me feel bigger, more confident, more desirable—indeed, more lovable. It made the world a friendlier, less hostile place.”²

Probably each of us has looked for—tried—something that we thought would do that for us. Maybe success, productivity, competence, feeling needed. Any one of those things might give you a temporary dose of the affirmation you're looking for, but it comes at a cost. It's exhausting. The drive to earn other people's love or admiration or acceptance feels relentless.

¹ James B. Nelson, *God and the Alcoholic Experience*, p. 127

² p. 136

And all the time, there's someone standing in front of you, asking, "What do you want me to do for you?"

"A power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity," the second step says. The power is there. God is present whether you believe in God or not. That's why the 12-step program just talks about "a higher power". They don't stop at Step 2 and spend months teaching theology. It doesn't really matter what you call God, or how you picture God. What makes the difference is whether you "came to believe"—whether you've gone the distance with yourself, come to know that you need something you cannot manufacture for yourself, no matter how good your intentions are, how committed you are to being a better person.

After he was healed, Bartimaeus got up and followed Jesus. Healing—the granting of his sight—came to him as grace. Jesus' power, not his. There was no nothing he had to do first to earn it, not even believe the right things. But afterward he did have to do something, to work at his own salvation. He had to not let anything get in between him and the one who had healed him.

You've heard alcoholics say that they're never "recovered". They're always recovering. That takes effort, discipline, work. Recovering alcoholics make sobriety a priority every day: with meditation, reading, going to countless meetings, reaching out to others. There's a program, work to be done, a path to get on and follow. But all of that *follows* the healing that saved them.

The embrace that heals us is God's. Our work—no small thing—is to get ourselves out of the way: our cluttered expectations, our limited images of God, our hopelessness about all those things we've already tried and failed at—so that we might *come to believe*.

Sources

James B. Nelson, *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

Richard Rhor, *Breathing Under Water*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011