“Stepping Stones to Life”

When I say the words “twelve-step program” what comes to mind for you? I hear people saying AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Al-Anon, Debtors Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, NA (Narcotics Anonymous), SA and others. One of the most important programs that this parish sponsors is Alcoholics Anonymous. A group of men and women meet here six days of the week to help and support one another in their recovery from alcoholism. When we suspended worship services due to the pandemic, AA meetings went on. Some people met via Zoom but we realized that the in-person support was crucial to these folks maintaining their sobriety, and for others to be able to start their journey to sobriety.

The twelve-steps of AA are:

1. We admit we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives have become unmanageable.
2. We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.
4. We make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We make a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong we promptly admit it.
11. We seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

As I pondered the passage from the Gospel of Luke I realized the publican or tax collector was an embodiment of these steps and how much the Pharisee needed to know them. The Pharisee seems to be living a blameless life. We who have heard so many parables where Pharisees are the bad guys need to adjust our hearing to that of a first-century Jew. In that time Pharisees were behind the reformation of Judaism. They refocused religious life on a closer observance of the Mosaic Laws. They taught and practiced a reverence for the Torah. They followed the commandments and taught others to do so. This is in contrast to the Sadducees who had sold out to the Roman Empire in order to keep power in the Temple. St. Paul was trained in the Pharisaic tradition, and some scholars believe that Jesus was trained as a Pharisee.

Despite these many positive attributes of the Pharisees, in Jesus’ parables the Pharisee often plays the foil for an average person or even someone his audience would think of negatively for example the Samaritan or in this case the tax collector. Given his self-description the Pharisee in this parable seems blameless. As he stands prominently in the Temple courtyard his prayer is actually a self-congratulatory list of his good deeds. He goes on to thank God for being better than sinners such as, “thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He is not praying but telling God how much better he is than other people.

In contrast, the publican or tax collector importunes God for mercy. He stands away from others in the Temple courtyard. In his shame he cannot even look toward heaven. He beats his chest in lamentation for his sins. He does not recite the good things he has done. Instead, he simply states that he is a sinner and begs for forgiveness.

Jesus says that the Pharisee may be righteous under the law, but he does not realize from whence mercy and grace come. Thus, he has fooled himself into thinking that he is justified because he has been righteous and has **earned** his justification. The tax collector, the lowest of the low in society, is justified because he realizes that justification only comes from God.

Justification in theological terms means “the action of declaring or making something righteous in the sight of God.” The Pharisee could have performed all of his virtuous acts and even thanked God for his better station in life. If he had gone on to accept that what he had done did not make him anymore worthy than the tax collector, he would have been made righteous in God’s eyes. However, it is his apparent claim of having earned his righteousness through his own actions that puts him in the position of being unjustified. The tax collector knew his actions were not as they should be. He begged for mercy, knowing that it was only God who could save him.

Jesus wants us to be like the tax collector, not in his sins, but in his recognition that there is no way for us to earn justification before God. That is something God has given us. Our works do not save us. God saves us and our works are a way we give thanks for God’s generosity.

The teachings of Moses and the many commandments the Pharisee followed were not his or anyone’s key to salvation. Following the commandments is a way of giving thanks. That is what the Pharisee needed to learn, what the tax collector has learned, and what we too have to learn. If we believe any differently we have fooled ourselves. There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. It is only through God’s mercy that we have the skills to be successful. It is only through our reliance on God that we have hope for salvation. As Jeremiah wrote we are to set our hope on God for only God can save us. As those who commit to AA know it is only with their reliance on their higher power that they can be saved from their addiction. Once we admit our addiction to self and ego it is then that we are on the road to a rich and truly righteous life in this world and in the world to come.

1. Luke 18:11 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)