IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS

Step Twelve B

*Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics [sinners], and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

So we come to the end of this very brief and cursory look at the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous – Twelve Steps that have now proliferated into a national and worldwide Spiritual Growth Program, with applications so wide and varied that the list often makes people chuckle in either derision or appreciation. The last twenty years have seen AA and its many offspring sweep into unprecedented popularity and acclaim. Those of you who are students of history know this also signals a time of peril for any movement. Great popularity frequently dilutes or even kills the very heart and purpose of a spiritual movement. Many church historians have mused that perhaps the conversion of the Emperor Constantine was the greatest tragedy ever to befall the Christian church.

Likewise, it is proving well-nigh impossible to keep the principles and traditions of AA intact under the onslaught of widespread popularity and acceptance. For illustration, the principle of “anonymity” is extremely uncomfortable under this new limelight. Again we feel the strange links with Christian heritage. Jesus said we should pray in the closet, in secret; that we should do our good deeds in secret; that we should practice our spiritual disciplines in a way that does not attract attention or acclaim. Today we live in the midst of enormous religious effrontery. Religious advertising is commonplace and often raucous. There is hardly any good deed the churches ever do without publishing it far and wide, presumably to encourage others to come help and be helped. It sounds sensible. It just isn’t how Jesus told us to live.

I am annoyed when people think our particular church doesn’t do very much for others. The urge to tell them what and who – it is sometimes nearly irresistible. Yet I constantly struggle to keep it quiet. Denominational leaders sometimes scold me for not being more willing
to write articles about what we are doing and how we are doing it. They say it would be a help and an encouragement to our sister churches.

Well, I didn’t get it from AA, but I find it in AA in the Twelfth Tradition: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.” And the Eleventh Tradition: “Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.” They didn’t mention television because they didn’t have television when that was written.

What happens if I go out and drink? What happens if people are drawn to me, instead of to the Program? What happens if people are drawn to me or to this church, instead of to Jesus and the Kingdom? You see, anonymity is not really about secretiveness or protection for the individual (though on the surface, that is sometimes helpful to an individual in the early phases). Anonymity in Christian language would be translated as “humility” – the first of the Christian virtues. And in our culture, the last thing anybody wants.

So we live in fascinating times. Will AA find a way to maintain its core principles, like anonymity, and still survive in our culture? Will some portion of the Christian church find its way back to humility, and still survive in our culture? If not, then what remains of AA or the church may be wildly successful and popular, but they will slowly lose the power that brought them to be: the power to save – the power that is not their own. Remember, “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.”

If you are a physicist, you are also fascinated by the widespread popularity of the Twelve-Step movement. “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” It is not possible for a movement based on powerlessness and humility to mushroom into such widespread acceptance, without the eventual “equal and opposite” reaction. It is predictable, then, that in the late 1990s and in the early years of the new millennium, there will be powerful leaders calling people into new movements that stress the need to claim personal power and build life on consciously chosen concepts of pride.

So the world does its thing, and we do ours. What we do here is claim the mercy and love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and that opens for us a new and different Way of Life. Jesus Christ saved and saves me first and continually, and His church has my primary loyalty.
STEP TWELVE B: IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS

in this world. But AA saved me from alcoholism, and so I have a lot of
gratitude and loyalty toward AA as well. Since I find the two so comple-
mentary and helpful to one another – as should be the case between
mother and daughter – I wanted to say something about it in case some
of you would be as charmed as I am by the interplay between the two.
So last October, on my tenth anniversary of joining AA, I decided to
preach this series of sermons. I have always been amazed that you did not
“throw me away” when I came out of the alcoholic treatment center at
Cabrini Hospital. I was perfectly willing to leave here, back then; I hope
I still am, in the Spirit’s guidance. And I appreciate your patience over
this long series, and hope it has been more of a blessing than a trial.
Just because you have heard the sermons does not mean you are working
the Twelve-Step Program. But you have heard about it, and you know
there are places to work it if and when you’re ready.

Back to the Twelfth Step. We promised to talk about the second
half of it today: to practice these principles in all our affairs. A friend of
mine says, “You know, you just can’t win. Ever since I started practicing
these principles, I haven’t had any affairs.”

The real truth is, we all have lots of affairs: bills, plans, projects,
organizations, relatives, vacations, appointments, responsibilities. Keeping
our affairs in order, or at least somehow managing to make it through
our days, is everyone’s challenge, and often it seems an impossibility.
That is the very setup for the greatest religious change/conversion/
renewal/transformation of all. We wouldn’t dare mention it anywhere
near the First Step. We hardly dare mention it at the tail end of the
Twelfth Step. We cannot keep up with all our affairs as it is. Now we are
supposed to add this incredible, impossible, complex, and confusing new
maxim to every part of our lives? We must practice these principles in
all our affairs? Barely able to shuffle and juggle and dance the whole
array as it is, now we will do them all in the presence of God? For the
sake of God? In a way we suppose will please God, or will be obedient
to God’s will for us? We couldn’t even keep up with the way WE wanted
to do it. Now we are supposed to keep up with the way God wants us to
do it?

