

Diocese of New York Alcohol/Addiction Awareness Day October 21, 2015

My name is Stuart, and I am a recovering alcoholic. By the Amazing Grace of God and the fellowship of a recovery program, I haven't found it necessary to take a drink of alcohol or ingest any other mood-altering substance since the 8th day of March 1987—and for this blessing in my life, I am profoundly grateful. This happens to be one of those blessings that make all other blessings a real possibility; and with Patriarch Abraham, I know the potent meaning of “blessed to be a blessing.” How appropriately we speak of the disease of alcoholism/addiction in a diocesan clergy day where the participants—you **all**—are on the front lines of pastoral ministry. And how appropriately I serve as one of the speakers for some of the real stuff of ministry, the nitty gritty, down and dirty of incarnational life; this ministry to alcoholics, drug addicts, substance abusers and their families and friends.

Thank you Diocese of New York and Bishop Dietsche, and all of you who do so much to aid and abet recovery from this horrendous disease and the havoc it wreaks in families and churches—always lying in wait under just about every rock that is overturned. And what's more, we are the church, the diocese, and the city where the greatest and most effective work of recovery had its beginning. The founding of a movement called Alcoholics Anonymous—Calvary Church, Manhattan, 1935, Sam Shoemaker, Rector; and Bill Wilson, curious and skeptical bystander. And later its sister program, the Al-Anon recovery groups for the families and friends of those who suffer.

I speak of recovery—recovery from alcoholism and addictive illness. Recovery from a disease that is cunning, baffling and powerful, not to mention chronic, progressive and—unless it is treated—always fatal. Recovery from what the World Health Organization in 2011 deemed this globe's #1 most pressing health concern. Several months ago we almost flipped out over an international scare from the disease ebola, and while a serious and death-dealing affliction, not nearly as in our face as addictive illness. Why every church in the state of New

York ought to be joining our ranks and following our lead in doing whatever we can do in order to deal with that which is none other than the plague itself.

Every congregation, every caretaker by whatever stripe, every social service agency, every hospital and every clinic ought to be heeding the clarion call, but they aren't, and they won't. When it comes to alcoholism and addictive illness, let's face it—we play blind man's bluff with a disease that tells us we don't have a disease—and that dynamic goes by the name of Denial—the first and foremost symptom of this dreadful malady. A psychological and spiritual mechanism that can keep us in hell's dark prison, and our head in the sand, until the proverbial cows come home.

Let me tell you a short story about denial. I use it as a metaphor for my own denial when I started down that slippery slope that was alcoholism. I was standing under the World Trade Center at the moment of holocaust on 9/11. That morning as I came up out of the Rector Street Subway Station right near my office at Trinity Church Wall Street, I saw the South Tower of the Trade Center ablaze, alarms sounding all around me, and an audience of shocked pedestrians gazing up into the sky. I ran the two blocks to see what was happening, and I kept hearing murmurs about a small plane that had accidentally gotten off course, everyone trying their best to reassure one another that all would be well.

When I reached the entrance of the North Tower, and watched with real horror what was happening just a 1000 feet above me, the unthinkable occurred. That second jetliner crashed into the very building under which we were standing. Jet fuel spilled and ignited the street. Debris literally began to fall on our heads. Flames engulfed the upper floors of that enormous landmark, and the noise of explosion threatened to knock us loose from our physical and emotional moorings. The woman next to me said the most incredible thing. In a very calm voice, she said, "Is this a setting for movie?" Without missing a beat, I replied with the same kind of poised conversation, "Yes, I think it is." And we just stood there like stargazers until a friend grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, shook me until my teeth rattled, and said, "Stuart, run for your life!!"

Here the sky was literally falling on our heads, and the floor beneath us was just about to give way, and in cool, discursive terms, we were discussing the movies—perhaps in hopes that Bruce Willis might come and rescue us from the Towering Inferno. Of course the dynamic here is Denial—refusing to believe

what in my heart I know to be true; unable to hear and to see and to take in what's staring me in the face; allowing reality to sink into consciousness at the pace of an elderly snail—until it was almost too late to take action. Within my own alcoholic struggle, a catastrophe was in the making, and I pretended it must be a bad movie. Oh thank heavens there are ecclesiastical tornado alarms like the Episcopal Church which is forthright at times in saying "Stuart, wake up...it's your life, it's the lives of those you love, it's the vitality of the community in which you live...Get on the stick!" Learn what you can about this disease, find out where help is available, get your head out of the sand, and—if you or yours are so afflicted—make Recovery your highest priority, or in Scriptural terms—“work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

