

“Breathing Under Water: Powerlessness”
Romans 7:15-20

What do the following news stories have in common?

- The divorce of Jeff Bezos (picture from the news story)
- The break up of Adele and her husband (picture of from the news story)
- The college admissions scandal (picture from news story)

These stories show us that underneath the façade of celebrity and happiness, all of us struggle with the same temptations and heartaches in life. The college scandal is a perfect example of how we try to control outcomes because of our fears. The parents who used their wealth to bribe their children’s way to good colleges were no doubt driven by fear that their children would not get into these highly competitive schools without the extra help. The social pressure and fear of missing out drove these people to do something illegal and desperate, instead of accepting their powerlessness as parents to influence the process.

We can condemn these parents or the celebrities for their moral failures but in reality, the heart of our struggles with powerlessness is not that different from theirs. Life is unpredictable and many challenges often come our way: the loss of a loved one, health struggles, natural disasters, relationship pain, etc. We feel vulnerable and thus learn from an early age to deny our vulnerability and our powerlessness. We try to control life through power, possessions, and relationships. But the great mystery and paradox of life is that the more we try to control and deny our powerlessness, the more power it has over us. In fact, addictions enslave us and rob us of the very thing we are looking for. Just like people who struggle with addiction to substances think that they have the addiction under control and could manage their recovery on their own, all of us have that tendency to deny our addictions and thus our powerlessness over them.

The first step to our healing on this journey comes from the wisdom of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (screen) “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol -that our lives had become unmanageable.” Admitting our powerlessness over our addictions is the first and most difficult step of healing. We cannot be transformed and healed if we don’t allow the light of God’s love into our areas of struggle. Yet, we often resist this because it seems like weakness and our world tells us to reject weakness. The example of Jesus teaches us about the importance of embracing our weakness and powerlessness. Richard Rohr writes (screen), “Until you bottom out and come to the limits of your own fuel supply, there is no reason for you to switch to higher octane of fuel. Why would you? You will not learn to actively draw upon a Larger Source until your usual resources are depleted and revealed as inadequate to the task.”

The Apostle Paul knew this wisdom of Christ in his own life. Even though he was a man of faith and a committed follower of the way of Christ, he knew his own internal struggles. Let’s listen to his words (read Romans 7:18-23). This was a letter which Paul wrote to a congregation that he was yet to visit. In an effort to help them admit their powerlessness, Paul admitted to them his own powerlessness and his internal struggles. Even though he

had an incredible experience of transformation on the way to Damascus and had become a dedicated follower of the way of Jesus Christ, he still found himself struggling to live according to the values of the kingdom of God. He was sharing this with them to help them through their difficult time. He knew that they had divisions in their church that mirrored the divisions and prejudices of the culture. The Gentile followers of Jesus had taken over the leadership of the church during the time the Jews were expelled from Rome. When the Jewish believers came back, the Gentile followers of Jesus did not allow them to be in leadership. They started saying to them that they had replaced them because there was no need to be Jewish to follow Jesus. Paul understood the sway of people's addictions to power and control and how these things block their ability to love and serve God freely. He admitted to them that even though on an intellectual level he knew what was right and what was wrong, he still struggled to put that into practice. In fact, he had found himself many times doing the opposite of what he knew to be right.

We can relate in our own lives. We often know intellectually that a behavior is not healthy and yet we engage it. We also know this when we find ourselves stuck in our fears or resentments while yearning to be free of them. And sometimes we are not even aware of our addictions because they may seem like virtues to us. Our addictions often disguise themselves from us. That is why Jesus said (screen) "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?" Matthew 7:3-4 Without the grace of God, we may not even be truly aware of our real struggles. In his book *The Thing in the Bushes*, Kevin Ford uses the metaphor of hidden issues that are at the heart of our problems. He writes (screen), "Whenever there is dysfunction in a group, there are frequently two problems: (1) the identified problem and (2) The Thing in the Bushes. The Identified Problem is what people *think* is wrong. Although it is typically unspoken, it is rarely the real problem. The Thing in the Bushes is the real problem nobody talks about, because it lurks in our collective blind spot."

Paul knew that the answer did not lie in giving the church in Rome more rules or moralistic teachings. That was the "Identified Problem." That is what they thought they needed from him. They must have asked him something like this, "Just give us some rules/guidelines and that would solve our problem." But Paul knew that the rules were not going to be enough. They needed to deal with the Thing in the Bushes: their addiction to power and control. Much like he needed to learn to rely on God's grace instead of his own power, Paul emphasized their need to be open to God's grace.

Admitting that we are powerless is not weakness, it is about opening the door to God's grace. Paraphrasing Albert Einstein, Richard Rohr writes (screen), "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused the problem in the first place." Another way of putting it, "You can't fight fire with fire." That is why we have to let go of what we know does not work. No matter how scary and painful this admission may seem to you, it is the only way. Think of Jesus' saying in Luke 13:24 (screen) "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." Jesus knew that this work is not easy because it is so counter-intuitive.

I invite you to a breathing lesson today from Richard Rohr. He writes (screen), "By definition, you can never see or handle what you are addicted to. It is always 'hidden' and

disguised as something else. As Jesus did with the demon at Gerasa, someone must say, 'What is your name?' (Luke 8:30). The problem must be correctly named before the demon can be exorcised. You cannot heal what you do not first acknowledge."

"As we begin to see the need for recovery, we have an inkling of what our addictions might be. Find an image of something that you think might be the problem. Put it someplace where it can remind you of the work you may need to do.

We suffer to get well.

We surrender to win.

We die to live.

We give it away to keep it.

Spend some time reflecting on these central paradoxes. Choose one to carry with you through the day."

Now, we will practice some breathing, "Think about your breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Hold your breath for 20 seconds. Breathe deeply. Feel yourself relax. Think about an experience of being under water and not being able to breathe." Now return to the spaciousness of your breathing and become aware of this gift within you. Give thanks to God for your ability to breathe in all the circumstances of your life. Amen.

1. How do you feel about being powerless? When have you experienced being powerless in your everyday life? How have you been taught to regard power and powerlessness? Spend some time writing your immediate reactions to the word *powerful* and *powerless*.
2. When were you surprised by something good coming out of a seeming failure? Think of a time when you got exactly what you thought you wanted and were disappointed. Why do you think that happened? How might it look different now as you look back on it with a different perspective?
3. Reflect on a dark or difficult time in your past. How was God present or absent at that time? How does it look now? Write about how the memory of that time might be helpful in future situations.
4. How much do you depend on your own strength and abilities to get through everyday struggles? How easy is it for you to ask others for help? When did you last ask God for help? Name at least one area where you feel like you might be reaching “the limits of your own fuel supply.”
5. What area of your life do you have a need to control? How hard do you work at maintaining that control? What is it costing you in terms of physical and emotional health? How does your need to control affect your relationships?
6. What is your first response to a change in your life? How do you find your way to acceptance? Write about a time when you knew that you needed to make a change but resisted. Write about another time when you found something better. What are you afraid to change right now? How can you take one step forward?