

Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles
Step 3: Making a Decision to Surrender
Matthew 4:18-22

We come back today, and for the rest of the summer, to the twelve-steps. Alcoholics Anonymous has used this process for years to guide people into a life of faith and freedom from addiction. We are imagining these twelve steps as a path not only to stop drinking or using drugs, but also to shedding the attachments that keep all of us from living fully. The things we crave but that fail to satisfy us. Habits and patterns that we just cannot get rid of—that keep us from freedom, from being able to love God, love others, love ourselves. To live fully alive.

The first two steps were—first—about admitting that we are powerless over some parts of our own lives, admitting that we are unable to control the quality of our lives completely; and secondly, coming to believe that God (a “Higher Power” in AA terms) is able do something for us we cannot do for ourselves.

Today we talk about Step 3, which is about *surrender*—the decision to turn yourself over to that God. To give up struggling, to stop even pretending that you can work hard enough or discipline your mind carefully enough or set your sights high enough to change your life on your own. This third step is the pivot point, the key, to the whole twelve steps. It’s the act of *surrendering* that turns vulnerability into strength. It’s like plugging into the power source for change.

But what does it mean to surrender? Isn’t surrendering something sad, defeatist, even tragic? The pictures I have in my head about surrender always have an enemy in them: the end of a fight or a war, admitting defeat to a stronger adversary. How can giving up be a good thing, when everything we’ve learned since childhood about what it takes to succeed sounds like “Don’t ever give up” or “You can succeed if you just try harder”?

Maybe the more important question is who or what are we surrendering to. The actual wording of Step 3 is: *We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.* Not to an enemy, or to this demon we’ve been battling. To God. It’s surrendering to someone you can trust more than you trust yourself. To something more powerful than all the exhausting effort you’ve been bringing to the work of getting things right.

But still, surrender is a fuzzy concept, isn’t it? Let me tell you a true story, to see if it gets clearer.

Jim was a seminary professor. A good teacher. He was well recognized for his books, his thinking, his charisma. He was much loved by his students. He got lots of the kind of affirmation that is success in his field: his classes were full; he was asked often to be a lecturer; his college gave him an honorary doctorate. He could do all this because he worked like a perfectionist. He couldn’t stop, because it was who he was; who others expected him to be, and who he expected himself to be. But inside, underneath all those things that looked like success, he was exhausted. “I felt a constant pressure to appear competent and compassionate,” he said. “I was trying to be the perfect husband, teacher, father, citizen, church member. It was like I had several gods I was trying to please; and to do that, I’d become several selves. I was surrendering to too many demands. I actually believed I would take care of myself tomorrow, but tomorrow never came. And I longed for freedom.”

For Jim, it was drinking that gave him a few moments of reprieve from this pressure every night. If he had enough drinks, by 9:00 or so, he could let go of thinking he should do more work—because of course he couldn't. Alcohol—or the way alcohol made him feel—became the one god he longed for, the one whose presence saved him from all the others. When he served *that* god, he no longer had to run around and please all the other gods.

He tried for a long time to control his life. He resolved to do better. He used all the willpower he could muster. He decided to change...over and over again. Until finally, he couldn't any more. He surrendered into what he called “holy vulnerability,” the realization that only a grace he couldn't earn, from a God he couldn't control, could save him. And this is what he discovered:

“True recovery is not a matter of God's winning the battle of the wills. It is not God's taking control of my alcoholic life as a ruler controls subject or parent controls child—‘for your own good.’ Were that the case, the struggle would continue within me. No, the war is over. I have surrendered my false perspective. My letting go and falling into the arms of God is a profound relaxing into my true self. It is coming home.”¹

You may or may not be able to identify with that drinking part of Jim's story. But I wonder if there isn't some part of you that can *feel* the pressure he felt. To please many people, to feel like you are earning the value and security that you must have—for yourself, or for your family. To control the people and things around you so they don't go spinning off into trouble. To be needed; and then to say 'yes' to whatever is asked of you so that you will continue to be needed. To say 'yes' until you are exhausted.

This too is addiction.

