

Higher Powered

Psalms 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11

July 13, 2008, by Kathy Knauff

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I absolutely love the United Church of Christ. The more I learn about our denomination, the more I know I am where I am supposed to be.

In preparing for leading today's worship service, I was concerned with doing everything right ...by the book. I didn't want to climb into the pulpit, give a sermon ...only to find out that I said something in conflict with the beliefs of the United Church of Christ.

I was particularly concerned when I read the scripture readings for today in the King James version of the Bible....then googled the internet to find some thoughts about the verses ...and learned that some churches point to this as the absolute proof that Christianity is the only key to eternal life. Belonging to a particular denomination means that you are part of the elite class of Christians. And attending a specific church on Sundays is your safe haven from certain damnation.

So imagine my relief when I read about theology in the UCC from our national website... I talked a little about during Children's Time. There is no one right answer. Our denomination is all about sharing our journeys. It really is all about listening to each other and learning ...because God is still speaking.

Armed with that revelation...I cracked open *The Message*. ...the version of the Bible that I asked Mary Lou to read from. With an open mind...and listening to the word in a way I could relate to...I heard an entirely different message that resonated with me.

In Psalms, it said "I inherited your book on living; it's mine forever. What a gift!" Now I know most of you probably think of the Bible when you heard that and that is most likely the book that the author was referring to. But for me..... the first book I inherited ...that brought a higher power into my life ...was the book of Alcoholics Anonymous, more affectionately known as the Big Book. My journey in recovery simply can not be separated from my spiritual path.....my path to finding God, my Higher Power.

So this morning, I would like to share with you some of the parallels between those two gifts...those two special books...what they mean to me.

Both verses from the Bible talked about living in darkness...following a darkened path or living under a low flying black cloud. That was exactly how my life used to be. I felt doomed. I didn't have the strength to do anything without alcohol. Somehow I thought it made me stronger and wiser. But the truth of the matter, I drank because I thought it would block me from feeling. I was trying to get away from that low flying black cloud. That black cloud to me represented the sure fact that you were going to find out the truth about me. You were going to find out that I wasn't who I tried to pretend I was. You were going to expose me as a nothinga lost person. And when you did find out about the real me....you wouldn't want to have a thing to do with me.

Living life this way is hard. It took a lot of energy to be a fake. It's hard to keep track of who you are supposed to be in any given situation. It was impossible to remember what white lies or promises I told and to whom I told them.

But an even bigger problem was that there was not enough alcohol in the world to fill me up or make my feelings go away. I can't figure out where to go. My path was dark. The light was off. The bulb was there....but I didn't have a power source to turn it on. I was not aware of a Higher Power I could tap into. And I believed that if by some chance that existed....I certainly wasn't part of that exclusive, elite club. I was afraid of it. I didn't want to be in it. I wouldn't be caught dead in it.....Or more accurately....I didn't believe I fit in and certainly didn't deserve to be in it.

The Bible tells us that we no longer have to live this way. There is a way to "throw a beam on my darkened path." The Big Book also lets us know there is a choice. It sounds simple...but when you are under that black cloud...whether it is the darkness of alcoholism, depression, sexual identity, loneliness, or a number of other issues that separate us and make us feel "less than" You don't know there is another way. You can't imagine that there is hope.

Something happened to me almost 19 years ago during a drunken Labor Day weekend. A little flicker of a light started to come on for me. OK....it was actually flashing lights on top of a police car! It may sound strange to hear that I felt hope in those flashing lights on top of a police car. It may seem bizarre that I look back and saw God playing a more active role in my life when that cop pulled me over

for drunken driving. But, I know of no other way to describe it. At the time, I had no idea what was to become of me. I had no vision of getting sober or finding God or filling my life with all of you wonderful people. AA and any type of organized religion was no where in my potential plans. But, I do know that when I was in the back seat of the police car being hauled off to the Gig Harbor police station, I felt relief. I knew the charade was over and I could stop running and hiding. Yes - a DWI started to light my darkened path!

That dim light sent me on the road to 2 years of court ordered probation and among other things...the requirement to say sober and attend AA meetings. I did that...not because of some honorable reason like changing my life forever to become a respected member of society...but simply because Kathy Knauff certainly could not be known as someone who spent time in jail. I guess it was OK to be an unreliable liar, cheat on my girlfriends, break promises to my friends, show up at family events drunk, wreck my car, etc. etc.....but to spend 24 hours in jail! What would people think! So, I showed up to AA meetings and did as I was told by the judge.

One of the important things about AA is that there is a lot of talk about a Higher Power and God. But you are not forced into believing in any particular God, religion or sect. As a matter of fact, whenever the God word is used...it is typically followed by God, as we understand him. And the God as you understand him simply has to be something outside of yourself. It can be the AA group, a court slip you have to get signed, or a door knob. It doesn't matter as long as you believed you could not do it on your own.

And the opposite is true also. If you have a particular belief, it is not acceptable to force yours on someone else or demand they do it your way. I know as sure as I am standing here today that if I had to believe in a certain, specific well defined for me God and worship in only one certain specific well defined way.....I would most likely still be drinking and absolutely would not be in the pulpit today!

Sounds somewhat like the theology within the United Church of Christ. We learn from our journeys and sharing our experiences. That includes other religions and cultures. We don't label others as wrong and we are right. We don't just take someone else's interpretation of the Bible and call it a day. We share our personal experiences. We question. We listen. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, all are welcome here. Embracing the diversity doesn't threaten our experience with God...it strengthens it.

