

**SLD07.11.10 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Summer Saints Series**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 10:35-37**  
**Colossians 1:1-14**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Bill W. – Rescued From the Darkness”**

This morning we examine the first of this summer’s series on “saints” of the Christian tradition. Because during this long stretch of “Ordinary Time” between Pentecost and Advent we’re meant to be focusing on the challenges and possibilities of Christian discipleship, for some years now we’ve been in the habit exploring the lives of *other* people’s spiritual journeys and witness. Since we Protestants don’t really buy the idea that any one person is any holier than another, we put the word “saints” in quotes, using it as a kind of shorthand for people whose lives give us some “proof that the gospel can be lived.” (Ellsberg)

And we need proof, you and I, that the gospel we study and salute actually *can* be lived. Since most of us are not all that good at it ourselves, it can be helpful to hear examples of everyday folk who manage somehow, against all life’s extraordinary challenges, to integrate their creed into their lives. Our hope is that when we witness discipleship “in the real,” we can better imagine possibilities for our own faith journeys.

Today we’ll be spending time with a “latter day saint,” we might say, a person of our own time, less as a “holy one” than some we’ll talk about this summer, yet whose impact on the lives of ordinary struggling people continues to surpass that of just about anybody I know.

His name is Bill Wilson, more commonly referred to as Bill W. In the 1920’s, Bill W. was a successful New York stockbroker. Unfortunately, throughout those days of an

otherwise successful and productive life, Bill W. was also a drunk. In fact, most of the life of Bill W. was an interminably long roller coaster ride of hubris, deceit, and self-destruction. Bill W.'s story is about the unlikely grace that God wrenched out of the rotten pit of one man's pickled despair.

Not a very tidy tale for a saint, is it. Hardly a romantic projection about it. Still, as we listen to Bill W.'s story today, I ask that we withhold judgment.

Do you recall my sermon last fall in which we asked the question, "Where Is God In Addiction?" I quoted priest and psychiatrist Gerald Mays as saying that "all people are addicts. ...that addictions to alcohol and other drugs are simply more obvious and tragic addictions than (some.) To be alive is to be addicted," asserts Mays, "and to be alive and addicted is to stand in need of grace." (p.11)<sup>1</sup>

Few of us would argue that we all stand in the need of grace, but all of us addicts? Well, Mays regards as addictions anything to which we're attached that abuses our freedom and makes us do things we really do not want to do. Got anything like that in your life? Remember the Apostle Paul's despairing cry to the church in Rome? "I do not understand my own behavior! I do not act as I mean to, but I do the things that I hate!"? (Ro. 7:14)

So as we listen to Bill W.'s story, let us see if we recognize anything of ourselves in it – in its dreams and ambitions, its patterns and impulses, its determined hopes or categorical helplessness. Let us look also for where, in this shadowy, serpentine, painfully human tale, we see God at work. And where we don't. For often in the darkness of our lives, it is not at all apparent where that God is whom Paul celebrates in

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald May, Addiction and Grace, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1988

today's text, that One who rescues us from our darkness, who transfers us from our fundamental brokenness to the redemptive kingdom of God's beloved Son.

Where and how in Bill W.'s story does God seem present, and where, absent?

It starts like this:

***“War fever ran high in the New England town to which we new, young officers from Plattsburg were assigned, and we were flattered when the first citizens took us to their homes, making us feel heroic. Here was love, applause, war; moments sublime with intervals hilarious. In time we sailed for ‘Over There.’ I was part of life at last, and in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor.”<sup>2</sup>***

Twenty-two, and already a veteran of foreign wars, Bill came home fancying himself quite the leader. Hadn't he survived foreign combat? Hadn't the men of his battery awarded him a special token of appreciation? Hadn't his gifts for leadership, organization and all 'round smarts been publicly recognized? When it came to his potential, wasn't the sky the limit? And what better place to show the world how great he was than on Wall Street itself?

