

Tree of Life Church  
October 27, 2024—Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost  
Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and The Twelve Steps

#11 Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood [God], praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out.

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**PSALM**

Psalm 46:10

"Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations;  
I am exalted in the earth."

**LETTERS**

Ephesians 4:22-23

<sup>22</sup> to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

**Romans 12:2, but 12:1-21**

**12** I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup> the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**GOSPEL**

Mark 1:35

<sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

**SERMON**

An Alternative Mind, AA Step #11

Rev. M. Courtenay Willcox

## **Week Thirty: Breathing Under Water, Week Two**

AA Step #11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood [God], praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out.

Let's briefly recap this three-part series of melding The 12 Step program from Alcoholics Anonymous with Richard Rohr's book, *Breathing Under Water* and with an exploration and understanding of our own faith. From a Christian perspective, the Twelve Step Program "parallels, mirrors, and makes practical the same messages that Jesus gives us.

We remember that Step #1 had us admitting that we are powerless, and for AA members, it is a powerlessness over alcohol; for the rest of us, it is that we are powerless to control our perhaps less visible addictions, shopping, anger, hoarding, pornography, food, the need to have power over others, well, you get the idea. Admitting even a level of powerlessness is difficult and makes us vulnerable to one another and to our higher power. Step #1 is giving up all control and ceding that control to God... a practice that we repeat again and again. For Christians, it is relinquishing power, again and again, to God.

Last week, we touched on the need to confess our sins to ourselves, another person, and God. AA's step #5 says we admit to God and ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs, and it turns out that Richard Rohr and Jesus say this is what we are to do, too. In Jesus' economy of grace, we receive forgiveness and pardon, freely given, that we haven't earned and don't deserve. And in case you are skeptical that this is a practice you might catch a glimpse of in the larger world, yesterday's Philadelphia Inquirer's headline reported, "Biden on Friday formally apologized to Native Americans for the "sin" of a government-run boarding school that for decades forcibly separated children from their parents. Step #5 is in the news, and acknowledging our sin is receiving coverage.

For our last week tripping through the 12 Steps and chapters in Rohr's book, we hear step #11, Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood [God], praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out.

Powerless in the world, confession of sin to ourselves and others, and now we're supposed to improve our relationship with God so that we can understand God's will for us? How is that supposed to happen?

How do we know God? Our Reformation father John Calvin gives us a clue. He says, "The more we know ourselves, the more we know God and the more we know God, the more we know ourselves. I imagine the self-examination involved in working through the 12 steps helps one see and understand oneself better than do many people who do not explore this introspective process.

I spent three hours last Sunday afternoon in the first of a four-week program hosted by Interfaith Philadelphia called Visionary Women 2.0. Included in your bulletin is a sheet that outlines what I'm explaining, so you'll have it if you want to follow along or refer back.

I went through the first Visionary Women during the pandemic on Zoom, and this in-person version was so wonderful. What we do in our times together is learn about other faiths or life practices or a worldview—because for some, they are not practicing a faith, while articulating and sharing our own faith. Interestingly, sharing our own faith strengthens our faith.

My small group included Judaism, Universalism, and me, a mainline Christian. Before we broke into small groups, we explored the physical signs that we might experience when we are stressed or overwhelmed in conversation. And then, how we ground ourselves **at** those times and where we find challenges in dialogue. It is about having conversations with people who have a different worldview and how we can do better navigating those sometimes difficult conversations. This is a challenging and timely topic, as 2024 is filled with the potential for so many difficult conversations. And stay with me for just a minute to see how this loops around to explain how we can know God better.

In our larger group, we also reviewed asking curious rather than judgmental questions. **Curious questions** ask permission, offer time for an answer, present with a posture of openness and tone, present in a non-judgmental way, and begin with the words 'what' or 'how' rather than 'why.' **Judgmental questions**, on the other hand, tend to put people on the defensive from the start, build on existing stereotypes and bias, have a harsh or accusatory tone, and often begin with the word 'why.' For example, "Why in the world would you...?" or "Why do you all...?"

**Curious questions** take the form of appreciative inquiry and look for the good. Some examples include:

What is your favorite part about your belief (or worldview)?

What is a common practice from your faith tradition (or worldview) that you find valuable?

What are some challenges you find when engaging with others who are not a part of your faith background? This is a question that helps you articulate your own faith, helping to deepen your relationship with God.

How does your faith inform you *in* what you are witnessing *in* [insert this current event or situation]?  
How has your faith helped you navigate...

AND I'm curious about... Would you be willing to tell me more? How do you relate to...? Help me understand.

These curious questions require a change in posture and, for some, a change of intent as well. These conversations, these exercises are not about being right, they are about working to understand.

