

SLD07.31.05 19th Ordinary
EPC
Ephesians 2:1-10
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“Bill W. – Saint for Sobriety”

This morning’s sermon marks the fifth in a summer series on saints of the Christian tradition. I chose to focus on the lives of various saints this summer, you’ll recall, because during “Ordinary Time” on the lectionary calendar, we in the church are meant to focus on the challenges and possibilities of the Christian life. And “saints” - as I keep quoting from Robert Ellsberg – “are proof that the gospel can be lived.”

And we need proof, you and I, as we stumble through life doing the best we can to be true to what we believe. We need proof that the gospel actually *can* be lived first of all because most of us are not all that good at it ourselves. And we are essentially imitative creatures. We humans have a hard time imagining a different way of being, to quote Richard Rohr, “until we see it ‘in the real.’”¹

Of course, as Protestant Christians of the Reformed tradition, we use the term ‘saint’ pretty loosely, neither worshipping canonized witnesses of gospel living, nor, for that matter, regarding them as any more holy than the next guy or gal. It’s not the stuff of shining halos or romantic legends we’re after – that’s too easy to dismiss.

What we need are models and examples of every day people who somehow manage to integrate their God-consciousness into their lives, who find the pulse of the Holy Spirit in their lives and follow it. What we need are the stories of ordinary people who embody, who incarnate, who literally en-flesh, the challenge of faith in their time

¹ All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1999, p. 2 of opening “Acclaim.”

and place. That's what we need to see 'in the real' in order to imagine such qualities for ourselves.

So far we've spent time with Augustine of Hippo, Therese of Lisieux, Thomas Merton and Hildegard of Bingen. Today, in another attempt to move our imaginations out of the Middle Ages, I want us to spend some time with another latter day "saint," one less known perhaps, at least as a saint, than those we've talked about so far, but whose transformational impact on the lives of ordinary people continues to surpass that of just about anyone I know.

His name is Bill W., and in the 1920's, he was a successful New York stockbroker. He was also a drunk. In fact, Bill routinely drank himself into a stupor, ultimately losing everything he had, including hope.

Doesn't sound like much of a saint, huh. Talk about someone dead through trespasses and sins, (Ephesians 2:1) Bill W. became one pickled mess, categorically unredeemable by his or anyone else's estimation. No, there's nothing shiny or romantic about Bill W.'s story. In fact, most of his tale, as you're about to hear, is just one long roller coaster ride of hubris, deceit, and self-destruction. And anybody who knew Bill for the first half of his life would have laid bets that it would have ended just like that.

But it didn't. 'Cause God, out of the great love with which God loved Bill even when he was dead through his trespasses – and I'm talking roadkill here, like after a couple weeks on the tarmac when there's not enough left to identify what's been hit, that's how Bill was – but God, who is rich in mercy, somehow brought Bill back to life together with Christ. (E2:4)

I *guess* it was God. It *sure* wasn't Bill, himself.

Anyhow, as you listen to Bill's story, try to withhold judgment if you can, and see if you recognize anything of yourself in it, in its dreams or successes, in its patterns or impulses of behavior, its hope or its helplessness, its totally 'human' character.

The story of Bill W. 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.”²

A few years later, when Bill was just twenty-two and a veteran of foreign wars, he came home to the US of A fancying himself quite the leader. His experience of the military had been a positive one. Why, the men of his battery had even given him a special token of appreciation! What with his gifts for leadership, organization and all 'round smarts, Bill was sure that when it came to personal potential, why, the sky was the limit. He'd show the world he was important, and what better place to begin than Wall Street.

“Many people lost money but some became very rich. Why not I? I studied economics and business as well as law. ‘Course, at one of the finals I was too drunk to think or write. My wife got worried, but I reassured her by telling her that men of genius conceived their best projects when drunk. Why, the most majestic philosophic thought was so derived! ...She believed me.”

² www.recovery.org/aa/bigbook/ww/chapter_1.html This and all of Bill W.'s quotes following.

Bill's wife *did* believe him. In fact, so high was her confidence in Bill that when he decided to abandon law, corral 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 you know what? That escapade paid off. Bill's reports back to Wall Street about the businesses he visited landed him a position there, along with a large expense account and a profit of several thousand dollars. Life was sweet.

“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. There was loud talk in the jazz places uptown. Everyone spent in thousands and chattered in millions.

Who of us has not lived among them in the passions of our flesh? (Eph. 2:3)

“In 1929 I contracted golf fever. We went at once to the country.

Now, not everybody knows who Walter Hagen is. I didn't so I googled him – Hagen was an early to mid 20th century pioneer golf pro right up there with Bobby Jones (whom we all know *wasn't* a pro but Hagen was famous like Jones) who retired with 40 PGA wins and was a 6-time U.S. Ryder Cup captain.

As I was saying, my aim was to overtake Walter Hagen (who everybody knew in my day). But liquor caught up with me much faster than I came up behind Walter. I began to be jittery in the morning. Golf permitted drinking every day and every night. Still, it was fun to play the exclusive course that had inspired such awe in me as a kid. I acquired the impeccable coat of tan one sees upon the well-to- do. The local banker watched me whirl fat checks in and out of his till with amused skepticism. “

Unfortunately, however, in October of 1929 all hell broke loose on the New York stock exchange. Abruptly Bill was finished, as were so many of his friends. Yet reports of men jumping to their deaths from the towers of High Finance merely disgusted him.

“I wouldn’t 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.”

