

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

There is an old Cherokee story about a grandfather who is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he says to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil –filled with anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, inferiority, false pride, superiority, ego. The other wolf is good – full of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith. The same fight is going on- inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thinks about this for a minute and then asks his grandfather, “Well, which wolf will win?”

The old Chief simply replies, “The one you feed.”

You may well have heard this story before, but it speaks to the heart of where we are in following the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, in Richard Rohr’s ‘Breathing Underwater’ and in our journeys of life.

“You are what you eat” is what a German philosopher (Schliermacher) once said, and that can be taken both physically and metaphorically. What we feed ourselves on, emotionally, counts as much in life as our table diet.

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In the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, the description of Step Seven concludes with the Seventh Step Prayer: "My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding."

In Step Eight, today's endeavor, we are asked to take concrete steps to "repair the damage done in the past, to sweep away the debris which has accumulated out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves. If we haven't the will to do this, we continue to ask God until it comes." (A.A. Big Book, p.76).

For many alcoholics, addicts and compulsives, one of the most potent and toxic hazards in life is holding on to old resentments held against others. It is unhealthy food in many ways. Tied to this is holding on to guilt and shame about the way we treated other people. This is a natural enough issue for many, but when combined with an existing disabling illness, like alcoholism, it can combine to create an impervious and negative wall of resistance.

Carrying in us what we believe to be "justifiable anger" or crippling guilt represents two sides of the same destructive force that jeopardize whatever peace of mind we might gain in recovery. And these feelings take up space in our psyche that elbows out positive and life-affirming ways of thinking and feeling.

There is great Biblical wisdom for life in in the Book of Proverbs' admonition that "fools mock making amends, but goodwill is found among the upright" (Proverbs 14:9). We hold on to our anger, resentments, shame and guilt at the price of losing our own peace and recovery. It is not a healthy diet, by a long shot.

The need for making amends is at the heart of the Gospel message, bringing the ways of heaven to earth; and is at the core of Twelve Step recovery. It is one aspect of Jesus' genius taught two millennia ago that we can still live by today.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches that if a believer is about to offer his or her "gift at the altar and there remembers that a brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister; then come and offer your gift." Without reconciliation, a healthy relationship with God and real peace with others – is just not possible.

It is important to remember that Temple worship in the first century was not the same as going to church. The picture here in your minds' eye could be of someone bringing a basket of grain, or a pair of doves in a cage, that need to be left on the Temple steps- or maybe carried back home, on the way to make peace with that person who has just come to mind... and that situation you need to apologize about.

According to Jesus, the one who places reconciliation before worship has set priorities right. In the first-century mix of Jewishness in which Jesus lived, this was unorthodox, to say the least. But Jesus made his point clear. In worship, we bring our whole selves before God. Better to bring the best selves we can, rather than presenting ourselves as more perfect than we really are. Carrying around guilt and anger, and making a habit of it, is simply not healthy. According to A.A., Jesus was on to something.

What was going on in Jesus' teaching was this. Like other Jewish teachers of his time, he used the interpretive principal of 'light and heavy' to biblical commands. Not every line of Scripture was given the same weight. As far as he was concerned, the weightier matters of life concerned justice, mercy and faith. The lighter jots and tittles weren't to be neglected, but neither were they allowed to get in the way.

When obeying a light law got in the way of obeying a heavier law, then light yielded to heavy, so that God might be glorified.

So, for Jesus, in his day and time, what was heavier, ritual cleanliness or open table fellowship? *Open table fellowship*, Jesus taught. Healing a withered hand, or full observance of the Sabbath? *Healing a withered hand*.

Not everything Jesus said was accepted unconditionally. You had to take his word on it; and, of course- it wasn't until after the resurrection that any of this even began to make any sense at all.

But you have to give it to him; the urge to make amends arises when we have had the courage to face the reality of what have been negative impacts on others. In the best sense of the term, it is a Christ-like urge. It is a time when we experience grace.... Maybe not full acceptance by who it is we once faulted, but we at least get a little more peace with ourselves, and God, in the process.

Jesus didn't just teach the LAW as a static concept; it had a practical and living meaning to those who followed him. Jesus' message, though recorded in scripture, is not a codified manual

of operations we use to check off in order to live life correctly; rather, his words have always been understood as a LIVING Word of a LIVING LORD who walks with us on the rocky road of life.

Now, I'm not sure what you will be doing with Step 8 in this next week to come. I have been living with it all through this past week. Of the two things we are given to do, one is eminently practical, the other is well, spiritual, in the best sense of the word.

First make a list of those people we have harmed. And then become willing to make amends...

The list and the willingness are intertwined; you don't get one without the other.

Going back to the story I started with, of the two wolves of good and evil, jealousy and kindness; resentment and humility, it sure is a helpful image to use in how to best approach the circumstances, even theoretically, at this point. (Step 9, next week, has to do with actually making those amends, when it will be most helpful.)

But there is no denying that this isn't a necessary step, or that it is easy. Try it. It is a meal worth making.

Psychologists tell us that we are deeply imprinted by the harm we have caused others. The imprint is sometimes felt as shame or guilt, or remorse, and it is our heart's sensitivity calling us to attention.

In our prayer of preparation to do this, we do not have to admit that those who wronged us are right. We only need to ask God to do what only God can do: to remove hatred from our hearts and replace it with love, that we might live more peacefully and comfortably. And so the prayer is: "Gracious God, we ask that you accept these names as we lift them up and grant us the willingness to forgive each of these."

Comfort can arrive from two things: (1) It is a way of setting up necessary terms of self-forgiveness, setting the stage for you to understand yourself in a whole new way, and (2) it is an expression of our finding our rightful place in the world and to our own hearts.

In every step of the way, be assured of the most important thing of all. You will not be doing this alone. Jesus, who walks with us always, will be right alongside. Of that you can be most thankful, and that will make all the difference in the world. Amen.