Last weekend I was the supply priest in a small congregation in the southern part of North Carolina. We recited the Ten Commandments during the Liturgy—the first time I've heard that done in years—and it got me to thinking. The first and foremost injunction of the Decalogue is this: *Thou shalt have no other gods before me...* Idol worship. Like Israel, we are whoremongers when it comes to such, we do it all the time, and with such casual abandon we don't even notice it. While we don't have golden calves to dazzle us and wrest our attention, we do give worth, we do assign value, we do make ultimately important a whole host of people, places, things and situations that spell relief. Remember the ad that sported the phrase, “How do you spell relief?” And the answer: R-O-L-A-I-D-S. I used alcohol to get that relief, to change my reality, to soften life's blows, and it worked—no doubt ever so much better than Roloids. At one point in my life, I thought it a magic elixir that did for me what I could not do for myself. For the 15% (perhaps now 20%) of us who suffer from this pitiful and incomprehensibly demoralizing disease, alcohol became the great deceiver; it mimicked the Holy Spirit; it promised that there was an easier, softer, and quicker way to the Kingdom of Heaven than that of taking up my Cross and following Jesus.

At a critical juncture, I think I must have transferred allegiance from the Holy Spirit to the Distilled Spirit, and shortly thereafter it became a case of “katty bar the door.” I was church-ed from the word go as an Episcopalian, said the Ten Commandments once a month, had a loving family, a proper upbringing, and a solid education. And yet—for some reason or other—my genes, my inner dispositions and proclivities, my environment...a combination of the above... For some reasons or other, alcohol took off the rough edges of life; it allowed me to relax; it provided me with a dose of courage and serenity and peace; it made it

possible for me to connect; it gave me the feeling that I belonged; it relieved my fears; it anesthetized my anxieties; it stopped the squirrel caging that tossed me about with many a doubt; it absolved my guilt; and it allowed me, at least for a few moments here and there, to forgive and to forget.

Now that's magic elixir for sure, but at some point—as with all who abuse that which alters the mood—it turned on me. Idols not only growl; they bite. The very thing that I thought was solution turned out to be the agent of dissolution—and I hit a bottom that was downright thunderous. It's not just alcohol for God's sake that holds out a tempting solution for some or all that ails us. Anything that promises to take the pain of life away, to provide distraction, and to change the way we feel has the potential for attachment as the psychologists would call it; or addiction as medicine deems it; or idolatry as theologians know it.

Methodist theologian James Nelson has written what I consider a sockdollager in the theology of addictive illness. (Sockdollager—a southern term by the way. It means “lallapalooza”). Nelson has been teaching academic theology since the time of Moses, and he is a recognized scholar in the field of Christian ethics. By his own public admission, he also is a recovering alcoholic, a faithful attendee in a recovering fellowship, and living proof positive that this disease is a respecter of no man, no woman. It can sink its sharp claws into any one of us without advance warning, and without regard to shape, size, color, career, nationality, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or political persuasion. Nelson speaks eloquently of his own bout with alcoholic idolatry and his words are instructive—especially for those who wonder why we're still preaching about idols. We certainly don't have any golden calves walking our streets, or do we?

James Nelson: "As an active alcoholic I did not label my situation idolatrous, but my failure to do so did not change the reality. Here I was, an ordained minister, a seminary professor, sincere (I was convinced) in my Christian faith, but sliding slowly, imperceptibly into a powerful idolatry . . . As the slide gathered momentum, my new god insisted on more and more allegiance. . . . Always in the back of my mind, there was a certain presence. It was a presence to anticipate, around which to plan one's day, a presence that guaranteed one would truly come alive when drinking time arrived, for that was sacramental. And, let this discipleship take second place to none other, for alcohol is a jealous god

whose first commandment is exactly the same as the one in the original decalogue: *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

"I have no doubt whatever, that my time of active alcoholism involved the deepest experience of sin I have had. I am not saying that I was a moral failure or a bad person. I mean that I was immersed in spiritual bondage—*sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore*, as the gospel hymn puts it. For sin, remember, is not fundamentally an act, but a condition. It is not essentially something we do, but a state of being. It is the situation of being cut off, disconnected, in a real sense homeless. The alcohol that originally had promised a bit more of life's goodness had become life itself to me. I was learning that false gods not only disappoint; they also destroy." [*Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience*, by James B. Nelson. pp. 72-73]

One of my clergy friends recently penned a superb little article in an internet newsletter. "Please let me remind you," this priest says, "that there are many forms of addiction, including success, prestige, adulation, technology, noise..." not to mention food, power, pornography, gambling, shopping, material objects of all kind, sex, exercise, body image, even religion. Whatever promises to be an elixir to take pain away, alter mood, and adjust attitude has great potential for taking up residence within the soul. I hope you know, and can celebrate the fact that the Episcopal Church has been a leader in recovery efforts from the get-go. From Calvary Church New York City where 12-step recovery was born just 75 years ago to the parish halls of almost every single one of our congregations today where AA and Al-Anon and SA and DA and GA and OA and a host of other A's meet every single day of the week and celebrate the gift of sobriety. Unsuspecting places like undercrofts where miracles occur; addicts find relief; wretches are saved; and God is glorified.

