



The Peace of God

Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9

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A man in his fifties, in a circle of women and men of a variety of ages, all of them seated in grey metal folding chairs, some sipping coffee, some with their hands holding up their faces. He stands and he tells his story:

Hello, My name is Jake and I am an alcoholic.¹

‘Hi Jake,’ they respond, all in union.

And Jake continues: “After twenty-two years of drinking, I actually quit. I still can’t believe that I’m sober. My wife kept criticizing my drinking. So, of course, I had to figure out how to get the liquor in without her knowledge. I would put a couple of bottles in my coat and stalk past her and hide them in the hamper. Usually, when I tried to get the bottles out of the hamper quietly, I got the bottles out but the hamper came with them. One time after a particularly bad bout, my wife said me to, ‘Why don’t you make me the happiest woman alive?’ I said, ‘How?’ She replied, ‘Drop dead!’ (Jake’s audience laughs knowingly). ‘Finally,’ he says, ‘my wife kicked me out. I had said to her, ‘This house is half mine, let’s divide it.’ So we did. She took the inside and I took the outside. (More laughter.) So I took a furnished room, and things went from bad to worse. My family gave up on me. I started scaring myself. Lying in a cheap furnished room drinking,

¹ Story taken mostly verbatim from Howard Clinebell, *Understanding and Counseling Persons with Alcohol, Drug, and Behavioral Addictions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 214-215.

² See Josh Katz, “Short Answers to Hard Questions about the Opioid Crisis.” *The New York Times*, Aug.

dreading the time when the liquor would give out or I wouldn't be able to keep it down in my stomach. I finally called-up up the only brother who'd still speak to me and asked him to come down. He protested but finally came and got me in the county hospital to dry out. While I was there a social service worker asked me if I'd heard about Alcoholics Anonymous. On Sunday some AA boys came to visit me, and I saw the light for the first time. I went to AA with them. It felt like the things I'd been looking for. After four months of AA,' Jake says, 'I said to myself one day, maybe with all my knowledge of AA, I could take a couple of beers. The first night I had six. (again, Jake's audience chuckles. They know where this is going). I woke up the next morning feeling fine, but I was scared to death of what would happen if I got drunk. The third night of my experiment I got drunk, and my dad threw me out, and I was back in the furnished room. For the next five years, I was on the bum. I lost job after job. I lost all hope and resigned myself to the alcoholic death I knew I was close to. Then two men came to see me. I knew before they spoke that they were from AA. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life. That was May, 23 years ago. No drinks since then.'" Jake finishes his story. He goes and sits down.

It's a common story. Across the country, similar tales of addiction, desolation, hopelessness, then hope, then falling off the bandwagon, then hope again, then hope continuing, taking one day at a time, sharing and pain, and temptation, these stories are told in Alcoholic Anonymous groups, Narcotics Anonymous Groups, and many other

related addiction support groups every day, right here in this church, all around Asheville. The need for them is increasing. An opiate epidemic is ravaging our country and our town. Overdose is the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 50 right now, more than guns; more than car accidents, killing people faster than HIV did at its peak in the 90s. 1 out of every 50 deaths in the United States is drug related. Over 2 million Americans have a problem with opioids.² Appalachia and western North Carolina are some of the worst hit regions of our country. In the first 8 months of 2017, Buncombe county alone saw 230 overdoses.

Many of you, many of us, likely a majority or well over a majority here today have been in some way affected by addiction, personally or in your family. My grandmother married an addict after my grandfather died before I was born. Larry, my step-grandfather, owned a lawnmower shop with my Uncle, my grandmother's son. We knew things were getting bad. Larry would start to drink at dinner parties, sometimes in the middle of the day, and he wouldn't stop until he passed out. I have memories of him when I was a child, Larry laying down with his eyes closed, all but unconscious, mumbling responses to my questions. Things got bad; my uncle did a search of the lawnmower shop they owned together; he found 13 bottles of liquor hidden all around the store. My uncle sold his half the business the next week and my grandmother left Larry. Years later she heard that Larry was dying from lung cancer, so she went back to him;

