



# HOLY CROSS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin



## WORSHIP SERVICE FOR SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

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Pr. Jay Ford, ELCA Pastor

Reading: Genesis 39:1-23

If you would allow me to pray as I begin... **[The 3rd Step Prayer]**... "God, I offer myself to You to build with me and to do with me as You will. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Your power, Your love, and Your way of life. May I do Your will always! Amen."

**"Hello! My name is Jay, and I am an alcoholic."** And that is how I introduce myself at any meeting of Alcoholic's Anonymous.

Now, I realize that this is a church service, and not an AA meeting. But I have known many recovering Christians who have wished that their congregation was as open and honest about their lives and problems, and at the same time as accepting and supportive of their recovery, as is the AA community.

Seven weeks ago I retired from parish ministry after serving for 40 years. And I told our Bishop, Paul Erickson, that I wanted to wait a full year before being asked to help out with any pulpit supply or interim needs. But when Pastor Meredith contacted me and told me about the hope and focus that you are giving at this time to **"addiction and addiction recovery,"** well, I felt the Lord pulling at my heart. And I realized that God was giving me an opportunity to not only share **"my experience, strength, and hope"** about recovery, but was also giving me an opportunity to reinforce my own recovery by hearing myself remember where I have come from, and where - by God's grace - I am today. ...I want to commend *Linda and Jim* who risked sharing their stories last weekend. And I thank you all for this opportunity for myself, today!

Now, like **"Joseph"** in our Scripture Reading, I would like to be able to say that I was also able to resist the subtle temptation to have an affair - in my case, with alcohol. But addiction is much more than a matter of *choice and willpower*.

Alcohol is so prevalent and normalized in our culture - and especially in the Wisconsin culture - so much so that we often tend to deny or not see the problem. And for many people, alcohol poses no problem. But for at least 15% of the population, the subtle *"seduction"* - and then the *disease of addiction* - (and I believe that addiction is **"a disease"**) if left *untreated* will either figuratively or literally sentence a person *to prison* or even *to death*.

But there is **hope** for recovery. And one place that many find such hope is with AA. I will never forget the first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous that I ever attended. It was actually being held at the congregation that I was serving in California. I was very nervous and apprehensive as I approached the door that evening. But by that point I couldn't keep fooling myself. I needed help. ...But, unfortunately, it took me far too *many years* to get to that point, and to honestly face my *powerlessness*.

*After all, to admit that I was an alcoholic would then be admitting that I really shouldn't drink anymore. And did I really want to give that up? What would that do to my status among my peers, or parishioners? And how would that affect my social life, or my ways of dealing with the pressures of life, as well as enjoy life's celebrations?*

But a few days before that first AA meeting, I had gone in to a Recovery Center for an assessment. And one of the things that I then learned about that recovery program was that I would have to attend at least two (2) AA meetings per week. Well, something inside me gathered up the courage that I needed, and I walked into that room that night.

I was one of the first people to arrive. And I was immediately met by a guy who came up and welcomed me by introducing himself. *"Hello. My name is Mike,"* he said as he offered me a handshake. *"I know,"* I said, as I shook his hand. *"My name is Jay,"* I said. And likewise, he said, *"I know."* And, of course, he did know me because he was the guy that we issued a key to the church to, specifically for that meeting. And I would see him come to the office from time to time.

*"So, have you come to check up on us?"* he asked humorously. *"No,"* I said, with a somber tone. And while feeling my heart pounding loudly in my chest, I said to Mike, *"Tonight this is my meeting, too."*

And Mike immediately understood. And what really impressed me was that - without a blink of an eye, or a moment's hesitation - Mike put his arm around my shoulder... and he led me to the coffee pot...And then he showed me where I could sit. And he briefly explained what I could expect to happen in that meeting - assuring me that there would be no pressure for me to say or do anything.

Well, at that time I wasn't one of those people who possesses the objectivity or the courage and self-awareness on my own needed to face this problem of addiction. Few of us addicts wake up one morning and say, *"Well, my life is going great! I think I will go into recovery!"* No, I needed help to push myself through my own fears and denial. As someone else once said to me, ***"Many of us get into recovery not because we 'saw the light,' but because we 'felt the heat.'"***

And sometimes that "heat" comes from the court system. My "heat" came from my loving wife who - after suffering for years from my addiction and my many failures at controlling my addictive behavior - had finally made the decision that she didn't want to live in this kind of relationship any longer. ...

