



- Step 2 - Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity
- Step 3 - Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Those who are struggling with addictions know that all the resolve in the world isn't enough. It takes a "higher Power to restore us to sanity." It takes, as St. Paul says, "the Spirit that helps us in our weakness."

For some in this room, you know exactly what I'm talking about, because you've been battling an addiction: an uncontrollable dependence on substances or activities that we know are destroying us and those around us whom we love. And some of you know what it's like to lose loved ones to addiction's deadly grip; our only comfort is that they finally rest in peace now, rest safely in God's everlasting arms. Others right now might be saying, thank God my problems aren't that bad. But my guess is that all of us have something we're struggling with, something harder to break than we'd like to admit. Not a full-blown addiction, but what might be called "bad habits." These habits may on the surface be innocuous, really; what harm is there in the ice cream/Sudoku/Pinot Gris anyway, as long as they're not wildly overdone, or for that matter shopping or watching TV or checking Facebook or playing video games? But the truth is that we know we turn to them to numb ourselves: we go to them to numb us to the stress of the daily grind, or numb us to the loneliness we feel at our core, or numb us to the pain of a relationship gone south, or numb us to the feeling that we've failed miserably at our work or failed at our ability to provide or failed at our capacity for love. We turn to them to numb ourselves to pain, and the problem is that once we're numb we don't do anything about the underlying problem. Moreover, once we're numb we find ourselves a little dead to joy as well, and deep gladness. We feel less than fully connected and alive.

There are things – important things – that we need to change in our lives, and it’s just really hard to do it on our own. And that’s why, as the new year begins, we’re going to spend this month reminding ourselves that God’s promises are sure. We’re going to remind ourselves about the covenantal promises God has made with us. And we’re going to remind ourselves of the power “greater than ourselves” that helps us keep our promises too.

Why am I so sure that this is going to work? Because God’s relationship with us has always been a covenantal one. God’s covenants run through the Bible like a string of pearls: God’s covenants with Noah and the patriarchs, Moses and the kings; the people of Israel in the desert and in exile; the disciples and those baptized in the Spirit. Over and over again, God makes covenants with us: making a promise, sealing it with a visible sign, ushering in a new identity and way of life. For Abraham, it was the promise to make him a great nation. The sign was circumcision. The new identity was to change his name from Abram to Abraham; but more importantly, his new purpose was to be a blessing to the world.

That’s how it works in us too. In the covenant of baptism, God promises to make us God’s children through the power of the Holy Spirit. The water of baptism is the seal. The result is a new identity: beloved ones, who are a witness to God’s love for the world. That’s what we celebrate today, as we renew our own baptismal vows. And because this covenant starts with *God’s* promise, and not ours – God’s unfailing, reliable, resolute promise – it is a promise we can trust.

Maybe an example will help make it real. My friend Leanne Reed recently shared with me a story Fr. Gregory Boyle tells in his memoir *Tattoos on the Heart*:

[He] tells of his work in gang rehabilitation in some of the most crime-ridden areas of Los Angeles. He recalls getting a phone call one

afternoon from a young man named Cesar. He'd known this kid most of his life, watched him grow up in the neighborhood, where he'd joined a local gang. Cesar had just finished a four-year stint in prison.

Cesar tells him, "You know I just got out, I don't really have a place to stay, I'm staying with a friend in his apartment, trying to stay away from the projects and the hood and the homies. Here's the thing: I don't got no clothes. Can you help me?"

So Gregory agrees to meet him after work, and finds Cesar waiting on the sidewalk outside the apartment. He's a scary looking guy. He was already a big guy and then spent his time in prison lifting weights. He looks muscular and menacing. But when he sees the priest coming to pick him up, this huge ex-con breaks into a smile and does a happy jig right there on the street. They head to JCPenney and Boyle tells him he can buy \$200 worth of clothes. He finds all the essentials, and then they stand together in a long line waiting to check out. All the other customers are staring at Cesar, with his rippling muscles and too-loud voice. When Cesar realizes that some of the customers seem afraid of him, he asks, "I mean, dang, G. . . do I look *that* scary?"

And Gregory tells him, "Yeah, pretty much, dog" -- and everyone in the line laughs together, tension relieved. Gregory drops Cesar off back at the friend's apartment and heads home.

Then his phone rings at three in the morning. It's Cesar, sober and urgent. "I gotta ask you a question," he says. "You know how I've always seen you as my father -- ever since I was a little kid? Well, I hafta ask you a question."

"Have I . . . been . . . your son?"

“Oh, yeah, “ Gregory responds. “Oh yeah.”

And crying gently, Cesar says, “Then . . . I will be . . . your son. And you. . . will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?”

“That’s right.”

Gregory Boyle reflects:

In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having. The voice broke through the clouds of his terror and the crippling mess of his own history, and he felt himself beloved.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, we remember that, through Jesus, we join in the baptismal covenant too. We join with Jesus in hearing God’s promise: You are my beloved Son; you are my beloved child. We are given a visible sign: the water of baptism that seals the covenant. And we receive a new identity and way of life, resulting from God’s promise. Through the clouds of our fear, and the numbness of our habits, and the weariness of our own failed resolutions, we discover our new identity. Not only that we have a Father who loves us; we are children of God worth having.

Today, may we begin the New Year not by the power of our own promises. May we begin this year by allowing ourselves to feel – really feel – just how beloved we are.

---

<sup>1</sup> Boyle, Gregory, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010) 28-31, cited by Leanne Pearce Reed in her unpublished paper for the 2012 Moveable Feast.