² See Josh Katz, "Short Answers to Hard Questions about the Opioid Crisis." *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2017: <https://nyti.ms/2hr8313>. Accessed Oct. 10, 2017.

she cared for him until he died. As a consequence, my mother and uncle didn't talk to my grandmother for years. I was a teenager by then. Not really knowing what was going on (what exactly was the fight? The issue? Why everyone was so angry?), but I also lost touch with my grandmother. I lost her for 4 years. In an important time in my life, I lost my grandmother while she was still alive, the only grandmother I ever knew, really the only grandparent who ever showed much interest in being in my life. Yes, they reunited eventually, my mother and grandmother, but I lost those years, and when my grandmother died about 5 years after this reunion, those 4 years without her remained; I felt that loss. I feel it now.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”

“The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” “The God of peace will be with you.”

These famous words of Paul to the Philippians: What is the peace of God to men like Larry, like Jake, to millions who have no peace because they are pulled toward chemical escape every waking moment of their lives? What is the peace of God to the families their addictions tear apart? To the people hurt by addicts, the long trail of broken relationships and broken people addictions leave behind? This isn't an inconsequential question, if we, Grace Covenant are going to proclaim it: The peace of God; we proclaim peace, but can we say we live in peace? The people inside and outside our walls, when they do not live in the peace we proclaim, can we proclaim the peace of God? If we do,

while others suffer, do we really live it, the peace that Paul proclaims here: the peace of God, which passes all understanding?

There are other addictions that aren't chemical; other compulsions, not to addictive substances, to the death-grip of the bottle or the pill, but other things that draw us in, that allow for escape. Do you have a compulsion? Do I? Is there a hole in your life that you keep trying to fill, a thirst never quenched, a pain never healed, a loneliness never soothed? Do you surround it with shame? Or anxiety? Do you know someone struggling right now? What is your struggle? What do we use to take us out of the life we are living right now?

I've lately become a student of Alcoholics Anonymous, not having spent much time with the group before. I have been asked to teach a course on the subject of pastoral care and substance abuse for an online seminary.

Do you know that AA has only one requirement for membership: that you desire to stop using? Not that you have stopped using, not that you won't ever use again, just a desire to stop. Do you know that some of the best people to help addicts are fellow addicts? Do you know the people who work at AA are addicts who volunteer, and they volunteer as much for themselves as for others, because when you help someone get sober, you help yourself stay sober, you hear yourself say things like, "take it one day at a time," "can you just not drink for this hour," "this too shall pass," "let go and let God," and when you say these things, you start to believe them yourself? Do you know that the

stories that addicts tell at AA, like the story of Jake, that they are told so that addicts can put the meaninglessness, the shame, the anger, the loneliness they experience, they can turn them into stories about their lives; they can watch as people hear them and not walk away. It says something about our church that we give space to such groups almost every night in our church building. They are a part of our ministry.

Larry is not the only addict in my family. My uncle's addiction became apparent to our family after he sold the business that he owned with Larry; he doesn't return my calls anymore. My grandmother's brother, my grand-uncle, died an addict who drank until his dying day. I'm told that the grandfather on my father's side also had his troubles, though I never got close enough to him to really know for myself. I'm not going to sensationalize addiction, to romanticize it, to excuse it. But if you are going to know me, you need to know that it is part of my story; I come from a family of addicts without any recovery stories. Addiction is part of the story of our town too, of our region, our state, our country. The peace of God: we proclaim the peace of God, week after week, in a town where peace oftentimes is scarce for many of our neighbors, for many of us.

What is the peace of God here, when we name the realities of addiction that are always already here? Paul, in his chains, Paul in a jail cell, proclaiming peace. Paul, with his own thorn in his side, as he tells us in 2 Corinthians; Paul, who just a chapter earlier, had said that he lost everything, "For Christ's sake, I suffered the loss of all things"; here

in the midst of loss, in the midst of chains, Paul proclaims peace. What is the peace of God?