She was the only other person who really saw my drinking problem progressing. The people in my congregation didn't see it. My church staff and friends, and even the rest of my family, were not aware. And for way too long my wife tried to deny it, too. After all, *who wants to be married to an addict?* ...No one!

Now, my wife had done a lot of those things that loving "codependents" often try to do in order to deny what intuitively she knew was true. At first she tried to keep up with my amount of drinking in order to "normalize" it. But that didn't work. And I was "a hider" with my drinking. I hid my bottles, because I knew she was watching. And I was afraid that she would get after me if she really saw how much I wanted and needed to drink.

Periodically, she would go on a "hunt and destroy" mission when I was away from home. And she would find a bottle that I had hidden somewhere. And I would come home, and I would feel a sudden pain in the pit of my stomach when I saw that bottle - whether partially filled or empty, sitting on the kitchen table. ...But my first thought wasn't "*Jay, you've got a drinking problem.*" No! My first thought was, "***Where did she find it? Jay, you need to be a better hider!***" That's an example of the "insanity" of addiction.

You see, I was always protecting my supply. And I was always willing to run to the grocery store if we might need anything, because that would give me an opportunity to purchase more alcohol. And I would put the grocery receipt in my wallet in order to remember to record the purchase in our family checkbook. But first I would tear off the upper part of the receipt so that my wife couldn't see the alcohol that I also purchased.

Well for me, that "fork in the road" moment came that day when my wife told me that she no longer wanted to live with me in that kind of relationship. And knowing that she couldn't control me or my drinking, she said that if I wanted to continue drinking, I could. And I wouldn't have to hide it any longer, she said. I could keep my bottles right there in the open and on the kitchen table. That kitchen table, however, would just have to be somewhere else, she said. And I knew that this time she was serious. I was about to lose my wife and family, and probably also my career. And that scared me.

My wife had been to see a therapist earlier that day. We had actually seen a number of therapists over the years, both individually and together. But what I now know is that a lot of therapists really don't know much about "addiction" (as strange as that may seem). But I thank God that that day she had seen a therapist *who did recognize* what she was talking about. And he helped her rehearse her speech to me. And he gave her a brochure about a Recovery Center that he would recommend - the one that, days later, I went to, to have that assessment with.

Now, I can't say that our problems were then immediately solved. They weren't. Because, as often happens when you begin good therapy, things seem even worse at first.

But that's because you are finally talking about things that have needed to be talked about for a long time. And you are now feeling things that before were ignored, or unrecognized, or anesthetized.

Well, I am especially grateful that the Recovery Center that I went to also had a "family component" to it. Because addiction is *a family disease*. No one is unaffected. And the whole *family system* gets built around the addiction. ...So, in order for there to be good recovery, that whole family system needs to be looked at and changed. And new roles and behaviors need to be learned in order for the family system to now support recovery, and healing, and new life.

I am so grateful that my wife and our two teenage children were willing to take part in those group sessions. Because we all grew in our understanding about addiction and each other. And our kids now recognize that they also possess a biological predisposition to addiction. And they will need to pay attention to that.

**"Well, where was God in all of this?"** some people may ask me. **"After all, you're not only a religious person - a Christian - but even a pastor. How come your faith didn't help you?"**

Those are great questions. And what I have come to recognize in myself and in my experience is that while I always had **"faith"** in God, it wasn't the kind of faith I needed. I thought that I was being a faithful person. But over time my pastoral role became a façade. And behind that façade was a whole lot of emptiness, and darkness, and fear.

I've done a lot of reflection and study about this. And four years ago I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the subject of **"*Spiritual Formation in Recovery*."** And I was helped to learn that it was Martin Luther who recognized that there are two different kinds of faith. One kind is the faith that is about *"information and knowledge."* Luther used the Latin word **"Fides"** to describe this kind of faith. It's about having "information" about God.

But the deeper kind of faith, Luther said, is the faith where a person really centers and entrusts his or her life. And the Latin word that Luther used for that kind of faith is the word **"Fiducia"** - from which we get the word "fiduciary" (which is someone who is entrusted with the wellbeing of another).

I came to realize that while I had all kinds of "knowledge" about God and God in Christ Jesus, I wasn't really "entrusting" myself to God in Christ. Instead, I was entrusting myself to an addictive substance - in my case, to alcohol. That is what I went to for things like inspiration and for comfort. That is what I woke up thinking about, and made sure that I had enough of for the day. That is what was always not far from my mind in one form or another. In other words, that is what became the center of my life. Not God. Not Christ. But alcohol. And that needed to change!

