

Sunday March 13, 2011

Jim O'Brien

But for the Grace of God

One of my earliest memories, still clear as a bell. I was walking to school on Franklin Avenue in Brooklyn. I was about 11 years old and in front of me were the two local "bums". One handed the other a fistful of coins and that one then went in to the liquor store. "Wow", I thought, these guys share their money and share their drinks and don't have to go to work. That's pretty cool.

A couple of years later I had my first real drink with my friends at Grand Army Plaza. It was a cold beer on a cold night. It was a moment of sublime pleasure. I fit in and all the world was a welcoming place and I had a wonderful time. I drank one quart of Schaeffer beer. (A real drunk always remember his first drink. A couple of days later I had two quarts of Schaeffer beer and got drunk. Being 16 I recovered quickly. Then, a few months later I visited my cousins in Queens and drank a fifth of Seagram's 7 in about a half hour and was deathly sick. I did not recover so quickly that time and learned later that is the kind of drinking that kills. But the lesson I learned was to never drink Seagram's again - and I never did.

I drank hard and heavy for 16 years. Now you may think that alcoholics are like the 2 bums I mentioned earlier. That is, after all, the stereotype that persists to this day. But I never lost a job, was never homeless, was never taken to the ER for a stomach pump, was never arrested. I was very lucky. I drank in bars when I was 16 with a fake draft card. The saloons I drank in were neighborhood joints where if you had a dollar and any i-d at all, you could get a drink. My gang graduated from Herman's ice cream parlor on Underhill Avenue to the Windy Gap or Millie's on Flatbush Avenue. Beer was \$0.15 a glass. And while I was having the best times I can't remember, I didn't know that eventually the time would come when I would not want to drink anymore but would not be able to stop.

I'll not tell all the gory details of those 16 years. Too many war stories becomes what's called a drunk-a-logue. Suffice to say that almost every time I drank I got drunk. I celebrated my 23rd birthday aboard my submarine in the middle of the Pacific and thought I would have "just one". Most times it was always I'll have "just one". I drank almost a fifth of Jack and was thankfully rescued by the Chief of the Boat before I sang and danced my way through the wardroom and probably into a court-martial. After the Navy I would sometimes go missing for days at a time on a bender that ended with me waking who knows where. And upon waking I had no idea what I had done or said. Fear was a constant companion for those first hours after coming to, for I was sure nothing good happened during this binge. Many times I was so ashamed and embarrassed I swore off drinking for good. "I swear to God, never again" I would

declare. But as soon as I started to feel a bit better I would forget the morning's promise and find myself once more sitting in the gin mill ordering a shot and a beer. When I disappeared my mother would say "Jimmy's got the taste" and I believe she hoped and prayed for my safe return. (By this time my first wife had taken to calling me Hitler so I'm not sure what her prayers were.) Little did my mother know how right her description of the "taste" was. In people with alcoholism the first "taste" is the one that sets them off, because once an alcoholic starts to drink, takes that first taste, there is frequently no defense against the second and the third, and so on into oblivion. It was that way with me.

One night I had my first car wreck. That week I went to my first AA Meeting. I was 25. My thought was that going to AA would provide me some "cover" if I ever had to go to court. The folks in the Elizabeth AA group were very welcoming and gave me a Big Book, and told me to keep coming back. I still have that Big Book, the worse for wear. I went to that meeting once a week for a month. When I realized nothing would come of the car accident I stopped going. It was another 6 years before I went to AA again.

My friend Mike W and I were drinking buddies. One day I noticed Mike wasn't around so much. We lived down the road from each other but I hadn't seen him in about 6 months. One day he showed up at my house and he told me he quit drinking and was going to AA. I told him "good for you, you need it". For the next couple of weeks Mike stopped by pretty regularly and kept inviting me to go with him.

After a series of very awful drunks, celebrating Christmas no less, I woke on a Sunday afternoon, lying on my living room floor. My Christmas gift was the clear realization, that this is not what I had envisioned for my life. The horrors of drunk driving, the car wrecks, the awful excruciating hangovers, the blackouts, the infidelities, the lying and sneaking about, the dishonesty to myself and others, suddenly became intolerable to bear. Given my history I didn't think I could stop drinking on my own.

The next night Mike took me back to AA. In hearing the story that night from Bill S., and mixing with the group, I recognized that I had a lot in common with these folks, and it was sure better than tying one on. So I kept going and I went to as many meetings as I could, because it fed something in me that was sorely missing. I got my 90 day pin the day my son Rory was born. None of my children have ever seen me take a drink.

I studied the teachings of AA as best I could. I knew I was beat that Sunday afternoon, that I was powerless over alcohol and that my life was unmanageable. So Step 1 came

easy at that time. Step 2, Came to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity – of that I was not so sure. I was angry with, and frightened of, God, and very much doubted there was such a thing.. But I did what my sponsors said. I prayed as if I believed. I faked it. I read the Gospels for the first time and, as there are no coincidences, today's reading is most significant. There were two occurrences that are critical to my lasting recovery. The first was a dream.

