

**SLD12.06.09 Second Advent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 3:1-6**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Where Is God In Addiction?”**

Where is God in addiction? A peculiar question for us Advent pilgrims, perhaps, as we make our way toward the manger. At least that’s what we thought last August when we first started planning this sermon series. After all, Advent is when we switch gears to new themes of preparation for, and anticipation of, the birth of Jesus. How was addiction supposed to fit in?

Pity poor Jon Arnold, for example, trying to come up with a choir anthem that somehow echoes the dual themes of Advent and addiction. Indeed, when Heather and I learned the title of the one the choir would sing today, “Where Shepherds Lately Knelt,” we couldn’t help but chuckle about those shepherds kneeling before a different kind of throne, retching their indulgences of the night before.

And pity poor me, tackling number nine of 11 unanswerable questions around which there have been as many opinions, abuses, distortions and battles as there have been believers since Jesus peeled his first potato. You know how elders have to write a faith statement to share with Session when they’re being examined? Our two new elders just did that Friday night.

Well, for me, this sermon series has been like facing a weekly examination, first by God and then by the entire congregation, about what I really believe. For eleven weeks.

Sometimes we get a little carried away at our staff planning retreats. You know that conquer-the-world-optimism at the beginning of things? And so many questions

about God were surfacing at the time, and we were so high on the realization that *this* church that wasn't afraid of asking them, that we thought, what the heck, let's go for it and stretch the series clear to the end of the year, right through Advent. 'Cause we're all about questions in this church, not so much for the purpose of arriving at their answers as walking, dancing, wrestling, battling and finally surrendering to the unanswerable nature of the questions themselves. That, we feel, is where authentic exploration has it all over dogmatic declaration. The thing is, as anyone engaging in authentic exploration knows, there ain't nothing easy or uncomplicated about it. You ask a question like "Where God Is In Addiction?" and you gotta be prepared to navigate some mystery.

Or maybe not. After all, what's a preacher got to say about addiction besides "you brood of vipers," or "just say no?"

Well, what I have to do when I tackle these questions is step outside my preacher role for a minute and just be a person. A person who struggles in the world and with the nature of God like anybody else who's awake. And as a person, I know a little something about addiction— less than some but more than most. My father was an alcoholic, my mother a foodaholic, and I was bulimic for 18 years, long before there was a word for it. As children of the sixties and seventies with curious minds and adventuresome spirits, my sisters and I all dabbled in the drugs and alcohol so readily available. Thank goodness heroin, meth and crack were not a part of our market at the time, but pot, hash, acid, mushrooms, cocaine and ecstasy were and I thoroughly enjoyed them all. Did I develop a chemical or psychological dependency? I don't think so, but there's a fine, fine line between really, really, really wanting and liking a thing

and the chains of addiction. To this day I actively struggle to limit my alcohol intake and have, in fact, been on sabbatical from it since the beginning of my Sabbath sabbatical last May.

Not that this is a sermon about me, but as I've said before, knowing the context from which a preacher preaches can be helpful in weighing their words. So I want you to know that though my experience with addiction may be much less dramatic than many, I am no stranger to its seemingly sovereign realm. So when I ask the question of where God is in it, well, just so you know, I really wonder. Can God be found some place in the shadowy despair of addictive dependence? In the seemingly sovereign realm of substance abuse, is there some word from the Lord?

Like all of the questions we've been tackling in this series, it's a big one, a charged one, a complex one, hardly given to adequate exploration in just one sermon. One could write a book on the topic and fortunately several have. The book I leaned on most for this sermon is one called Addiction and Grace by priest and psychiatrist Gerald Mays.<sup>1</sup> And what Mays says about addiction is that "all people are addicts. ...addictions to alcohol and other drugs are simply more obvious and tragic addictions than (some.) To be alive is to be addicted," Mays says, "and to be alive and addicted is to stand in need of grace." (p.11) Few of us would argue with the latter, that we're all standing 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. (p.3) Does anybody here *not* have any of those? We may not routinely identify ourselves as addicts but anybody here *not* relate to the Apostle Paul's despairing cry to the church in Rome, "I do not understand my own behavior! I do not

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

act as I mean to, but I do the things that I hate!”? (Ro. 7:14) Who of us here does *not* have any personal life-draining attachments against which you struggle.

The word *attachment* comes from the old French *atache*, which means “nailed to.” Mays says that our attachments effectively “nail” our desire to specific objects and create addiction...in everyone. Not wishing in any way to reduce the meaning of addiction, yet Mays insists that, “The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, perfection, moods, fantasies, and an endless variety of other things.” (p.3)

Perhaps this is not really news to us Presbyterians, aware as we are of the ubiquitous and pervasive power of sin. But addiction...? Visions of winos in back alleys, flasks of scotch in the bottom desk drawer, and bartenders declining yet another drink come to mind. But Mays sees addiction differently, locating its roots less in the extremes of psychological dependency than in our longing for love.

“All humans hunger to love, to be loved, and to move closer to the Source of love,” he says. (p.4) And this elemental, pervasive and thoroughly human longing for love, echoed in our faith story from the Garden of Eden through the witness of the gospels to that relieving glass of wine in the evening after a hard day’s work, is all of a piece, an unpeaceful piece, you might say; all expressions of this God-given desire of ours for love bumping up against the variety of ways we try to satisfy it.