Last year, I had our assisting Bishop—Chilton Knudsen—address students at the General Seminary. In her remarks to a class on addictive illness, she said (and I paraphrase) that we as a church are immersed in the drinking culture that has become a huge aspect of life in this country. We see it everywhere. And we are bidden to do our level best to address that culture when it infringes on our health and well-being.

Of course General Convention did precisely that with this new set of resolutions that you have sitting before you—a much more comprehensive

remodeling of the resolution that appeared in 1985, the one about alcohol that received not much more than a wink or a nod when it was enjoined on the Church. Bishop Knudsen stunned my students when she said: In all my years of ordained ministry, I cannot recall one church squabble, one church conflict, that did not have the fumes of addiction associated with it.

I'm not Carrie Nation preaching temperance. I don't go around smashing gin mills, or shaking my bony finger at a disconsolate world, but there are times when I feel like taking on at least some of her iconoclastic style. I'd love to close a few of the gin mills that bedevil the Church. This past spring, I did an alcohol awareness workshop for the elderly at a beautiful Episcopal retirement center in one of our southern states. It's a gorgeous place, and it may well be my final habitat. The workshop was housed in a new building in the middle of the acreage; a complex that sports a chapel, an assembly hall, administrative offices, and a gathering place for residents. In the very center of the gathering place—the focal point of the building—was a huge bar, gorgeous bottles of various liquors showcased in chrome and ambers; along with oh so handsome bartenders who worked the crowd. A big sign over the bar sported the name of the place. It's called PARADISE.

When I did a alcohol-awareness parish workshop for the Episcopalians in another part of the country, I spoke of that item in the General Convention resolution that dissuades us from using alcohol as a drawing card for parish events. I explained to them that we can still use alcohol in moderation at such occasions if we insure that reasonable and attractive alternatives are also served, but we don't call them "wine and cheese" functions anymore; we refer to them as fellowship gatherings, or some such. The audience began snickering. Someone said, "Stuart, turn around." Right behind me was a beautifully calligraphed banner that said *Easter Vigil, followed by Champagned Reception (Veuve Cliquot), Saturday at 5:30pm.*

In June, I received an invitation from the Diocese of New York to attend a gathering in Salt Lake City. The event was a mixer for all the New Yorkers who were going to be at General Convention. The invitation came over the internet, and I was really surprised that it was billed as a "Cocktail Party" with apparently no awareness that this kind of thing is a real infraction of polity that should no longer be tolerated. Last week I attended Safe Church training in a neighboring diocese. The program was quite excellent in its conscious-raising, along with its

novel way of illuminating boundary violation and assault. But you know in three hours of presentation, there was not one mention of alcohol usage/abusage—the very context in which safe church often devolves into scary church.

And finally, I attended a celebration of the Eucharist recently wherein a long-time employee of the Church was honored for service. Before the dismissal was ever even uttered, someone zipped down the main aisle of the Church, uncorking champagne bottles; a worshipper commented “let the party now being.” With this very short list of examples, and you and I could supply a whole bunch more, suffice it to say—we live and work in an ecclesiastical drinking culture that appears oblivious to the dangers of social lubricants run riot; a culture that has been so enormously harmful to a large percentage of our sisters and brothers; a culture that winks and nods at what has been designated the world’s #1 most pressing health issue.

So instead of the old saw that says “where 4 Episcopalians are gathered together, there is always a 5th”...let’s make sure there’s also Diet Coke on hand in addition to the fifth, an alcohol/drug policy in place, meetings going on in the undercroft, awareness of the resources in our community that provide good help, and something less expensive than Veuve Cliquot after the Easter Vigil. And furthermore, let’s drop the moniker “Whiscopalians” and instead come to be known as that church in every community that offers a safe, open, warm and hospitable pew to people like me who know that we would not make it another day without the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let me end with the collect for addiction, p 831 of the BCP. The prayer appeared in the *1976 Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer* and was authored around that time by the liturgy professor at Virginia Seminary. Strangely, it is one of the few prayers in the Prayer Book commentary that has no exegetical blurb to provide context, explication, or occasion. *O blessed Lord, you ministered to all who came to you: Look with compassion upon all who through addiction have lost their health and freedom. Restore to them the assurance of your unfailing mercy; remove from them the fears that beset them; strengthen them in the work of their recovery; and to those who care for them, give patient understanding and persevering love. Amen.*

May The Lord who has given you the will to minister to all who through alcoholism/addiction have lost their health and freedom, now give you the grace and power to bring in the sheaves.

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