

# STEPS

A MAGAZINE OF HOPE AND HEALING  
FOR CHRISTIANS IN RECOVERY



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Jesus apparently did not go about from village to village preaching “Choose me” or “Get your statement of faith to match mine.” His typical sermon was “Follow me.” Jesus was not a Twenty-first-century individualist, so he almost certainly meant, “Become a part of the community of people who are following me.” And that is still the heart of things. We all have been a part of many communities in our lives: communities of users and abusers, communities of pretense and denial, communities of shame. But now we seek to be part of communities that follow Jesus. That means unlearning a lot of dysfunctional ways of relating. And it means learning many new skills: how to be conscious in relationships rather than mood-altered, how to tell the truth even when it is difficult, and how to grow in our capacity to give and receive grace. May God grant us the serenity, courage and wisdom we need to take the next step in following Jesus today.

# BEYOND ANONYMOUS



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## GOD STUFF

BY JAMES RYAN

The Twelve Steps make it clear that real recovery is grounded in our relationship to something more powerful (and more benevolent) than us. For many who are new to recovery, especially those who are atheists or agnostics, this insistence on a Higher Power isn't easy to accept. "Coming to believe" is, for them, a major undertaking: lifelong ideas and prejudices have to be discarded and replaced with a whole new understanding of themselves and their place in the universe.

For those of us who enter recovery with an intact Christian faith, "coming to believe" poses a different set of challenges. For one thing, many Christians confuse the Twelve Steps with something we already know. Because the Steps say so much about God, and because we think we already know so much about God, we come to recovery with the mistaken belief that we have already worked the Steps. We may even go so far as to presume that we know more about God than those lousy drunks in meetings do. After all, we are real Christians, and they are just talking in abstractions about an unnamed power. By presuming that we are already familiar with God as he makes himself known the Twelve Steps, we—just like the atheist and the agnostic—run the risk of placing our lifelong prejudices between us and the Source of recovery.

It is a further complication if the God we think we recognize in the Twelve Steps is one that is not likely to help us. For some of us, the intact "Christian" faith we bring to the Steps is a faith characterized by our deep-seated fear of a stern, judgmental, or even outright abusive power-figure. This fear-based faith makes "coming to believe" a difficult process: we have to struggle to believe that

# THE GIFT OF NOTICING

BY BARBARA MILLIGAN

A woman I had just met looked at me with sad eyes. She hadn't felt God's love for her since about a year after she became a Christian, over twenty years ago. "God and I were so close at first. I felt loved; I *knew* I was loved. But the weird thing was, as I got involved in my church, and as I learned how to pray and memorize Scripture, I lost that sense of being loved by God. And I want it back."

This woman is not alone. I've heard similar stories many times before, and I have my own version. But how does that experience happen? How is it that some of us are drawn by the loving embrace of Jesus into his kingdom, only to feel later like poor, homeless orphans?

Sometimes we receive unhelpful advice from Christians we look up to, perhaps including close friends. "Act as though you believe it, and the feelings will follow," we're told. So we do, but the feelings don't follow. Sometimes we try really hard to please God—maybe for years—and we become tired and discouraged. God seemed to be leading us at first, but now we wonder where God is. Or we wonder why God is

withholding love from us when we've worked so hard for God's kingdom. Sometimes we become aware of deep wounds that make it difficult for us to receive God's love. Or, in spite of what our minds tell us, we may see God standing over our shoulder with a clipboard, shaking his head as he checkmarks a box that says "Needs improvement."

No matter what may be the reason for losing a sense of God's love (or never "getting" it in the first place), no matter how sound our theology and how obedient our walk with God, no matter how many scripture verses we've memorized that assure us of God's love, and no matter how much we might believe with our minds that God loves us, the result may be the same: Our feelings aren't changing. We begin to think there's something wrong with us. We just don't feel that God loves us.

We might experience this loss periodically or throughout a lifetime. And as with all deep losses, there are no easy fixes. Thankfully, however, there are some things we can do that might, over a stretch of time, help us become aware of God's love for us—or help us become

more aware of God's love, if that's our goal.

I'd like to share one of those things with you in this article: the gift of noticing. It's a gift that can help any God-seeking person draw closer to God, and especially those of us who want to regain the sense of being loved by God. First, however, we need to ask for help.

### GETTING HELP

**A**n old story tells of the little fish who tugs at his mother's fin and says, "Mom! We've got to find the ocean!" "My dear son," replies the mother fish, "the ocean is all around you."