Those with addiction, those who meet in anonymous rooms almost every day in our church, what do they have to teach the Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church that meets here on Sunday morning about the peace of God? What do they know about peace; what do they know that we do not? The peace of God, which passes all understanding?

Willa and Stephanie, a married couple now, did not know one another and did not identify as gay when they entered recovery separately.³ Stephanie, especially, was suspicious of AA's step to "believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity," however you define that higher power. Growing up in a home with abusive parents, who referred to God's wrath as just punishment, she remembers thinking, "I don't need this because it is all, its all hogwash. It's all man-made....I don't need to go to a church that beats me up and makes me feel bad about myself because I don't follow their rules." Both Willa and Stephanie had turned to alcohol, one following abuse, the other seeking escape. In Willa's words: "I used to think that when something bad happened I was going to be there forever. I'm never going to get out of it. It's never going to end....My way of dealing with it before was to drink." To drink herself out of problems she felt had no other escape. What strikes me about their stories, which I read through an article published by a friend, Sonia Waters, who teaches at Princeton

³ Stories from Sonia Waters, "Identity in the Empathic Community: Alcoholics Anonymous as a Model Community for Storytelling and Change." *Pastoral Psychology* 64 (2015): 769-782.

Seminary, what strikes me is that their change, from suspicion, and compulsion, and escape, to peace: it was never intellectual. No one ever gave them a really good sermon that lead to sobriety. The peace of God: that peace was found in community, through community, with a community of people who identified as life-long addicts taking recovery one day at a time together.

It's nothing more than people, a community of people who allow themselves to be vulnerable with one another, who let other people in, learning to trust others with their stories. Putting it out there, hearing oneself say it, hearing others say it: I'm hurting, I'm broken, I need help, just saying those words makes the triggers of addiction lose their power. Willa says, It was the "stories in AA [that] told me that this is where I belonged. This is who I was. That I no longer had to be the person that I was when I was drinking. I no longer had to have all those negative feelings and negative ways of behaving. I could be a different person. And I found that out by listening to stories of other people." Isn't that powerful? A life of compulsion, a life of escape, a life that hurt countless others feeding an addiction, a chemical release: A life now opened up, to the vulnerability of others, hearing other people's stories. Not that its easy; if Willa follows current trends, she likely tried it and failed it, tried it again. In such a community, Willa and Stephanie found that they could stop drinking for one day. Stop drinking today, and the next day, and perhaps, the next day. Opening themselves up to such community, Willa and Stephanie were able to open themselves up, also, to the love that they found in one

another. Opening themselves in such a community, they found the love of God. The peace of God be with you.

Christian communities like ours, we have a heritage of pretending like everything is all right; no problems to see here; everything's fine, just fine. Isn't that strange, a body, a congregation, born of a body broken: "this is my body," Jesus tells his disciples: "broken for you." Isn't it strange that in mainline churches across our nation, gathering today, Christians have been told to hide their brokenness, to hide their humanity, not to risk vulnerability. That's a risk we must take, for the peace of God, it comes, not in spite of brokenness, but in the midst of brokenness. This is what we learn from the anonymous people who meet upstairs every week. That the peace of God, which passes all understanding, is found right here, in our midst, in the telling and hearing of stories of pain, of suffering, of shame, being vulnerable with one another, being guilty with one another, finally giving up the better-than-thou façade that still runs things outside these walls. The peace of God is revealed in a man who feels free enough to talk about the moment when his wife threw him out, sick of his drinking. The peace of God doesn't just come down from above; or perhaps, when God does come down, She appears in an outstretched hand, a willingness to share, a willingness to be in vulnerable community. Learning from our upstairs neighbors, we too can be a community where stories of suffering, and pain, and hope are told and heard. By the grace of God, we are already becoming that community. The peace of God. It was with us all along. Thanks be to God.