

## **Why Recovery Sunday?** (Isaiah 40:21-31 & Mark 1:29-39)

What is *Recovery Sunday* and why are we celebrating it? *Recovery Sunday*, according to the Episcopal Church, “is a celebration of the deliverance by God’s grace of persons who have been imprisoned by a punishing and bewildering illness.” There are all kinds of addictions. Most prevalent in our society is the addiction to alcohol, but countless thousands are also addicted to various narcotics, whether it be a street drug or pain killers or tranquilizers or other prescription drugs. There are also many kinds of addictive behaviors: such as around eating – overeating or binging on food and throwing up or even starving one’s self to death – gambling, sex, pornography, spending... all these can become addictions. There is an absolutely huge cost to society in illness, accidents, crime and dysfunctional and lost lives as a result of these addictions and addictive behaviors. The effects of addiction are not just societal, they are felt right here in our fellowship. At least one in 10 persons (probably a whole lot more) are addicted to one or more substances or behaviors. And addiction effects not just the addict but also everyone who is part of that addict’s life. Addiction is a serious concern for all of us in this Christian community. Recovery Sunday recognizes that addiction is a *disease* not a moral weakness. Thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous and the powerful 12-step model developed by AA as a means for people in a fellowship of support with others who are similarly afflicted can begin to live new lives in recovery. It is this *recovery* that we celebrate this morning.

Someone challenged me, *why should we be talking about alcoholism and addiction? You should be preaching from the lectionary not to whatever special Sunday or popular theme that someone comes up with.*

I can well imagine a challenge also from someone entrenched in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous or any 12 step group: *What can the Church possibly teach us about addiction and recovery? We’re the experts. What can the Church possibly have to say about it?*

Let me give a short answer to each of those two questions and then look at each of them in more length. So, *why recovery Sunday?* Why should the Church be talking about alcoholism and addiction? As I’ve already shared the Episcopal Church invites us to set aside at least one Sunday to look at issues of addiction and recovery. A second short answer to that question is that 12-step recovery is a wonderful model for the miraculous ways God not only heals addiction, but heals all of us. *Recovery* is a model for Christian healing.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> question was, “*what could the church possibly have to say to someone in recovery?*” I believe we have something important to say because in the Church God is not anonymous. We in the Church have something wonderful to say about the *power greater than ourselves* (as spoken of in the 2<sup>nd</sup> step) which can restore us to sanity. A.A., N.A., Al Anon and other 12-step groups are healing fellowships of people from a wide variety of faiths or even no faith at all. They need to speak in generic terms of a *higher*

*power* in order to reach all people. We in the Church have been blessed to know that *higher power's* name. Let me address this 2<sup>nd</sup> question first.

Isaiah proclaimed with great power, “*Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?*” Our God is the Creator who stretched out the heavens, who created the universe and the stars and the planets and this great earth with all its abundance of life. Our God is all-powerful, all knowing, all seeing. Nothing is too great for God. Nothing is hidden from God. And this great God cares for his people. “*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.*” It is God’s power that can help us mount up with wings of eagles. He it is that allows us to run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.

And something more, in our Gospel passage from Mark, this all powerful God is revealed in a human face to be all compassionate. Jesus, in showing us the human face of God, shows compassion for all who are troubled or sick or possessed or broken. In Jesus we see the all powerful God touching Peter’s mother-in-law’s fevered brow, taking her by the hand, helping her out of her sick bed and healing her. We see Jesus healing all who came to him in that early night of his ministry in Capernaum: the lame, the blind, the deaf, those possessed with demons and those who needed forgiveness. Jesus healed them all. Jesus reveals God’s compassion and power to heal. This is the all knowing, all powerful, all compassionate *One* to whom we admit our powerlessness to right our own ships. This is the *Power* which can restore us to sanity. We are invited to hand our lives into Jesus’ care, into our Creator’s strength, into the Holy Spirit’s power to transform. That is the positive message that the Church has to share with those in recovery, why those in recovery need the good news of Christ Jesus as well as their 12-step fellowship.