The ocean of God's love is all around us. But often we need help to become aware of it, just as the little fish probably needed his mother to point out the sea anemones, hermit crabs, and jellyfish, teach him how to navigate the currents, and encourage him to taste the salt water, as evidence that he was already in the ocean. Asking for help is basic to experiencing any major improvement in our lives, so we start by asking God to help us become aware of his love. Help us see it and touch it and taste it. That may sound obvious, but it's an easy step to forget. And it's helpful to do it regularly—not because we need to badger God so he doesn't forget to get back to us, but because we might forget that we asked, and then miss God's responses

when they come.

In addition to asking God for help, we need help also from someone who would be willing to serve as a spiritual companion for us. A spiritual companion can help us notice what we might not notice on our own, including ways that God's love is evident in our lives. The spiritual companion can be a spouse, a close friend, a spiritual director, a therapist, a pastor, a mentor, or other person we trust. Someone who respects us, listens carefully to the feelings we express, affirms us, prays for us, and is available to us for a conversation at least once a month. Definitely not someone who tries to convince us that God loves us or who has their own agenda about how we need to change and how soon. If the person is a family member or close friend, the spiritual companionship can be mutual, with each person taking a turn at silently and prayerfully listening as the other person talks about their relationship with God. The listener can then respond with questions, affirmations, or positive observations that might help the other person notice more ways that God is present in their life.

Having a mutual spiritual companionship is a wonderful way to deepen a relationship, but having a spiritual companion who serves in a professional role—for example, as a spiritual director, a therapist, or a pas-

tor—is also worth considering. This kind of spiritual companion has been specially trained in listening skills, spiritual discernment, and the art of noticing. Of equal importance is that when we meet with them, it's all about us. That means we can be free from concerns about allowing enough time for the other person to share, or about how each other's stories might affect our relationship.

One of the benefits of having a spiritual companion is that it reminds us that we are not alone. This can be enormously helpful when we don't feel loved by God. Feeling unloved is a feeling of isolation, a feeling that if we tried to explain it, no one would understand. But sharing our feelings with someone we trust can help us feel less alone, and can help us feel valued and loved.

Asking for help reminds us also of the need to be honest—honest with ourselves, honest with God, and honest with others. If we're feeling unloved by God, this is no surprise to God. But we tend to hide such negative feelings, so that we don't have to face possible disapproval by others and we don't have to keep experiencing the depth of the pain. Being honest, though, by acknowledging our feelings to God and to someone we trust brings us out of our denial, out of our isolation, and into a place of openness. And that openness can enable us, eventually, to be-

gin noticing God's love for us.

### A HELPFUL TOOL

So once we ask for help from God and from a spiritual companion, and we acknowledge our feeling of not being loved by God, then what? A tool I've found helpful is a ten-minute examen (pronounced like "examine"), much like a personal inventory, that we can do at the end of each day. Also called an examination of conscience and the examen prayer, it was popularized by the sixteenth-century monk Ignatius of Loyola, although it's been practiced by believers since before Jesus was born. When King David prayed, "Lord, search me and know my heart; / try me and know my anxious thoughts" (Psalm 139:23), he was doing an examen.

Before beginning the examen, it's important to find a quiet place where we can sit comfortably and be as free as possible from external distractions. We can't help but have some distracting thoughts or concerns during the examen, but we can respond to each one as it occurs by putting it in God's hands and then returning to the examen prayer. Sometimes when I'm alone I find it helpful to cup my hands together and lift them to God as a physical way of dealing with the distraction or concern.

There are many versions of the daily examen, and I will describe two of them: first, a sim-

ple version, and then a complete version that's my adaptation of Ignatius' five-step examen in his *Spiritual Exercises*. You may want to start with the simple one, and then move on to the complete version when you feel ready. Or you can do the simple one with another person and the complete one when you're alone with God.

### DOING A SIMPLE EXAMEN

In a simple version of the examen we ask ourselves two questions: When today did I feel most drawn toward God? and, When today did I feel most drawn away from God? With these questions in mind, we review the moments of our day and we pay attention to what was stirring inside us—hope, regret, reluctance, enthusiasm, disappointment, or anything else that might have caused us to feel drawn toward God or drawn away from God at a given moment. Then we let our responses to the two questions lead us into a conversation with Jesus, right then or at a more appropriate time.

Now, even this simple version of the examen may not seem so simple if we've been feeling far away from God. So we can ask these two questions instead: What am I most grateful for today? And, What am I least grateful for today? Although these questions were intended

for us to ask at the end of the day, we can ask them anytime we want to review how our day is going so far. The questions can help us notice what has been stirring inside us, so that we can become aware of how God may be inviting us, leading us, and ultimately, loving us.