I think most of us long for the *one thing* that will give coherence to our divided lives. One calm and grounded thing at our center, that will hold our head on straight instead of spinning around to face each of the demands we feel pressing on us. Surrender is to recognize that one thing, and to name that it is God. The one God who is big enough, good enough, reliable enough to be worthy of our surrender. To let that God lead us home.

In the story we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus rescues the first four people who follow him, who become his disciples. We don't often think of Jesus' call to the disciples as *rescuing*, but imagine with me this morning a little more about who they were, and the lives they might have been living before Jesus came along. They were fishermen. Fishing was a pretty common occupation in the lake country where they lived—what many men did in those days to support their families; maybe like being an engineer or a health care worker in this valley. It wasn't glamorous or ambitious work, and it certainly wasn't a career that was going to earn anybody great status, or much more than just enough money to get by on.

We don't know much about the lives of those four—Simon (who later in the story is called Peter), Andrew, James, John—but I think we can assume that they were living the same lives of quiet desperation that we know something about. They had families that never got along quite as well as they were supposed to. There was not quite enough money, ever, to buy that really great net that would make *all the difference* in their business, if they could just get far enough ahead to make the

¹ This story from *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*, James B. Nelson

investment. There was that one bad habit that kept surfacing, no matter how Peter tried to keep a lid on it. For James and John, there was a father who still worked with them, a father who was a treasure and still, always ready to remind them of the ways they have not yet measured up to his expectations.

These are the lives they were resigned to living. They had learned not to expect much more. And then Jesus came. And he said to them, “Come with me.” “Come with me,” he said. “Keep fishing, but come help me fish for people.”

And Matthew adds the most surprising detail to this story. He says it twice. They got up and followed Jesus “at once”, Matthew says; “immediately.” Really? They didn’t have to think about it for a while first? Ask what he meant by “fishing for people”? Make plans for how to take care of their families, their aging father, the end of their term on the Board of Trustees? It’s hard to imagine. But there are no words wasted in the Gospels. There is something for us to hear in this sense of immediacy that Matthew thinks is important enough to mention twice.

Follow me, Jesus said; and they went. Matthew is telling us that Peter and Andrew and James and John knew right away that this was someone they could trust. Someone they could hold onto. Someone who could save them from their frustrating, disappointing, too-many-responsibilities lives, if they could just keep their eyes on him. They didn’t get an entirely new career, or a replacement life. What Jesus offered them—if they could trust him enough to let go of things as they had always been—was the one thing that could save them. What they got was knowing that all those other things that had become like little gods to them—becoming the best fisherman, working out, being the most self-sacrificial volunteer at church, good clothes, impressive children—didn’t *have* to save them.

You see, fishing, in the Gospel story, is a symbol. It means real life—the whole package of things that made up those first disciples’ lives, their identities. “Keep fishing,” Jesus said to them. “But do it differently.” What Jesus invited them to was not an identity transplant. They would still be fishermen, fathers, husbands, synagogue members. This invitation was to a new “why” for all those things their lives included. Jesus’ “Follow me” was the call to them to surrender—to see that there is just *one thing* big enough, good enough, important enough to make the rest of their lives make sense.

Mostly, Jesus’ invitation to us to follow him doesn’t come as a call to leave our everyday, real lives behind. It comes like the call to the disciples: Keep fishing, but do it differently. Let go—surrender—to a God who is bigger. Even in the middle of all your important commitments, there is just one God who can bear your ultimate loyalty

All the other steps we’ll talk about in the coming weeks—four through twelve—are about the things you need to do to *stay* surrendered, to *stay* committed to God. Those really smart people who knew human nature well enough to start Alcoholics Anonymous knew how hard it is to live differently. How natural it is to keep taking back even the best intention to surrender. How hard it is to let an invisible, hard-to-grasp God be the one who shapes you and gives direction to your life. They knew that letting go of control is not a once-and-forever decision. For most of us, there’s no glorious moment when the angels burst into song and God suddenly turns his face toward you, and everything is clear from then on. It’s not like that. It’s a decision we have to make over and over again. Surrender is a practice, something you do every day, maybe even several times each day. And it starts right now. At this moment. At every moment.