One of the traditions of the 12 step program is about attraction rather than promotion. And that is how I made it here to St. Paul's. I saw someone who had what I wanted...a calmness...a bit of serenity... that intrigued me. If she told me that I had to follow her...I would have run the other way. If she had said I had to worship just like she did...I would have done the opposite. But, she simply called me excited about some of the happenings at St. Paul's and her excitement hooked me to show up.

If you had not greeted me with smiles and made me comfortable, if you told me I had to sit in a certain pew or do my time or dress a particular way...I would not have stuck around. You took away all of my excuses. And you let me know I belonged. Both St. Paul's and AA loved me as I was ...and saw me for what I could become.

This started to turn my dimmer switch to the right....My Higher Power started having a stronger presence in my life. I can't tell you when it happened or how it happened. But it has.

Now I'm certainly not perfect and my dimmer switch turns both ways. Sometimes I short circuit. And again...both books talk about that....

Romans says "Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle, but never get around to exercising it in real life." Wow! In 12 step programs we call that talking the talk rather than walking the walk. Growing up we might have heard, "Do as I say, not as I do." Whatever you call it, I think we all have seen that kind of behavior and I certainly am guilty at times of making sure I tell you how wonderful I am rather than keeping my mouth shut and simply doing what is right. The light switch is off.

But, again ...both books get to the core issue with this problem. The Bible tells us that "focusing on self is the opposite of focusing on God." The Big Book talks about ego getting in the way...about self centeredness being the root of our problems. Bingo for me!

As long as I spend all of my time pointing fingers at you to keep the attention off of my own faults.....I can immediately return to being under that black cloud.

The answer to combat this ego thing is the same in both books. AA tells us to be of service to others. The Message says that if you are conscience of God in your life, you will be so busy doing his will that you won't have time to feed your ego. As Mary Lou read "You have things to do and places to go!"

I love this. I always envisioned that belonging to a religion or being part of AA was a serious, somber, thing that I equated with boring and tedious. Boy was I wrong! I have never laughed as hard as I have in an AA meeting. I have never experienced such great tears of joy as I have sitting in this sanctuary. Sure there are serious moments. But opening my heart to God has released the child in me and I can laugh and play more at the age of 49 than I could have in any other time of my life. I have discovered creative gifts from God that I never knew were there and I am busier with things like planning auctions than I could ever have imagined! Yes - I have things to do and places to go.

So the light on my path.....is powered by God....my Higher Power. Sometimes I disconnect the power source...but it is always there if I just reconnect the wire. And my light is connected to a dimmer switch rather than a simple off and on. Sometimes it is turned low and I get little awareness moments like that inner voice saying..."you need to get to an AA meeting"! or my kitty rubs against my leg. Sometimes it is turned a little to the right...like when I'm riding my motorcycle on a crisp morning, come around the bend in the road and see Mt. Rainier. And sometimes it is like a blaring spotlight....such as when I listen to special music that touches my heart or feel my Dad's presence even though he has passed away....or read the Bible passages and know that God's gift to me was not just one book but two books to lighten up my dark path!

It's important for me to make sure you know that I tell my story because I really do feel that my disease of alcoholism is a blessing. Knowing what it is like living under a dark cloud has helped me to appreciate living in the light. Experiencing the pain of loneliness make me value the joy of fellowship all the more. Knowing what a burden it is to keep secrets allows me to love the lighter load I carry when I am the real me. I have felt life without direction and am all the more grateful now when I can see the path to take.

I'd like to end with the story of a man, John Newton, who grew up in England in the early 1700s. John spent a lot of his life confused about God and as the story goes "displayed a lack of moral self control and discipline." After a brief time in the

Navy, John began a career as the captain of a ship that made a living off of slave trading.

A turning point in John's spiritual life was a violent storm that occurred one night while at sea. Moments after he left the deck, the crewman who had taken his place was swept overboard and lost. Although John manned the vessel for the remainder of the trip, he later commented that throughout this experience, he realized his helplessness and concluded that only the grace of God had saved him.

He continued to captain the ship that traded slaves. But he did immediately demand that they were treated with gentleness and concern. He also encouraged his shipmates to pray. Years later he did finally challenge slave trading openly.

Later in life, John Newton looked back on his spiritual experiences and put the pen to paper. He wrote a song that I can't begin to adequately describe. But, it certainly does encompass today's message in a way more powerful than anything I could say. Feel free to follow the words on page ____ in the Hymnal as Mick shares this incredibly, God inspired song that is one of those spotlight blaring moments for me. ("*Amazing Grace*")

"Amazing Grace"

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

The Lord has promis'd good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ'd!

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.

John Newton, *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779)

Psalm 119:105-112 (The Message)

The Message

105-112 By your words I can see where I'm going;
they throw a beam of light on my dark path.
I've committed myself and I'll never turn back
from living by your righteous order.
Everything's falling apart on me, GOD;
put me together again with your Word.
Festoon me with your finest sayings, GOD;
teach me your holy rules.
My life is as close as my own hands,
but I don't forget what you have revealed.
The wicked do their best to throw me off track,
but I don't swerve an inch from your course.
I inherited your book on living; it's mine forever—
what a gift! And how happy it makes me!
I concentrate on doing exactly what you say—
I always have and always will.

Romans 8:1-11 (The Message)

The Message

Romans 8

The Solution Is Life on God's Terms

1-2 With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

3-4 God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

5-8 Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored.

9-11 But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms. It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!

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