The psalmists in the Bible were adept at doing a simple examen, although they probably did it without thinking about it or giving it a name. The writer of Psalm 77 cries out, "Has God forgotten to be merciful? / Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" (v. 9). This is what Ignatius called desolation, or the sense of being far away from God; it is what the psalmist is not grateful for. But in the next verses the psalmist says, "Then I thought, 'To this I will appeal: / the years of the right hand of the Most High.' / I will remember the deeds of the LORD; / yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. / I will meditate on all your works / and consider all your mighty deeds" (vss. 10–12). The psalmist then describes some of the miracles he's seen God do. Ignatius called this consolation, or the sense of being drawn toward God; it is what the psalmist is grateful for. The consolation doesn't make the desolation go away, but recognizing both a consolation and a desolation gives us a clearer picture of what is happening inside us.

My husband and I sometimes do the simple examen together

over dinner. It helps keep us honest when we ask each other, “How was your day?” I might say to him, “My main consolation today is that I met my deadline for a rush project. My main desolation is that I’m so tired I can hardly speak.” He responds with understanding and compassion, and when we’re ready to move on, he shares his own consolation and desolation. “I’m grateful that I had time to take a walk today. I’m not grateful that a client keeps making last-minute changes to the project I’m working on.” We’ve found that sharing our consolations helps us to celebrate with each other and to thank God together, and that sharing our desolations helps us to pray for each other and to invite God into each desolation, so that even if the circumstances don’t improve, we sometimes find peace and hope.

Doing a simple examen together has drawn my husband and me closer together, and it can do the same for just about any significant relationship. One evening when we had two friends in our home for dinner, the four of us did the simple examen together. I set four candles of various sizes, shapes and colors on a small table in the middle of the living room, and dimmed the electric lights to create a prayerful atmosphere. We each, in turn, lit a candle, held it while sharing with the others what we were most grateful for and least grateful for about

our day, and then returned the lighted candle to its place on the table. Whenever someone was sharing, the rest of us kept a respectful silence, and we continued the silence between turns by taking a minute or so to privately process what we had just heard. After the last person shared and we observed the final one minute of silence, the four lighted candles reflected our joy as we all exclaimed about how wonderful it was to listen to each other and share with each other. The experience had deepened our friendship.

The idea of lighting a candle as we shared our consolations and desolations came from the beautiful picture book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Paulist Press), by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn; it’s full of creative ideas for doing a simple examen. I like lighting a candle for several reasons: it’s a quick way to add beauty to the environment, it helps me focus on what I’m doing, and the flickering flame reminds me of the presence and movement, or “breath,” of the Holy Spirit, who is there with me and within me. It reminds me also that Jesus is the light that shines in all the dark, scary places of my life. And that even when I feel no bolder or brighter than a smoldering wick, with wax dripping onto the furniture and carbon forming a dark cloud near the ceiling, Jesus promises never to



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pick up his golden candlesnuffer and finish the job.

If we're doing an examen every day, we're usually doing it alone. This is good, because solitude can help us to be honest before God, without being distracted by another person. Solitude can also help us to receive insights, affirmation, encouragement, faith, joy, and other gifts directly from God. It's also important, though, to share some of these gifts with our spiritual companion. When we speak the truth out loud to someone we trust, we notice more of what God is doing in us. Whether our spiritual companion is our spouse, a friend, or someone in a professional role, it's important to schedule time with that person at least once a month, so that we can share some consolations and desolations, notice what God is doing in us, and become more open to receiving God's love.

DOING A COMPLETE  
EXAMEN

If we can set aside time to do the complete version of the examen, as developed by Ignatius, we open ourselves up to even more opportunities to receive God's love. Although it's more complex, some people say they can do even this version of the examen in ten or fifteen minutes. Again, sit comfortably in a quiet place and begin to focus your attention on God. Then follow these steps:

1. Give thanks to God for gifts you have received today. Be specific—a conversation with a friend, the aroma of a hot breakfast, a helpful realization. Give thanks also for a way that God used your talents, skills, or other gifts to benefit someone else today. Giving God thanks benefits us as well as God. "You who sacrifice thank offerings honor me / and you prepare the way / so that I may show you the salvation of God" (Psalm 50:23, my change of pronouns). What is the salvation of God? It's Jesus. So when we thank God, we make it possible to see Jesus more clearly. And Jesus is the love of God in human form.

2. Ask for the light of the Holy Spirit to guide you as you prepare to look inside yourself. God promises to bring into the light the things that are hidden in the dark places of our hearts—even the things we've unconsciously hidden from ourselves (1 Corinthians 4:5). Fears, buried traumas, anxieties, mistaken beliefs about ourselves, and other things that we may have avoided before might surface during the examen. The light of the Holy Spirit reveals truth, including the truth about who we really are (Psalm 139:14) and how God delights in us (Zephaniah 3:17).

