

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction?

Mark 2:1-12

January 14, 2018

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction? That was the question posed by one of you as a suggestion for an Epiphany season sermon: How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction?

It's a hypothetical question, right? I mean, for us, it's a hypothetical question. There are lots of people struggling with addiction, but not here, not among our church family, right? One in twelve Americans is addicted to alcohol, which means that among our four hundred members, it is likely that thirty-three are alcoholics.

But not me. I drink a glass or two of wine on occasion, and a dram of whiskey on still rarer occasions, but never to excess. I have never in my life been drunk and never used a recreational drug and never gambled and never smoked, so I am not one of the thirty-three. Not you, either?

And yet, and yet, we do have those impulses, don't we, you and I? Various kinds of compulsive behaviors intended to avoid or temporarily anesthetize our pain or emptiness, but only make it worse? There are many forms of addiction: alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, smoking, video games, phones, Facebook, television, shopping, eating, sports. It's a real question, isn't it?

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction? Let's start by looking at this question one piece at a time.

How does Jesus help? Jesus is light. Jesus helps by shining light onto our lives, bringing what is hidden in the shadows into the open, letting us see clearly, letting us see ourselves as we are. Jesus' light exposes our denial, our rationalizations, our unwitting or willful self-deception. Jesus helps by offering us a clear choice: to follow or go our own way, to trust God or ourselves, to live or to die. Sometimes the choice is that stark.

How does Jesus help families? The question is well put, because we are, all of us, members of families: immediate families and extended families and the family of those with whom we associate and among whom we live. None of us are alone. We are all members of a family, we are all members of a wider community, whether we acknowledge it or not. We are all members of this family. Jesus never helps any of us in isolation, but always in the context of our wider family and for the sake of our relationship with the wider family.

We are made for relationship. One person's disease, one person's pain, affects all of us. Your untreated wound hurts me, too, and your healing, your salvation, your sobriety is not just for you, but for me, too.

Did you see last Tuesday's episode of "This Is Us?" One of the siblings, Kevin, is being treated for an opioid addiction, begun while using vicodin to alleviate knee pain. The members of his family, his mother and sister and brother, are

brought in for a therapy session to allow him to express his apologies for how his addiction has brought hurt on each of them, but also how to tell them how broader family dynamics have enabled and complicated his addiction.

The session begins, as you might imagine, with much denial and avoidance and playing of assumed family roles, but when pushed by the therapist, Kevin opens up about how he felt like a “fifth wheel” in the family, triggering a torrent of anger and hurt and grief pouring from all of them -- a most painful time, but the beginning of healing, for Kevin and for his family.

I enjoy watching “This Is Us.” The show does wrap things up a little too neatly sometimes (it comes with the territory), but it does portray a love that is genuine, not caricatured, among genuinely flawed people. That’s the best we can hope for in our families: genuine love among flawed people.

But where does love come from? Love comes from God. How does Jesus help families? Isn’t it true that love is the help? That love is the healing? That love is the salvation? Salvation is learning to love yourself because you are loved by God, and salvation is learning to love your sister, your brother, your neighbor and to accept love from them because God made us for love.

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction? I had a conversation this week with one of you, a member of this church, in preparation for this sermon. He is an addict, an alcoholic, a recovering alcoholic who has been sober now for decades.

I asked him: “How do you stay sober?” Because it’s an ongoing process. No one is a “recovered” alcoholic, always a “recovering” alcoholic. He told me that every day he starts anew: “Yesterday, I was sober, and, with God’s help, I will remain sober today.” He begins each day with the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

It’s a process, a long process, renewed one day at a time, depending not on his own strength but on God’s, and knowing that, if he gets to a point where he craves a drink, he has someone to call. “God gives you messengers,” he said, people who support you in your recovery. His sobriety began with such a messenger, a friend, a colleague, himself a recovering alcoholic.