It's dark, in the lower level of a cathedral. A low ceiling supported by numerous columns. I am standing looking forward when I hear someone calling my name: "Jimmy, come with me". I look around and lurking over my left shoulder is the devil, half hidden behind a column. "Jimmy come back". I froze, as frightened as I've ever been. The hairs on my neck were straight out. Having been sober about 9 months I was still in a danger area. I didn't know what to do, then the words came to me, the same words we heard in today's Gospel: I said what Jesus said to his devil. "Get thee behind me Satan, Go away. I am not yours." And then I was alone and a feeling of enormous relief came over me - a real sense of Victory, a decision made. I woke, and knew then that the desire to drink was lifted.

A couple of years later, having taken up the practice of daily meditation, I stopped at Gilgal Chapel in West Milford for a meditation break. It is a chapel in the round and open during the day to any and all. After about 20 minutes I was surprised and overwhelmed by an enormous sense of peace. It was bliss, and I believe I was in the presence of the Almighty. I came away changed from the arrogant and obnoxious person I could be to someone with more understanding and compassion. Resentments toward others melted away and I forgave myself for all the wrongs I had done and thought, and set about to make real amends. Life became different, settling on a new foundation. No more embarrassing moments, no more need to make excuses. No more lies.

The 12 Steps of AA, which is a program of recovery from many things over which people are powerless were summed up in a prescription from Dr. Bob, the co-founder of AA: Quite simply, the prescription reads

- Trust God
- Clean House
- Help Others

Pretty good prescription for anyone, alcoholic or not. The 12 steps just fills in the details for Dr. Bob's prescription.

I had two AA sponsors early on: Harry C. and Walt T. Walt had about 40 years of recovery then, 30 years ago, so he was an early timer in AA. He always ended his talk in a particular way that expresses his gratitude and humility for his recovery, They both taught me many things about how to live. “But for the Grace of God,” “Your secrets will kill you”, “Resentment is our number one enemy”, “One Day at a time”, “Don’t pick up that first drink”. And one of my favorites: for when egos get out of control “God loves you, sonny, but you’re not that special”.

In my opinion, the genius of AA is the 24 hour plan. Anyone can do almost anything one day at a time. It is a prescription for sober, sane and serene living. Jesus tells us the same thing in his prayer: Do not worry about tomorrow, and Give us this day our daily bread. The message of course is to put our faith in God’s will for us, that God will provide.

So since I’ve recovered from my alcoholism, I have become a new person. The Grace of God is what got me sober, nothing else. I was hopeless before that, living in hell. A willingness to believe in a power greater than myself opened the door to salvation, and a new life, and so long as I am willing to be rigorously honest with myself, and have faith in God, I will be ok, no matter what else comes along. Trust God, Clean House, Help Others.

When I am frightened or worrying about things I can’t control I think about two sayings that have been very helpful to me. Jesus on the turbulent sea to his disciples, in Mark: Why are you afraid? Have you no faith? (Mark 4:40) The other from the Bhagavad-Gita: “Faith, yea a little faith, shall save thee from the anguish of thy dread.” (The Song Celestial –Edwin Arnold Trans. Page 18) So just a little Faith, and an awareness of God’s daily Grace together, are keys to long lasting recovery, and a pretty good prescription for life.

So why am I confessing my life to you? First, to show that real recovery, long lasting recovery, is not only possible but common. I’m not the only one in this church who has been so graced with full recovery. Second, and part of my ministry, is to talk about the temptations to drink and drug, which are all around us. The use of alcohol and drugs are at epidemic proportions. Folks and families are heartbroken because of the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Like Satan tempting Jesus with the pleasures of the world, alcohol tempts us too, with its allure of the better life. Look at any advertising for it. Camaraderie, fun, sex, always in beautiful settings – what could be better? But those messages are false, incomplete, staged. The truth is closer to what I see everyday – broken relationships, anger and resentment, violence, infidelities neglected children,

incarceration, overdose deaths, two bums using their last coins to buy a bottle of cheap wine, because they have to.

The vast majority of people who drink are certainly not alcoholic (about 1 in 10 are). The questions we need to ask ourselves are these: Is my drinking or drug use responsible? Am I hurting myself or others by my drinking? Is it time to examine my drinking or drug use behaviors? And what about my use of prescription drugs, the fastest growing area of drug abuse. Have people commented about my drinking or drug use? Can I stop or cut back? Unsure? If these questions peak your interest or raise concern, let me offer this suggestion from an early AA, Marty Mann; She gave this test to someone who was uncertain. Promise yourself to take one drink and no more. If you can't, you might have a problem with alcohol. Of course today there is plenty of help available and it is all confidential. And it being Lent, what better time to try that suggestion. In the old Irish Catholic communities of Brooklyn, putting the bottle down was the Lenten sacrifice. It worked better for some than others.

I have been through a lot in my recovery but the desire to drink has never come back, not since I kicked my devil out of my cathedral. Trust God, Clean House, Help Others. So let me end this way, in the manner of and to the memory of my old sponsor Walt T. My name is Jim and I'm an alcoholic and by the grace of God, the help of my friends and a little effort on my own part, I've been blessed with sobriety since December 30, 1979, one day at a time. God Bless us all.
Amen.