3. Examine your inner and outer responses to the events and tasks of the day. Review the feelings you experienced—your hopes, fears, disappointments,

anger, comforts, discomforts, conflicts, sense of freedom, sense of unfreedom, or anything else, as revealed in your heart, your words, or your actions. In what ways do you notice God being revealed in your day? In what ways was God helping you? Where could you have asked God for help? Notice also how God may be calling you or inviting you today. This review is not for you to receive judgment, but rather to help you to grow closer to God. The writer of Hebrews urges us to “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

4. Express your sorrow for wherever you notice that you “missed the mark” (the literal definition of *sin*) today. This could include times when you neglected to turn to God for help. Remember that it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Receive God’s forgiveness, perhaps picturing it as light that fills you and makes you whole.

5. Talk with Jesus, as honestly as you can, about other concerns that arise, any discoveries you’ve made during the examen, and what you would like his help with tomorrow. Try to picture Jesus looking at you and listening to you with compassion. Imagine what he might say to you in response. If you keep a prayer journal, write down what you notice about

this conversation with Jesus.

## LEARNING TO NOTICE

Noticing what God is doing is not something we do just by deciding to do it, any more than we can become sober or overcome depression or be healed from a trauma just by deciding to do it. Noticing is a gift, a daily gift from God, and part of the gift package is supportive friends such as our spiritual companions, and useful tools such as the examen. It is God who gives us the desire for good gifts such as noticing, and God is eager to answer “Yes!” when we ask for that gift. Also, God sticks around so that when we read on the outside of the package the fine print that says “Some assembly required,” we don’t have to figure out the instructions on our own. Just as God gives us the gift, God also helps us learn to use the gift.

I’ve been trying for most of my life to notice what God is doing in me, and in recent years the examen has been a huge help. Sometimes I’m encouraged and grateful for progress that God is making in me, and that draws me closer to God. At other times, I become discouraged by my limitations and shortcomings—although that, too, draws me closer to God when I remember to turn to God with those feelings rather than deny them or avoid them. But as I’ve continued to seek the

gift of noticing, I’ve noticed one thing more than anything else: that God’s love is all around me. The more I can see and touch and taste the evidence of God’s love, the more I can receive it as a gift from God to me. And through me, to others.

Acknowledging our consolations and our desolations at any given moment helps us notice what God may be doing in us. And the more we notice what God is doing in us, the more we know God’s love in us and around us. The apostle Paul prayed “that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:17-19). The love of Christ is far greater than what our minds can understand or our hearts can hold. But when we’re willing to be open to this love, God helps us notice it, receive it, and become rooted in it.

May you be blessed with the gift of noticing what God is doing in you today, at this moment. And may you soon find yourself swimming in the ocean of God’s love.

*Barbara Milligan is the associate editor of STEPS magazine. She is also a spiritual director in the San Francisco Bay Area.*

# HOW A JEWISH DRUNK CHALLENGED MY IDEA OF THE CHURCH: TOWARD AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF RECOVERY

BY MATT RUSSELL

Jerry first came to Mercy Street, our church in Houston, Texas, with his AA home group. Like most regulars, he settled into his weekly spot in the fellowship hall (back-left). He listened intently, didn't sing many of the worship songs, but participated in the "Recovery and Spirituality" group that followed worship. Jerry was on the van ministry that picked up folks from various halfway houses in the city. He was a congregate that any pastor would love to have—consistent, eager to serve, and generous. He brought a slew of friends with him each week.

Jerry was also Jewish. He was a member of a local temple and embraced his religion and heritage with affection.

Over the years this type of ecclesial fusion has become quite common at Mercy Street. There are Catholics who still go to mass on Sunday but never miss a Saturday night. We also have folks who were raised Southern Baptist, Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian and Pentecostal (and a host of other denominations) who quit going to church when they got hurt or when their using got too bad. There are Buddhists, agnostics, and folks who will tell you

that they are "spiritual, not religious." They all come together Saturday night to work out their faith and recovery in the context of our community.

I'm not exactly sure how this happened, but early in our formation Mercy Street became known as a safe place for the countless "spiritual refugees" in Houston's recovery community. What most of these people needed was a church that would fully embrace their past and would support them in their spiritual journey. They needed a community that would ask as many questions as it was prepared to answer. They longed for a place of worship that had room for doubt, not as contrary to faith, but as the very pathway of faith.

I found the candor and authenticity of those showing up to be as refreshing as it was startling. These folks were not liturgically housebroken or religiously savvy. On the contrary, many were messy, loud and opinionated. But they came with spiritual hunger and were prepared to wrestle with the "Jesus question" and the claims of the gospel in profound ways. I rapidly began to see that we (the church) needed them—their honesty, recovery, service and

dysfunction—as much as they needed the church.