It began on a hot August day. He was working in the garage cutting boards on a table saw with an open blade, no blade guard, with four or five beers already in him when he suddenly stopped and asked himself: “What the hell are you doing?” He stopped cutting, sat down ... and had another beer. The next day, he attended a birthday party keeping his vow not to drink that day, and spent one of the most miserable days of his life.

The third day, he went to see his friend, hoping to learn from him what he could do to drink “normally,” how he could learn to drink but not let it get out of hand. His friend said: “I’ll pick you up at 6:45 tonight.”

“Well, let me check my schedule and talk to my wife.”

“I’ll pick you up at 6:45 tonight.”

“I really should check with my wife first”

“I’ll pick you up at 6:45 tonight.”

His friend picked him up at 6:45 that night and took him to his first AA meeting, where he met more messengers from God, more people committed not merely to their own recovery, but his, too. So began his recovery: going to meetings, reading the book, following the twelve steps, and never taking that first drink, because when you are an alcoholic, one drink is too many and a thousand is not enough.

God gives you messengers. God gave messengers to the paralyzed man whose story is told in Mark’s gospel. Four men: they are not named, they are not identified, they never speak. They may be friends or neighbors or family members, it doesn’t matter. What matters is they brought him. They brought him to Jesus.

They could not heal him, but they brought him to Jesus. They brought him to a place where healing could happen, just like my friend’s colleague brought him to a place where healing could happen.

And like that messenger, these four men would not take “No” for an answer! They were going to bring him to Jesus, whatever it takes. When they could not get through because of the crowd, they climbed onto the roof, cut a hole in the roof, and let the paralyzed man down on his mat right to the place where Jesus was. And Jesus saw their faith. Their faith: not anything they said, but what they did, that they were determined to bring this paralyzed man to Jesus because they knew Jesus could help, because they knew Jesus would help.

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction? The addict cannot heal herself, and you cannot heal her, but you can bring her to Jesus. You can bring her, we can bring him, to a place where healing can happen.

Jesus saw their faith and said to the paralyzed man: “My son, your sins are forgiven.” Whoa! Where did that come from? “Your sins are forgiven?” Jesus can see that this man is sick, paralyzed. Was Jesus suggesting that sin was the cause of his paralysis? Not at all. Jesus made no connection between his ailment and any particular sin and elsewhere corrected his disciples for making such a connection. His paralysis is a malady, a disease, just as addiction is a disease.

But look at this man again. What does he need most? To be made able to walk and go on his way? What does an addict need most? To stop drinking and go on his way? Have you heard the expression “dry drunk?” A person who may be sober, not drinking, but be just as broken as ever?

Recovery is about more than “drying out.” It’s about treating the soul. It’s about healing the whole person. It’s about restoring a person to life, about giving him his own life back again, about giving her back to the people she loves and to the God who loves her.

When Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven,” he is treating the more serious illness. It comes from his heart, from the heart of his message: “Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!” This is the Good News, that God loves us, each of us and all of us together, that God forgives us, not to minimize or excuse our sins, but to enable us to turn around and follow instead the path that leads to life.

If Jesus has not said: “Get up, pick up your mat and go home!” would the paralyzed man have been any less well? If you are not healed of your cancer, your dementia, your arthritis, your addiction, are you any less well? If you have four friends who love you enough to put themselves out to help you? If Jesus looks at you and says, “My son?” If Jesus looks at you and says, “My daughter?”

How does Jesus help families facing problems with addiction? We can’t generalize, can we? Because Jesus’ encounter with you will not be the same as his encounter with anyone else, because you are not anyone else.

What do you need? What do you need to live? Come to Jesus, and if you cannot or will not, pray that someone else will bring you. Come and ask! Ask for what you want ... and Jesus will give you what you need.

And I am thinking what you need most is to be forgiven. I am thinking what you need most is to be loved. I am thinking what you need most is not to be taken care of, not to have someone else make it easy for you, but to be empowered to live your life as it is, to live your life gladly as it is, with hope and with courage, with faith and with joy.