But once I removed that alcohol and dependency from my life, I needed to replace it with something else, because nature abhors a vacuum. And if I didn't fill it with **"a God who loves me"** - as Jesus reveals through His own life, death, and resurrection - well then some other kind of evil addictive behavior was going to take its place.

So, I really needed to get on with **"practicing what I preached."** I needed to daily *entrust* my whole self to Christ. And I thank *Alcoholic's Anonymous* for repeatedly reminding me to do that. ...I am glad to announce that my wife and I have remained *married for 44 years now*, and more in love than ever. ...And as of this last Tuesday, by the grace of God and the support of my sisters and brothers of AA, I am grateful to have *23 years of continued sobriety*... And the timing of that anniversary together with your present focus on **"addiction and recovery"** is another reason why I felt God calling me to come here today and utilize this opportunity to briefly share my story with you.

Now, many of you are probably like **"Joseph"** in our Reading today, able to recognize and flee from temptation and wrong doing. You are people of good character, and we all are blessed by your lives and your example. But for those of us who have not been so able, we need to hear that **God still loves us**, and has revealed that love by coming to us in Christ Jesus...who, as you know, wasn't above socializing with the lowly, the outcasts, or "the diseased" of this world. Risking to entrust our lives and wellbeing to Him can change everything. And I know that I have felt His touch and counsel through so many of the people that I have met through AA, as well as in the Church.

I remember once at the Recovery Center hearing another alcoholic trying to justify himself about drinking by pointing out to the medical director, Barry Rosen, that Jesus Himself turned water into wine. *"Yes Jesus did,"* said Dr. Rosen, *"But not FOR YOU!"* And for me as a Christian, and especially as a pastor, that became a bit of a quandary since a significant part of ministry has involved the sharing of this meal of the Lord's Supper - where Jesus promises that *in, with, and under* these elements of bread and wine is His body and blood given and shed **"for you,"** as we always hear promised. Well, that is true. And part of the mystery of this sacrament is that here we have a physical and tangible way in which we can know that the love, and acceptance, and forgiveness and grace of Jesus is for all of us collectively, and each of us personally. I also know that the church teaches that if I get just one of those elements - whether just the bread or the wine - I receive everything that Jesus intends this sacrament to be for us. So, there are some times where I choose to just receive the bread if that is my only option.

But here at **Holy Cross** - just as I have done in my previous congregations - a "white grape juice" option is also offered for anyone who (for a whole host of reasons even beyond that of addiction) may want to receive that instead. Well, we can trust that Jesus will make even that what it needs to be for us. So, come today and receive. Please know that I have now added all of you to my prayers for however alcohol or addiction has wounded your life.

I encourage you to take advantage of the resources and resource people available to assist you in your ongoing need for healing and recovery. And I pray that God will find something in what I have shared today to benefit you. At the very least, I thank God and you for this opportunity which has benefitted me and reinforced my journey of sobriety for today. ...God bless you all. Amen.

### Prayers of the People

Filled with God's abundant blessings, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

L: Faithful God, through Joseph you bless so many whose lives were in his path. Make us blessings for others so that they may know your abundant mercy. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: We pray for your Spirit to continue to move in this place as we learn more deeply what it means to welcome all your beloved children to our faith community. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: Give us courage to speak in times when truth must bring light to lies, deceit, and convenience of the status quo. We pray for your spirit to work to bring truth and that falsehoods will not win the day. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: May courage and healing surround those seeking recovery – protect those who are still using – comfort families and open doors for their own health and healing. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: Continue to lift up servants to carry out our ministries here at Holy Cross – many helping hands are needed. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: Surround with your presence all who suffer. We pray for the Ukraine and Russian people as things beyond their control affect those they love and the communities in which they live. We also pray for those experiencing desperation from earthquake, hurricanes, flooding, drought and fire. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: Pour out your healing upon Gary Engel, Aaron Baker, David Falk, hospitalized and those in Hospice Simone Rogina, Barb Woerner and John Sauerberg. Surround Justin and Lindsay upon the death of their father Robert Groeschel. Be their hope and steadfast comfort. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L: We give thanks for the faithful service of Pr. Jay Ford and pray for your blessing to surround him and his family in this new chapter of retirement. May he find new and rewarding ways to serve. We are grateful for his sharing his time with us this weekend. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

L With full confidence of your mercy, we pray these things in the name of Jesus, our savior and Lord. Amen.