#### BUT JERRY, YOU'RE A JEW

One night after the service Jerry approached me with a broad smile and said, “Matt, I’d like to join Mercy Street.” With deep pastoral insight that can only come from a freshly minted United Methodist ordination, I responded, “But Jerry, you’re a Jew!” Jerry’s smile turned into a belly laugh, and he said, “Nice observation, preacher-boy” (which he has called me ever since this exchange), “but I want to join this place. I’ve been in temple all my life but have never been a part of a community that brings my spirit alive like this one, and I want to join.”

In the minutes that followed, I explained to him the best I could the theology of the church—that the church was an extension of Jesus’ ongoing ministry of reconciliation to the world; that those who joined the church were joining themselves to this person who was God and who proclaimed to be the messiah and savior not only of the Jews but of the entire world; that membership in the church was a move toward solidarity with Jesus in the world.

Jerry tilted his head slightly and said, “Matt, I’ve got a lot of questions about Jesus, but I’m open and committed to work those out at Mercy Street. All I know is that since I’ve been coming, there are pieces of my recovery and spirit that are fitting together in ways that I can’t

yet explain.”

“Plus,” he went on to say, “when people join this community, you ask them to commit to the church with their prayers, presence, gifts and service. I do all of these already; I just want to make it official.”

Each month people would come forward during the greeting time in the church service and would partner with us on their spiritual journey through the vows of our United Methodist tradition. The vows in our tradition presume that people have made an affirmation of faith. Although Jerry had not yet done this, he was a living example of the vows of membership both in his recovery and in the life of our community.

When I met Jerry, his outgoing and gregarious personality made it easy for us to become friends. He was warm, inviting and full of faith questions. Early on he told me the story of how alcohol had ruined two marriages, a few jobs, countless friendships and had left him with a lifetime of bad memories. And then he told me how, through the program

of Alcoholics Anonymous, he had been able to reclaim much of what had been lost. He told me that AA had given him not only recovery but also restoration. What I would understand only later was that the person of Jesus was incognito within the process of Jerry’s recovery. The Spirit of the risen Christ, who is the basis by which all humanity is transformed, stood silently connected to Jerry as he made his way up from the bottom of his addiction. Alcoholics Anonymous had provided a safe place for him to confess things that were long hidden in the shadows of his life. The fellowship had given him courage to face his character defects, to speak honestly about his life, to take responsibility for his actions, and to begin the process of making amends. All the while, the person of Jesus was present to Jerry in the different aspects of the program—in the forgiveness, in the honesty, in the amends.

What Jerry needed now was a place to ask his questions about the nature and character of Jesus, not as an outsider but as a



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participant, not as an undocumented seeker but as one who was willing to uphold the commitments of the church while he asked his questions and worked out his faith and recovery. His desire for membership in our community was a desire to take hold of what had already taken hold of him.

It was the distance that bothered Jerry—the requirement of mental assent to a doctrinal statement before he could intimately and intentionally experience the risen Jesus in the life of the community. Jerry was bucking against the fact that his faithful and faith-filled process of questioning and contending with Jesus had to take place at an institutional distance, one that his heart and experience had defied. What bothered him was the church's need for him to logically assert what his spirit was still attempting to integrate. For Jerry, the process of integrating his recovery and his discovery of Jesus needed to take place within the very relationships that constituted the visible presence of Jesus—the body of Christ.

At the bottom of Jerry's struggle was the issue of belonging. Could he belong to the community of Jesus, working out his faith and recovery inside the church? Toward the end of our conversation he said, "Matt, I need to get my hands dirty with this, and I can't do it at a distance or on the sidelines."

Although my mouth did not say it again, all I could think over and over again was, *But*

*Jerry, you're a Jew...*

Jerry and I parted that night with the agreement that I would think about his proposition and that we would pick up the conversation in the following weeks. I walked away with an image of Jerry's sleeves rolled up—and saw in that image the person of Jesus, his sleeves rolled up too, hands dirty, side-by-side with Jerry.

ROOM FOR REAL PEOPLE?

Jerry's questioning, his relentless pursuit of God, his commitment to contending with Jesus the Messiah, and his utter audacity to think he could do this at such a proximal space to Jesus within the life of our community—well, it confused me. I was raised in the shadow of the Four Spiritual Laws. I knew the graduated phases that allowed a person to gain intimate access to Jesus. Jerry and the other addicts that were showing up were getting these out of order! As a young pastor wrestling with all of these questions, I knew I was not interested in "dumbing down" the gospel message at Mercy Street. I was committed to orthodoxy, to the historical claims of our faith. But Jerry's request left my spirit hungry to offer more than a merely historical faith. I grew up in an evangelical church and learned early on that while agreement with doctrinal statements could produce conformity, it could not produce transformation.