So what happens? For most people, most of the time, it’s easy:
In one ear and out the other. Even if they go to AA or the church or both:
In one ear and out the other. They may agree with the sentiment, in a
general sort of way; it sounds like a good idea – a decent, commendable
concept. So it gets thrown into the “yes” bin along with motherhood,
patriotism, honesty, love, and all the other things we vaguely approve
of and believe in but pay no true attention to – things we have a vague and general allegiance toward and which, if we ever looked them straight in the eye, would change us forever to the very core of our beings.

*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Really? All kidding aside? All the way and no-holds-barred? How long could we look even that one phrase full in the eye and not begin to feel all our old castles crumbling? Omnipotent, omniscient, almighty God ... maker of heaven and earth ... who personally loves you, forgives you, has a plan for your life ... who sent Jesus Christ as surety on this pledge and as companion for the WAY – have we ever looked such a thing straight in the eye? Guess who would look away first?

In commenting on the Eleventh Step, I told you that AA is a religion, whether it admits it or not, because its adherents are instructed to listen for God’s personal guidance and, when they find it, to obey it. Now we have the second proof. This is to be a way of life – in all we do and everywhere we go. This is not just a Sunday-morning affair. This is not just for when you are at an AA meeting. *Practice these principles in all our affairs.* It is definitely a religion when people enter a whole new way of life, just as it is definitely *not* a religion when people do not.

What *really* happens, when we contemplate practicing new principles in all our affairs, is that we are desperate to hedge the bet. We want to try it on a little at a time – try it out in this or that area first and see how it goes, see how it works, see what happens to us. And that is our biggest mistake. That is what makes it all terribly complicated and debilitating. It is far easier to handle all our affairs in the light of new principles than to test-drive them in just one or two categories. Trying to do everything in the light of God’s guidance – in the light of trying to please God instead of ourselves – is easier than the practice of our own endlessly confusing and contradictory moods and wills. For we are not, in and of ourselves, integrated. *My name is Legion.* (Mark 5:19) I am a walking civil war. I want one thing one moment, and a different thing the next. I want to be holy one moment, and talk myself out of it the next. It is far easier to practice these principles if I turn *all* my affairs over to the new WAY, and it is much easier to live the Christian WAY than to live my own way. But it requires putting *all* the affairs into the new WAY. Otherwise we get a terrible hodge-podge. The confusing conglomerate of twisted and competing loyalties and pressures and stress does not ease until we start practicing the new WAY in all our affairs. Only then do we begin to experience the peace, coordination, wisdom, and power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.
What a terrible dilemma for us humans, who like to ease our way into things that scare us, into life-transforming changes, into the leap of faith. Are you still thinking you can ease your way into loving and serving God? As Jim Hightower says, “There are only two things you can find in the middle of the road – yellow lines and dead armadillos.”

What aspect of our lives do we least often equate with the mission of the church? All of us seem to have lapses, times when we forget to let the Holy Spirit speak and direct us. All of us seem to have certain areas or categories of life where we have not yet let our spiritual practice penetrate. These areas are invariably holding us back from our true destiny and identity. But what aspect do most people most often fail to identify as part of God’s mission? The church talks and talks about its mission, but it almost always means it as something extra – something after its people have already worked a full day and tried to take care of family and relatives and friends. Could the Holy Spirit really intend to save the world after its people are exhausted, and in the few minutes left over from already overly busy, stressful days? The power of the church is in the home and in the workplace. And the most neglected place of all is the workplace.

I am not talking about making a nuisance of yourself by trying to interject “Jesus remarks” at inappropriate times and into general conversations. But you don’t go to church, you are the church. If every Christian went to work each day with a personal inner desire to do their job in a way and manner that would please their Lord – as if (to borrow from Paul) Jesus were their true boss, behind and more important than their human boss – that would transform the world!

I don’t want to get you stuck there, but I will leave you there. Just trying to highlight a little of the meaning of this Twelfth Step: to practice these principles in all our affairs. It is not news to Christians that our Faith is a Way of Life, and a WAY we want to learn to walk at all times and in every situation. Not news, but still Good News – for otherwise we must return to old ways: living for nothing, or living for ourselves, or living for other humans we have designated as more important than ourselves. Thanks be to God, who gives us a new and living way. (Hebrews 10:20)