Now hear me - I’m not saying that enjoying a glass of wine is a bad thing – Lord knows I’ve been a vinophile since my days in the northern wine country of California in the mid-70’s. I’m just joining Mays in saying that *anything*, whether substances, ideas, people, goals or behavioral attachments, that gets in the way of our desire to “love God

with all our heart, and our neighbors as ourselves, or even ourselves as ourselves,” can and should be regarded as a participant in the subtle, vicious, usurping forces of addiction standing between us and what we long for most, the love of God.

Friends, this is not a church thing. I’m not talking judgmental doctrine, temperance, prohibition, or any other pointing of a finger. I’m talking about a *God* thing here. About the relationship between each of us creatures with our Creator, and how that relationship falters, bruises, breaks, whenever *anything* steals energy, attention, resources and even worship from the God before whom we are meant to have no other god.

And where might God be in this particularly dismal spin on human nature? *I* say, right there loving us. Waiting us out. Showering us with endless gifts and hints and glimpses of right relationship with God, with ourselves, with one another. Ever inviting, beckoning, tugging us toward the hard work, the harsh work, sometimes the hateful work, of truth, of wholeness, of healing.

Where is God in addiction? If addiction is “the absolute enemy of human freedom and the antipathy of love, yet faced and experienced for what is, yet it, too, becomes a servant of God by leading us to a deep appreciation of grace, by bringing us to our knees.” (p.4)

In this context, I gotta say that self-identified addicts have it easier. Self-identified addicts who have approached or hit bottom have faced and entered a process of overcoming the glaring lie that they can run their lives on the basis of their own willpower alone, both name their attachments *and* recognize their powerlessness over them. Can the same be said of the rest of us?

Self-identified addicts, if they have any sense, plug into communities of other self-identified addicts in order to work a simple, straightforward, if impossibly difficult, process, that begins with some of the most offensive words we know: QUIT IT. (p. 176)

Do we in the church community invest that kind of energy and focus and hard work to confessing and fighting our own demons? What could we learn from the deceptively simple and no-nonsense approach to wholeness, often best embodied and worked through Twelve Step programs? What wisdom is there for us in their convention that even though the smallest successes are celebrated, addicts are not called to success but to faithfulness to their path?

Mays is not saying that any of us who have consciously or unconsciously been saying “no” to God in countless areas of our lives (p. 169) necessarily belong in Twelve Step programs (though I doubt any one of us would not benefit from their wisdom, support, and community.) Truth is, if you or I can even recognize, never mind confess and surrender to the nature of our addictions, the form of help we seek to free ourselves will be more determined by the nature of our attachments. Clearly major destructive addictions demand assistance from professionals. More interior idolatries require spiritual companionship and accountability. Sometimes we just need a friend to help keep us honest. (p. 172)

Or maybe sometimes we just need a sermon to hold up a mirror to help us see, accept and claim what Mays calls “the sweetly painful incompleteness within ourselves.” The inescapable, sweetly painful, incompleteness in ourselves. Is anyone without it? Dare we see it? Accept it? Endure it? Mays suggests we not only we recognize, accept

and surrender to that incompleteness, but that we learn to *love* it as a precious gift from God! (p. 180.)

Now *there's* a leap.

But if we believe that God is good and loves us unconditionally, if we believe that through Christ Jesus, God is in us and we are in God, that we are in one another yet are very much ourselves, (p.175), then wouldn't anything that substitutes, harms or breaks our relationship with God, lead us to that greatest faith risk of all - bringing the *whole* truth of ourselves, just as we are, to God, just as God is? (p.169) And seeing what happens? Can we do that? Do we do that? There's a lot of compartmentalization in the church world – behave this way at home, this way at church. But what if there weren't? What if we even brought the whole of ourselves to one another? What would happen?

It's an open-ended question, and my gut feel about this church is that we risk it more than most, bringing the whole of ourselves to one another. At least to the extent that we bring the whole of ourselves even to ourselves. But it's a process, a life-long process, a life-long open-ended process, a process of becoming, always incomplete.

Says Mays, "authentic spiritual wholeness, by its very nature open-ended." Thus we ourselves must also be always incomplete. If it were otherwise, we could never exercise our God-given right to participate in ongoing creation." (p. 180)

St. Augustine was certainly correct when he said that our hearts will never rest until they rest in God. What Mays is saying is, "nor are they *meant* to." Our hearts are not *meant* to rest until they rest in God. And this "precious restlessness" is not so much a sign of something wrong, a problem to be solved, a pathology to be treated, a disease

to be cured, than a sign of something more profoundly *right* that we could ever dream of. Do you see? Understood in this way, our addictions have the ability to lead us to our truest treasure, the most precious thing we have – God’s song of love in our soul.

On this second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist cries out, “in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord!”

The way I see it, there’s no complying with the scruffy prophet’s command until we’ve first dared at least to walk *into* that wilderness. We Advent pilgrims on the way to the manger, that’s where John is calling us to go first – into the great wilderness of our addictions and attachments, of all the things that stand between our longing for love and the God who loves us, for that is where we’ll find God. Name, claim and confess and work *that* wilderness, and you’ll be on a straight path to that manger and the new life about to be laid in it.

For those of us who risk the journey and do the work, may the question become, “Where *isn’t* God in addiction?”

To the glory of God. Amen.