I knew this because it was my story. I had believed in Jesus for years. Heck, I gave my

life to him during at least two summer camps and a few of the August revivals in our church! I could recite the Apostles' Creed in my sleep. I had memorized the book of James, the Sermon on the Mount, and countless Psalms by the eighth grade. I was a model evangelical youth but with a burgeoning secret addiction that would control my life for years. All the belief that I could muster was not strong enough to defeat the shadows in my life. My issue was not conformity or a lack of belief—I had that in spades. My problem was that I was clueless about how to be transformed and how to persist in the way of transformation. Belief and agreement with doctrinal statements about Jesus were not enough.

Jerry's request would not let go of me. I began to wonder if, amid its profound tendency toward abstraction, theology (and particularly ecclesiology) had room for human beings. In other words, could the church accommodate (and not just in the basement) people struggling with profound issues of humanity and faith? These questions would not let me off the hook with any of the pat answers I was prepared to offer.

#### BELONGING AND BELIEVING

The philosopher Michael Polanyi once wrote that “our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging.”<sup>1</sup> He suggested that what we come to know and believe is embedded within the experiences of

our relationships. It is therefore within the context and process of our relationships that we “come to believe.” An example of this is the word *grace*. I can analyze that word for you and give you its theological meaning, but these offerings would only point toward a concept—and not very well. It is the stories we tell of our encounters with grace that move us beyond abstraction and into the beauty of these experiences. Grace is just a five-letter word until I tell you my experience about being lost in darkness, painfully alone in my addiction, and how God found me through an encounter with another addict at a coffee shop. It was that day that grace moved beyond theology and became autobiography. And the movement from knowing about grace to encountering and being undone by grace is everything. For years I had talked about the concept of grace, written about it, preached about it—but when it showed up across the table from me in the form of John S., I was forever changed.

This movement from knowledge to encounter is huge. As a pastor, my deepest desire is not to get the folks in my church to agree on information about Christ, but to encounter and to be drawn into the life and being of Christ. It is the encounter with the living God that produces the right thoughts about God. When we flip this truth, when we make creeds (“I believe”) the only door by which people may enter, we end up with a lot of people who will conform to a belief system but

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FROM KNOWING  
ABOUT GRACE TO  
ENCOUNTERING AND  
BEING UNDONE BY  
GRACE IS EVERYTHING.

I BEGAN TO WONDER IF  
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WITHIN THE PROCESS  
OF BELONGING.

may never enter into the process of transformation. People line the pews of churches across our country every Sunday and assent to claims of faith that they have yet to experience. Our churches are full of people who believe in God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven and earth, yet stay actively unchanged. People may be able to recite the Nicene Creed, yet resist the risen Christ at core issues of their humanity. Right “beliefs” have not produced transformational living. While affirmations of faith provide the historical context of our faith and are essential within the process, they are impotent to produce change. And change is precisely the point. When we make propositional statements about Christ the starting point of our faith, we can easily end up moving away from the very Christ of whom our statements speak. When we turn the statements about God into the criteria for access to God, we pretend to examine Christ at arm’s length. But our faith ultimately cannot be examined at a distance; it has to be experienced, entered into and lived.

As I thought about Jerry’s request, I began to wonder if there was a wideness within the process of belonging that we needed to examine within our context at Mercy Street. If these addicts truly had met Christ clothed in the guise of Alcoholics Anonymous, then what did that mean? If the person of Jesus was embedded within the movement from darkness to light, from shame to grace, then how could our community honor

the activity of the Spirit in the life of recovering addicts?

COME AND SEE

It was Jesus’ invitation in the Gospels to come and see and then, later, his question, “Who do you say that I am?” that began to open up the landscape of the gospel for me. When Jesus invited his disciples to “come and see” or to “follow me,” it was not as if these men and women had a clear picture of who Jesus was and the exact nature of what they were being called into. Each of them stepped into this process with their own agendas and an array of ideas about who Jesus was and what he had come to do. Some followed because this Rabbi invited ragamuffins into his circle, others followed with the hope that Rome would be violently overthrown, but they all had it wrong. It was the years they spent with Jesus, day-in and day-out, that revealed who he was. The scandalous truth that God had put on flesh and become human was revealed within the intimate encounter of belonging.

Jesus did not start by asking, “Who do you say that I am?” or “What do you believe?” That came later. He began with an open invitation: “Come and see.” What they saw was the sick healed, the hungry fed, the wind and waves calmed, the lost found, sins forgiven and the dead raised. It was through the “coming and seeing” that they came to believe. Their belonging to Jesus did not start with state-

ments about the virgin birth, the Trinity, or the cosmos. Through the very process of encountering, contending with, befriending, questioning and knowing Jesus, they came to believe that he was Savior and Lord. How could it be any different two thousand years later?