***“Many people lost money on Wall Street but some became very rich; why not I? I studied economics and business as well as law. Of course, at one of the finals I was too drunk to think or write. My wife got worried, but we had long talks during which I would reassure her that men of genius conceived their best projects when drunk. Why, the most majestic philosophic thought was so derived! ...She believed me.”***

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aaangola.org/chapter1.html> This and all of Bill W.'s quotes following.

Bill's wife *did* believe him, and believed *in* him, so much that when he decided to abandon law, withdraw their thousand dollars in savings, and set off across America on a motorcycle to review factories and businesses across the eastern United States, she went with him.

And what do you know but that the escapade paid off! Bill W.'s ongoing reports to Wall Street procured him a position there along with a profit of several thousand dollars and a very generous expense account. .

***“For the next few years, fortune threw money and applause my way. I had arrived! The great boom of the late twenties was seething and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life. In the jazz places uptown, everyone spent in the thousands and chattered in the millions. With amused skepticism, the local banker watched me whirl fat checks in and out of his till.”***

But then, in October of 1929, as we all know, all hell broke loose on the New York stock exchange. In a matter of days, Bill W., like so many others, was finished financially. But reports of men jumping to their deaths from the towers of High Finance only disgusted him.

***“I would not jump. I went back to the bar. My friends had dropped several million since ten o'clock; so what? Tomorrow was another day. And as I drank, the old fierce determination to win came back.”***

However, Bill's determination, even when combined with the help of friends and family, were neither enough to get him back on track nor to keep him sober.

***“Liquor ceased to be a luxury. It became a necessity. ‘Bathtub’ gin, two bottles a day, often three, got to be routine. Sometimes a small deal would net a***

***few hundred dollars, and I'd pay my bills at the bars and delicatessens. This went on endlessly. I began to waken very early in the morning shaking violently. Before I could eat breakfast, a tumbler full of gin followed by a half dozen bottles of beer were required. Still, I thought I could control the situation. I even had several periods of sobriety, which renewed my wife's hope."***

Unfortunately, things in Bill W.'s life gradually got worse. His mother-in-law died, his wife and father-in-law became ill, the house was taken over by the mortgage holder. He had to get a grip. Renewing his resolve, he tried again. Surely he had what it takes.

***"Only, one day I walked into a cafe to telephone, and in no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it had happened. As the whisky rose to my head, I told myself I would manage better next time. But this time I might as well get good and drunk. So I did."***

Unforgettable were the remorse, horror and hopelessness of the next morning. Any energy to do battle any longer was simply gone. Bill W. contemplated suicide. Instead...he chose oblivion...by alcohol...for two more years.

Finally his family placed him in a hospital for rehabilitation. With treatment and kindness, Bill gained a clearer mind, a deeper self-knowledge, and a new understanding of the nature of his disease. With high hopes, he moved on with his life...until...three or four months later...he took another drink...and back to the hospital he went.

***"Words cannot tell of my loneliness and despair. I had met my match and lost. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master."***

The second time Bill stepped from the hospital he was a broken man. And fear sobered him for a while, sure enough. But then came Armistice Day, 1934, and Bill was

off again. Off the wagon, that is. At this point Bill and everyone around him resigned themselves to the fact that he would have to be shut up somewhere, or simply stumble his lonely way along to a miserable end.

Until one day while Bill sat drinking in his kitchen, the telephone rang. It was the cheery voice of an old school friend who asked if he might come over.

***“What amazed me was, my friend was sober! Rumor had it that he’d been committed for alcoholic insanity. How on earth had he escaped? We had dinner together first, but when I pushed a drink across the table, he refused it.***

***‘What’s all this about?’ I asked. He looked straight at me and said, smiling, ‘I’ve got religion.’ I was aghast! So that’s it! Last summer an alcoholic crackpot; this summer, a religious crackpot. Well, let him rant and rave; my gin’s bound to last longer than his preaching!’***

Bill listened patiently. But, truth be told, the wars he had fought, the travesties he had seen in Europe and since, his own helplessness and despair, all convinced him that the power of God in human affairs was actually negligible.