On Tuesday the Church celebrated a new saint in the Episcopal calendar of holy men and women, Samuel Shoemaker. Did you know that the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous began in the basement of an Episcopal Church – Calvary Episcopal Church in Manhattan? Samuel Shoemaker was Rector of Calvary and was instrumental in working with Bill W in the 1930’s to articulate the 12 steps of AA. Those 12 steps describe not only the steps to sanity and recovery of life for those in addiction, but also I believe the process for all Christians of redemption, of becoming a new creation in Christ. Samuel Shoemaker was a prophetic witness in the Episcopal Church, a strong spokesman for the evangelical wing of the Church, an advocate years ahead of his time for small group fellowship, and a father in Christ to both Bill W, the founder of A.A. and Emily Gardiner Neal who helped to found the importance of healing in the Episcopal Church.

In a 1955 address to a convention of A.A. 20 years after its founding Shoemaker shared what the Church needed to learn from A.A. Fifty-five years later we need to learn needs to learn these things more than ever.

1. Nobody gets anywhere until he or she recognizes a clearly defined need. “*These people,*” he wrote, “*do not come to A.A. to get made a little better. They do not come because the best people are doing it. They come because they are*

*desperate. They are not ladies and gentlemen looking for a religion, they are utterly desperate men and women in search of redemption. Without what A.A. gives, death stares them in the face. With what A.A. gives them, there is life and hope. There are not a dozen ways, there are not two ways, there is one way; and they find it or perish.*” Are we not all broken people (the old fashioned word is *sinner*s) who desperately need God to make us whole? If we could see the *fellowship* of the Church as having a clear defined need and purpose how much more powerful we would be.

2. The power of life-changing *fellowship* is the 2<sup>nd</sup> thing A.A. has to teach us. The idea that we Christians depend on one another for support and help in turning from the ways that lead us towards death to the ways that lead us towards God and life.
3. Another thing A.A. has to teach us is the necessity of a real change of heart, a real *conversion*. The fruit of A.A. is changed lives. What is the fruit of the Church?
4. Lastly Shoemaker suggested that A.A. has to teach the Church is the need for exposure to living Christian experience. Concrete human testimony has an enormous power. We need each other’s stories in order to inspire us and remind us of God’s real power to heal and transform our lives.
5. I’d like to add one other important lesson that A.A. has to teach the Church. This one comes from the Very Rev. Ward Ewing, recently retired Dean of General Seminary. Ward suggests that A.A. has a clear focus on mission. Each A.A. chapter has the clear focus of carrying their message to the one who still suffers. At the end of each A.A. meeting participants hold hands and proclaim the *responsibility statement*: “*I am responsible, when any-one, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. to be there. And for that I am responsible.*” What if we were to end our worship with the same words and substitute instead of “*the hand of A.A.*” “*the hand of Christ?*” *I am responsible, when any-one, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of Christ to be there. And for that I am responsible.* (October 21, 2010 Keynote to the *Recovery Fellowship of the Episcopal Church*, in Memphis, TN)

Why *Recovery Sunday*? We need *recovery Sunday* because there is not a one of us who doesn’t need to admit our powerlessness to make our lives right by our own strength alone. We each need God’s help and strength. Every one of those 12 steps are a good prescription for Christian living. We need *recovery Sunday* because we need to continually lift up the exciting and wonderful work that A.A., N.A., Al Anon, ACOA and other 12 step groups are doing. We need *recovery Sunday* because the God who made the heavens and the earth and who loves us so much that in Christ Jesus he shares our very human life, leads us into recovery and wholeness. We need *recovery Sunday* because the Church needs to be reminded through the effectiveness of 12 step fellowship groups of how to better share the vitality of our own fellowship and healing in Christ.