One of the more striking stories in the Gospels is the story of Thomas. After Jesus is crucified, the disciples are on the run for fear of the authorities and are hiding throughout Jerusalem. Three days after the disciples went underground, word starts to spread that Jesus has risen from the dead. When Thomas hears this he says, “I won’t believe it until I can touch the wounds on his body.” The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus walks through a wall to get to Thomas and says in effect, “Go for it, brother! I’m going to give you what you asked for; touch me and see that I am alive!” Thomas does, and falling to his knees makes this incredible statement: “My Lord and my God!” All my life I have heard this man derided as “Doubting Thomas,” but it is not Jesus who gives him this nickname. On the contrary, he offers Thomas something he can touch, feel and wrestle with in the very midst of his questioning and doubt. It was the encounter with the risen Lord that gave birth to Thomas’ belief.

The problem for many people is that when they come to the church and attempt to touch Jesus in a way that moves beyond seeking (but like Thomas, is still teeming with doubt and questioning), they are promptly



asked, “Who do you say that I am?” How can they affirm what they have yet to put words to and encounter within the life of the Church? How can they say “my Lord and my God” without the same access and relationship with Jesus that Thomas had?

Many of the people in the Mercy Street community have told me that their experience with church was like trying to get into an exclusive hip-hop club, one that is partitioned off by a red rope and a bouncer. They are not on the “guest list.” If these recovering drunks wanted behind the rope, if they wanted to belong, they had to say the right words. The healing life of Jesus is sequestered behind the words. And the words—the correct theological assent, the undistorted meaning in correct combination—unlock not only the presence of Jesus but also the acceptance of the community.

But this is not what I see Jesus doing in the Gospels. He invites these men and women to discipleship with the invitation to “come and see.” I find it interesting that it is not until three

years into discipleship that Jesus gets around to asking, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Recounting this event, the Gospel of Matthew tells us how, after a few disciples stumble through attempting to answer this question, Jesus rephrases it, making it much more personal: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjonah because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:13-17, NASB). In other words, “Peter, this is not book knowledge or something you are reciting, but something you have come to know through day-in, day-out revelation of who I am.” But, as is the temptation with all of us, shortly after this exchange Peter retreats back into his own abstract ideas and agenda of who the Messiah is by telling Jesus that there is no way he is going to Jerusalem to die—at least not if Peter has anything to do with it! Faith is anything but a straight line for any of us.

## CHRIST AS COMMUNITY

As I befriended recovering men and women, it was evident that many had experienced, as Step 12 says, a “spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.” The same Spirit who had awakened them was now leading them to the person of Jesus within the life of the church. They were coming to church in response to the activity of the Holy Spirit, who invited them to “come and see” the God of their own understanding whose face is Jesus. They had encountered the presence of Christ in the incognito of the Program. The question is, Are we willing to get our hands as dirty as Jesus does? Can our community honor what the Spirit is doing in the life of these people?

As our community, leadership and staff wrestled with the two phrases “Come and see” and “Who do you say that I am?,” we began to ask questions about what it means to belong and what constitutes membership at Mercy Street. Traditionally, within the life of the church, membership has signaled the end of a process, a process in which a person seeks, questions, believes, receives Christ, and only then is invited to join the community. At Mercy Street our experience is that for many, membership is just the beginning. We have discovered that the formal ritual of belonging often becomes the conduit by which the name of Jesus and the presence of Jesus come together. As a result of this process, we opened up the aperture of membership. Affirmation of

faith is not the criteria for membership within our community. This process allows people like Jerry who are still laboring with questions of Jesus’ divinity and the cost of discipleship to do so as part of the very relationships that constitute the body of Christ. As such, it mimics biblical discipleship.

If Dietrich Bonhoeffer is correct and “Christ exists as community,”<sup>2</sup> then the process of belonging to the community seems indissolvably bound to the process of coming to believe that Jesus is Lord. At Mercy Street, this movement has become critically linked to the essential question of Christianity: “Who are you, Jesus?” As members given to each other, these men and women work this question out together from the posture of access, intimacy, and belonging. As this happens, the hidden presence of the God that embraced them within recovery begins to emerge and be known as Jesus of Nazareth, who rose from the dead.

As our community worked these theological questions out, we struggled with the reality that Jesus cannot be solely interpreted from one individual’s experience any more than he can be interpreted from history. There must be a cohesive continuity between what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the “historical Christ” and the “present Christ.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the encounter with the Spirit of the living God clothed in the redemption of the Program was intended to lead these addicts to the same clarity that Peter had after belonging to Jesus for three

years. Therefore it is in the sacrament of baptism that many of these recovering addicts respond to the question: “Who do you say that I am?” It is within the ritual of water and covenant that these men and women move beyond the incognito to be identified with the name by which we are all saved—Jesus. Traditionally, baptism has been the criterion for joining the Church. In our experience, membership begins the process of answering “Who are you, Jesus?,” and baptism is the culmination of that process whereby people are able to confess—not only with their mouths but also with their lives—“You are Christ, the Son of the living God.”