***“I conceded that the moral teachings of Jesus Christ were most excellent (although not, I observed, too closely followed by those who claimed Him.) For myself, I’d already adopted those parts which seemed convenient and not too difficult; the rest I disregarded.”***

Still, there across the table was Bill’s schoolmate, fully sober and declaring that God had done for him what he could not do for himself, that God had, in effect, raised him from the scrap heap to a level of life better than he’d ever known.

***“I wondered to myself: had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute, and this was none at all. Then my friend made a novel suggestion. He said, ‘Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?’***

***“Well, the idea hit me like a ton of bricks. If I could just believe in some Power, any power, greater than myself, maybe I could make a new beginning. Maybe genuine growth had to start from a different point, for I knew I didn’t have it in me. It was worth a try. Anyway, what did I have to lose?”***

Bill admitted himself to the hospital again, and was separated from alcohol for the last time.

***“This time I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood God, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under God’s care and direction, admitting for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without God, I was lost. Ruthlessly, I faced my sins and asked God to take them away, root and branch.”***

***“ I have not had a drink since.”***

Together with his schoolmate, Bill made a list of all the people whom he’d hurt or towards whom he felt resentment. He became willing to approach these individuals and admit his wrong, and right such matters as he could.

And you know, if this were the end of Bill’s story, it would have been enough. “God helps alcoholic dry out and make amends.” But the story of Bill W. does *not* end here. Indeed, this was only the beginning, in a sense, of hope and healing not only in his life but that of many, many others. For together Bill and his friend proceeded to

build a simple, straightforward, no-nonsense global movement for the redemption of others.

***“While I lay in the hospital, the thought came that there were thousands of hopeless alcoholics who might be glad to have what had been so freely given me. Perhaps I could help some of them. They in turn might work with others. My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works is dead, he said, and how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic fails to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he cannot survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he does not work at it, surely he will drink again. And if he drinks again, surely he will die. With us it is just like that. “***

And how did Bill W. choose to help other alcoholics? Well, in Akron, Ohio in 1935, Bill W. joined with another hopeless alcoholic, Dr. Bob S., to found what would become a voluntary, worldwide fellowship of men and woman from all walks of life who meet together regularly for the sole purpose of staying sober and helping others achieve sobriety - . Alcoholics Anonymous. Today Alcoholics Anonymous is estimated to include more than 100,000 groups and over 2,000,000 members in 150 countries.<sup>3</sup>

Its program is one of total abstinence; its members aiming simply to stay away from one drink, one day at a time. (Although ask any recovering alcoholic and you'll learn that there's nothing simple about it.) Sobriety is maintained through sharing experience, strength and hope at group meetings and through the suggested Twelve

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<sup>3</sup> [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org), 8/27/2004, “A.A. At A Glance.”

Steps for recovery from alcoholism. These steps are listed in your bulletins and you'll recognize in them much of Bill W.'s own experience.

This is not a sermon about the sins of alcohol. As I said at the outset, it's not really even a sermon about a saint, unless we measure the presence of the gospel in a person's life less by his behavior than by its impact on others. So why spend so much time on one man's torturous story and its ultimately happy ending?

Because besides the drama, the highs and lows of Bill's life to which few of us can relate, there is a grit and an honesty regarding both the depth of the human darkness and the power of God's often imperceptible grace. It's as straightforward a story as I know of both human limitation and divine redemption, mirroring well the spiritual wisdom the Apostle is witnessing to the Colossians in today's text.

On our own journeys of discipleship, may you and I be filled with *this* knowledge, that we might be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, that we might endure everything with patience and hope, that we might lead lives worthy of the Lord.

To the glory of God. Amen.