But Bill’s determination, even when combined with the help of a moneyed friend and his in-laws, who housed Bill and his wife, weren’t enough either to get him back on track or to keep him sober. Something about ‘following the ruler of the power of air.’ (Eph. 2:2b)

“Whatever that is. Anyway, for me, liquor ceased to be a luxury. In fact, 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 would pay my bills at the bars and delicatessens. This went on endlessly, and I began to waken very early in the morning shaking violently. A tumbler full of gin followed by half a dozen bottles of beer would be required if I were to eat any breakfast. Nevertheless, I still thought I could control the situation, and there were even periods of sobriety which renewed my wife’s hope.”

But gradually things got worse. The house was taken over by the mortgage holder, Bill’s mother-in-law died, his wife and father-in-law became ill. Bill had to get a grip. Renewing his resolve, he tried again. Some time passed, and confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. ‘Following the course of this world’ (Eph. 2:2a), Bill was confident he had what it takes!

“One day I walked into a cafe to telephone. In no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it happened. As the whisky rose to my head I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then. So I did.”

The remorse, horror and hopelessness of the next morning were unforgettable. The courage to do battle was simply no longer there. Bill contemplated suicide. Instead he chose oblivion...by alcohol...for two more years. Finally his family placed him in a hospital for rehab. 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...that is...until three or four months later...when he took another drink. Back to the hospital he went.

“No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master.”

The second time Bill stepped from the hospital he was a broken man. And fear - the spirit that works among the disobedient (Eph. 2:2c) - sobered him for a while. But then came Armistice Day, 1934, and Bill was off again. Off the wagon, that is. At this point Bill and everyone around him became resigned to the certainty that he would surely have to be put away up somewhere, or either just stumble his lonely way along to a miserable end.

Then one day near the end of that bleak November when 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.

“My friend was sober! That’s what amazed me! Rumor had it that he had been committed for alcoholic insanity. I wondered how he had escaped. I figured when he came, we’d have dinner first, and then drink openly with one another. But when I pushed a drink across the table, he refused it. I wondered what had gotten into the fellow. He wasn’t himself. ‘Come on, what’s all this about?’ I queried. He looked straight at me and said, smiling, ‘I 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 – that’s what I thought. My gin’s bound to last longer than his preaching!”

Well, and Bill’s friend did talk for hours. And Bill listened. But because of the dreadful wars that had been fought, the things he’d seen in Europe, never mind his own helplessness and bottomless despair, Bill, a child of wrath now (Eph. 2:3c), was certain that the power of God in human affairs was negligible and the Brotherhood of Man, a grim jest. If there were a Devil, he was the Boss Universal.

“The moral teaching of Jesus Christ I conceded to be most excellent, although not, I observe, too closely followed by those who claimed Him. For myself, I had adopted those parts which seemed convenient and not too difficult; the rest I disregarded.”

Still, a greater testimony than any system of belief was Bill’s schoolmate, who sat right there across the kitchen table, sober, declaring to Bill that God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed, he said. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. His family had deserted him. Society was about to lock him up. He had admitted complete defeat.

But then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, been taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known! “It’s not my own doing!” declared Bill’s friend. “It’s the gift of God!”

“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. And then, in the face of my skepticism, my friend made a novel suggestion to me. He said, ‘Bill, 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 a Power greater than myself, nothing more was required of me to make my beginning. I saw that growth could start from that point. Would I have it? Of course I would!”

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

“There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then I understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my newfound Friend take them away, root and branch. I have not had a drink since. “

Once again Bill’s schoolmate visited him and Bill fully acquainted him with his problems and deficiencies. Together they made a list of all the people Bill had hurt or toward whom he felt resentment. Bill expressed his willingness to approach these individuals and admit his wrong, to right such matters as he could. And you know, if that had been the end of Bill’s story, it would have been enough.

But God raises us up with Christ Jesus not just for ourselves but so that in the ages to come, God might show the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward all humanity. (Eph. 2:7) Bill W.'s personal experience of sobriety was only the beginning...not only of his own redeemed life but of a simple but powerful and 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 was dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic!*”**

We are what God made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:10)

If an alcoholic fails to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he can not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he does not work at this, he will surely drink again. And if he drinks, he will just as surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us alcoholics, you see, that's just the way it is. “

And how did Bill W. work to help other alcoholics? Well, in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, 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* estimates that there are more than 100,000 groups and over 2,000,000 members in 150 countries.³

As many of you know, AA is a program of total abstinence. Members simply 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 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.

But now, listen. This is not a sermon about the sins of alcohol. We left the Prohibition behind a long time ago. Nor, for that matter, is it really even a sermon about a saint, unless we measure the presence of the gospel in a person's life less by his whole history than by his impact on others.

What *this* is, is a sermon about grace. About the unlikely grace that God wrenched from the rotten pit of one man's pickled despair. And about how that man chose to respond to that unmerited grace by choosing, with wisdom and humility, to outline and model for others the faith, practice and discipline required to receive it.

As far as I'm concerned, Bill W. was a 'saint for sobriety' not because he was a good man, but because his life continues to be a testimony of the manner in which our God, "who is rich in mercy, loves us even when we are dead through our trespasses, and continues to raise us up with Christ." Ask Bill W., or anybody you know in recovery, and they'll tell you: only by grace are we saved through faith. This is not our own doing; it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8)

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ www.alcoholics-anonymous.org, 8/27/2004, "A.A. At A Glance."