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Addiction and Healing

The gospels record many sayings of Jesus. To the best of my knowledge, they never record him saying to his followers: “you’ve got to be kidding me.” I don’t know how that phrase would sound in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. In our gospel account this morning the disciples were actually arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. Unbelievable! Jesus must have thought. To make his point, or perhaps to cover up his frustration, he found a little child and took that child into his arms and said: 37“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Jesus did not choose a wise old man with the beard who knew the answers and mysteries of life: he chose a small child.

I remember as a child when I asked my parents each May and June when we would celebrate Mothers’ and Fathers’ Day, when would it be Kids’ Day? Every day, they would say: “every day is kids’ day.”

If that were only so...

Less we forget and move onto the next crisis or new cycle: It has been reported that over 12,000 children remain in federal detention after making the perilous journey north, many of them hoping to seek asylum and fleeing horrendous violence.

Sad but true: children have not always and universally been celebrated, cared for or protected -- let alone offered as a stand in for how one should welcome God. The life of a child can be largely determined by the when, where and how they come into this world. It wasn’t too long ago that little ones were unpaid workers: a free hand in the fields, help on the farm, or in a factory.

When a child is born and raised, those close to them can only hope that their life will be filled with good things: enough food to fill their stomachs, shelter, health, a good education and a chance to make to on their own. They hope and pray that no evil or hardship should come their way.

And when we life and events interrupt those aspirations, well, then it gets tough. For the child. And for those who love the child.

“Beautiful Boy” is a brutally honest and troubling memoir of a father coming to terms and living through the havoc of addiction of his oldest son Nic. Before his addiction to crystal meth, David Sheff’s son was charming and joyous, good in school, a stellar athlete and an adoring brother to his younger siblings. And then things changed. Nic began to lie; he stole for support his addiction, disappeared for days. His physical appearance changed, with black circles under his eyes. He seemed grayer, his father noticed. “What happened to my beautiful boy?” was the lament asked by his father.

This fall, here at Christ Church we are introducing the topic of addiction and recovery for both education and conversation. Many have learned that there is no one way to confront addiction, to resist its constant calls for escape and its momentary comfort and easing of pain. For the one

addicted, and those who love them, it is a cycle of hope, separation, fall, destruction, betrayal, return, and hope again. New Times reviewer Janet Maslin wrote of the book: “Addiction is a compulsion to do the same thing over and over, despite knowing that the outcome will almost certainly be the same.”

In the book, at one point another father reached out to David the author and shared his own story. “God bless you. I have been there. It is hell. But it’s in God’s hand.” David, though, was not a believer. “I wish I could put it in someone else’s hands. Someone powerful and benevolent.” The other father listened and said: “You will believe in God before this is over.”

At this point, theology and faith can go off the rails. Does one need God or a Power greater than ourselves to find recovery after addiction? Does one have to turn over one’s will and our lives to the care of God as we understand God? I honestly do not know the full answer. I know my father found his church in AA that helped him piece together 33 years of sobriety one day at a time. He and others would pray: Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

I know that many have found the peace and acceptance of God in the 12 Step meetings that go on each week in our Parish Hall. Who knows? – as many or more than those of us who sit in these pews each week. Yet it does not work for everyone and God, let alone recovery, remains allusive.

We are living through a cultural moment when lines of right and wrong seem blurred and fuzzy: what is truth, what is false? Whose story rings true. How do our lived experiences shape how we hear another person’s story?

If that is the case, in walks the Letter of James to draw for us clear lines. The world is shaped by envy, selfish ambition, and wickedness. It leads one to be boastful or false to the truth.

The Opposite is what is come from above: which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and without a trace of hypocrisy.

Godliness or worldliness. You choose.

It is a challenge, I have to admit, for us today to understand this either/or, above/below, up/down thinking that shaped the ancient world.

What James gets right is the description of the cravings that are at war within us. 4:2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. (An extreme example). You covet something and cannot obtain it – conflict arises.

For those overwhelmed by addiction it can seem like a war within themselves. From James: Resist the devil, and he will flee from you – if it were that easy...

If we can’t make the worldliness vs. godliness make sense, we can accept life’s built-in contradictions. Darkness and light. Hatred and love. Discouragement and hope. Doubt and faith. Scarcity and abundance. Jesus in our gospel reading today adds yet another: Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all. For the families in “Beautiful Boy” trying to support their loved ones through addiction to recovery, they are often simultaneously hopeless and hopeful.

Christians are no strangers to contradictions and paradox. We are resurrection people. We believe in the one who lived, suffered, died and rose again on the third day is our entry point into the greatest mystery of believing. The only way to live is to die to self and be born anew become a new creation.

“You will believe in God before this is over.”

I don't believe that the disappointments, disasters, illnesses, tragedies are not God's way of testing us to bring us to deeper faith. It is not God's will that we suffer and experience heartache and loss. To believe that would be to hold an image of God that I would have no interest in believing in and following.

I find both comfort and direction in from James: Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Maybe we should worry less about believing in God than drawing closer.

Where is God to be found? In the face of child in room of adults fighting about who is greatest.

The ancient hymn *Ubi Caritas* locates God like this:

Where charity and love are, God is there.
 Christ's love has gathered us into one.
 May we love each other with a sincere heart.
 Let evil impulses stop, let controversy cease,
 And may Christ our God be in our midst.
 Where charity and love are, God is there.

It is God's will, desire, promise and hope that when and if we experience personal valleys of the shadow of death, we will be held, loved, forgiven, and known. And for that to be true and not just a nice way to finish a sermon, then we all truly need to become the hands and heart of Christ in this very broken and hurting world.