Finally, there are **guidelines for dialogue, listening, and sharing** that we used in our small group.

Be respectful—listen to and respect all points of view.

Actively listen—listen to understand, not respond or react.

Be curious, not judgemental—seek to understand, not persuade or judge.

Be honest and sincere—speak about what has personal meaning to you—this requires a level of vulnerability.

Be open to discovery—question old assumptions, acknowledge the limitations of your knowledge and experience (the more I know, the more I realize how much I don't know), and look for new and shared viewpoints.

Honor confidentiality. Personal stories stay with the group; ask permission to speak with others about individual stories.

Use 'I' language—don't co-opt people who are there by drawing them into your narrative by using the word "we."

Speak from, but not for, your faith tradition or community. This is liberating because I don't have to know everything about my faith, just what I've come to understand.

With all this in our toolkits, we became a living library for one another—we learned from each other rather than from books.

We each spent five minutes answering the following questions:

- How would you describe your current faith/worldview?
- What is something you wish people knew or understood about your faith or spiritual practice or worldview today?
- And what from your faith/worldview inspires you to be here at this event?

After speaking, each person listening wrote down a curious question to ask the speaker. One question posed to me was, "How do you feel God moving in your life?" I had talked about feeling God moving in my life and loved her wonderful, curious 'how question. How do you experience this, she asked? Her question encourages me to dive deeper into my relationship with God and how that relationship grows.

I believe this question speaks into our conversation today. **How** and **where** and **when** do we feel God moving in our lives. Is this something that happens often, sometimes, almost never? How do we cultivate a relationship or a deeper relationship with God?

Step #11 says, Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood [God], praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out. Like some of the other steps, this has the potential to be a life-long pursuit.

Our friend Richard Rohr, in his book *Breathing Under Water*, has **so much** to say about the concept of prayer and meditation as a way to improve our contact with God, our relationship with God, that he refers to prayer as an alternative mind. Think about it: to encounter God, our minds need to change, moving from ego-centric, calculating minds to a soul-centric, contemplative mind. It is a bit of a paradigm shift because it moves our personal wants out of the way to see a bigger picture of God moving in our lives. And prayer is less about changing God, and more about being willing to let God change us. And here is the wrinkle, "Jesus goes so far as to say that true prayer is always answered (Matthew 7:7–11). We all know that is not factually true—unless he is talking about prayer in the sense that Rohr describes it. If we are able to switch our minds to the mind of Christ, our prayer has already been answered! That new mind knows, understands, accepts, and sees correctly,

widely, and wisely. Its prayers are always answered because they are, in fact, the prayers of God too.”<sup>1</sup>

So, if we can change our perspective, work and think and pray to act with the mind of Christ, much like the approach to Visionary Women’s difficult conversations, there is a paradigm shift that opens us to a different way. And like those in AA know and we Christians know too, this is life-long work, a practice that we work on daily as we dive deeply into understanding how prayer can change us.

Jesus reminds us in scripture that we are to go to our inner room and shut the door (Matthew 6:6). I can tell you that there is no such thing as an inner room in a Jewish one-room house, and Jesus’ listeners would have known that that inner room was about our inner selves, or what we might call the unconscious. It is our personal, inner room. And Jesus reminds us, “Do you not know, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21)<sup>2</sup> Please, when you leave here today, look for the kingdom of God within, inhabit the inner room, practice the paradigm shift, make the switch to the mind of Christ, give yourself the opportunity to heal your unconsciousness, and prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God.

We can always rely on Thomas Merton to speak into our current context. He said, “The will of God is not a ‘fate’ to which we must submit, but a creative act in our life producing something absolutely new...something hitherto unforeseen by the laws and established patterns. Our cooperation... consists not solely in conforming to laws, but in opening our wills out to this creative act.”<sup>3</sup> And as we consider prayer and meditation introducing us to and being embraced by God, keep in mind:

Watch your thoughts; they become words.

Watch your words; they become actions.

Watch your actions; they become habits.

Watch your habits; they become character.

What your character; it becomes your destiny.<sup>4</sup>

I’ll close our time together with looking not just of the three weeks we’ve spent dwelling in the 12 Steps and Richard Rohr, but in exploring our own interior and how we can better understand our relationship with our Creator. Our potential for growth and the instruction and stories that drive it can come from surprising places. I’m especially grateful for partnering with Alcoholics Anonymous, for the shares, and for your willingness to come along. I think we learn things when we are challenged, when we feel just a little uncomfortable and am glad, on this Reformation Sunday, that we consider way that we are not just reformed, but always reforming. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard. Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps (p. 104). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> IBID p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three (New York: HarperOne, 1999), 211.

<sup>4</sup> Rohr, Richard. Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps, p. 110.