## THE DESCENDING CHURCH

What I have discovered as the pastor of a church full of recovering addicts is that Christ was pursuing these folks long before their booze was gone, they reached bottom, and the track marks on their arms healed. Christ pursued these addicts long before they knew his name or acknowledged his presence. The same Jesus who “went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19, *King James Version*; both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed say “descended into hell”) also descended into the depth and darkness of their addiction and was bound to them in redemption. As they entered recovery, it was the presence of Christ who stood behind the words “God of your own understanding,” beckoning them to take the next step. What these addicts were

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desperate for was a community that would meet them at the same level of depth, authenticity, and dysfunction that the Program had. What they needed was a community in which to belong, in order for the “God of their own understanding” to emerge as the same Christ who exists as community. For the church to stand in solidarity with the world that God loves and gave himself to, it must be willing to commit itself to those who walk through its doors—not merely as “souls to save,” but as treasured companions, teachers, friends and guides. It must be willing to descend to the same depths that Jesus has. To elicit fixed and final affirmations of faith as the only door by which people can belong creates an exclusive space that Christ himself did not and will not inhabit.

1. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 322.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theology of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 182.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 43.

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God is a god who is willing to love us and heal us where we need it most.

Whatever the circumstance, coming to believe that a Power greater than us can restore us to sanity is rarely an easy task. Most of us come to recovery with “God baggage” of one kind or another, and in the Steps, we work to sort it all out.

This issue of Steps offers up two unique perspectives on issues related to spirituality in recovery.

In “The Gift of Noticing” Barbara Milligan offers her insights as a spiritual director and outlines one form of the historic practice of Christian self-examination. The “daily examen” Barbara discusses may be a good fit for readers who are developing their daily Eleventh Step practice of improving their conscious contact with God.

In “How a Jewish Drunk Challenged My Idea of the Church” Matt Russell communicates a learning experience he had when a Jewish man in recovery asked if he could join Matt’s church without first confessing his faith in Christ. This raised some rather difficult questions for Matt and the staff at Mercy Street. The result is a radically open ecclesiology, a possible theological map of the Recovery Church.

Wherever you are in your journey, and whatever you are carrying in your God baggage, we hope this issue will at least provide you with some food for thought. At best, we pray you may be nurtured by what is here and find yourself just a little closer to the Source.

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*When you do all the talking, you only learn what you already know.*

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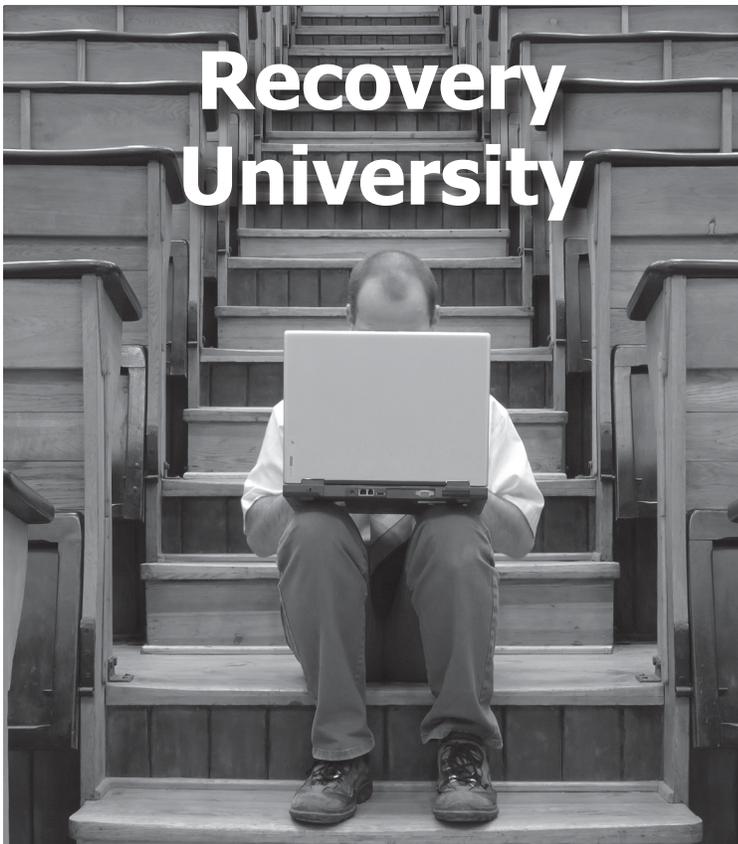


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