

What Can I Do? -- Pent + 10B

What does this letter to the Ephesians say to us? It is a prayer for our spiritual health. Love, Reality, Goodness, God, by whom everyone in heaven and on earth is named, God will provide strength in our hearts through faith. Thus we will have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth. and to know the love that surpasses mere knowledge to self-knowledge and beyond. This is the "Fullness of god." Set your heart on these things.

We are to set our hearts on knowledge, not just factual knowledge, but the spiritual knowledge beyond. Wisdom should be our Holy Grail. Notice four dimensions: breadth and length and height and depth. In other words, not just a description of things and people, but an understanding of them, beginning with ourselves. When New Testament people lived it was thought that the heart was the seat of intelligence and thought. Emotions were thought to be centered below the heart, in the gut. So when the letter petitions God that Christ may dwell in each of us, that indwelling begins with the mind, with knowledge, progressing to self-knowledge, and only then to spiritual knowledge and faith.

In the world of addiction treatment and recovery, the literature describes the course of any addiction. It is said that "(We) became ill – first spiritually, then mentally and emotionally, then physically." In other words, as a cancer, the arc of addiction first entails the loss of spiritual knowledge, then it moves into the heart and gut, poisoning self-knowledge. Finally the physical symptoms of the disease start appearing, changes that catapult the addict into misery.

The addict becomes ill, first spiritually, then mentally and emotionally, then physically. For example, a little kid might steal something, just to see what it feels like. When caught, a normal

personality would remember the instance as a marker of something not to do again, an opportunity for growth. But the addictive personality feels guilty about the stealing and vows – not never to do it again but – never to get caught again. This leads to lying, cheating, stealing: spiritual bankruptcy.

Next the progression is to the mental and emotional dimension; the addict begins denying the truth, especially truth about themselves if that truth blocks access to their drug of choice. This causes self-esteem to plummet even further and depression to rush in and occupy the ramparts of the mind. Relationships with others become less and less feasible as the addict's relationship to herself deteriorates.

Finally, as the disease progresses, there are physical consequences: illness, injuries, crimes and misdemeanors, leading to hospitals, jails, institutions and graveyards. The untreated addict will end up locked up, sobered up or covered up, goes the adage.

Recovery from addiction proceeds in the reverse order. Addicts in successful treatment soon begin to recover physically, because they aren't actively poisoning themselves anymore. Then comes mental and emotional renewal: truth is no longer dreaded, but newly embraced; the word humility is learned; self-confidence, or at least self-regard returns; and one feels much better about life. Mind you, this is if the addict is in recovery; for the formula to work, they have to enact their willingness to heal. They have to do something about it.

Eventually, a state is reached where there is (however relative) some kind of peace and contemplation in one's life again, the kind that might have existed had before you started stealing. Whatever her religious leanings, the addict in recovery takes on practices like meditation and prayer, that foster self-awareness and humility;

insight and fulfillment. She becomes convinced of the fellowship of all humankind. Spiritual matters become more significant; surely goodness and mercy begin to follow the days of her life.

The way addiction recovery works -- by spiritual transformation -- is what the epistle writer means by praying that, according to the riches of God's glory, we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through the Spirit. Even if one has no other beliefs, in order to recover, (as opposed to merely surviving) there must be a conviction that there is such a thing as cosmic goodness, and that pursuing it is not only possible but desirable, important, even vital. This conviction must be demonstrated by reminding oneself that ceasing to pursue it is the fast track back to hospitals, jails, institutions and the graveyard.

Our separation from the grace of God, our loss of that peace which passeth understanding occurs according to a similar pattern, spiritual deterioration followed by tragic mental, emotional and physical loss. If we are to recover, we must do so in the reverse order: physical practices like worship, meditation, and service to others leads to seeing the world more clearly and feeling better about what we see. This, in turn, eventuates in true humility, perspective and cosmic connection. But it begins with an invitation, a desire to stop running away from life, from reality, from God; a willingness to change. message: Christ's love will live in us only as we open the door and invite it in.

Where once we were fearful, cynical, bitter and isolating, we become engaged with the world and all those in it. As spiritual health increases, we become more attuned to beauty, compassion and hope. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote —

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with god;

and only she who sees takes off her shoes—the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

This is not to condemn the plucking of blackberries, a noble and satisfying undertaking to be sure, but to insist there is more to a well-lived life; one must learn to pluck them mindfully.

The issue is in letting Christ in to change us. having Christ dwell in our hearts is akin to having a new person move into your household. if they're just visiting, it's all rather easy. you simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners. but if someone moves in, everything changes. at first you might try to hold onto your familiar patterns and routines, but eventually they make their mark, and you change to accommodate them.

Nations can become addicted too – to power, to wealth, to brutal competition and violence, to pride. And they can go down the same sad roads. Again, the progression begins with spiritual cancer. In our case, the signers of the Declaration of Independence were the most progressive, exciting, admired people on the planet. But there was a fly in the ointment. Because slavery existed, and so much economic growth and so many fortunes were founded on the proceeds of it, our nation began its life spiritually out of whack. The truth can sound outrageous, but it is only by apprehending it that we are liberated from our addiction to self. There's no way the Gospel supports chattel slavery, yet our founders claimed to be Christian. All sorts of horrors have ensued.

Notice Jesus says, not merely that the truth will set us free, but that we will know the truth, and it will set us free. Until then, we are handicapped, imprisoned and paralyzed by our inherent vice, our besetting evil. We know (as Hannah Gadsby quips), “...more facts about unicorns than we do about ourselves... There are no facts about unicorns.”

A nation's mental and emotional decline or dysfunction might manifest itself in imperialist military activity in others' countries. It might result in the genocide of native peoples, or the wanton befoulment of the planet. The nation might become divided against itself. It might fail to take care of its poor, despite plentiful resources. Certainly its self-knowledge would cease.

And finally the physical evidence begins to pile up: A long and inestimably costly war on another continent, then another, then another. Traumatized young people, horribly polarized politics, debt, addiction to guns, addiction to incarceration. It is fair to say that the people we have allowed to lead us today would not be described as among the most progressive, exciting, admired people on the planet.

All of this points the way to a nation's recovery – first the physical: address injustice, hypocrisy, violence and corruption. Secondly the mental and emotional faculties return: economic cruelty, cynical manipulation, and habitual mendacity become less fashionable, and eventually recognized for their toxic effects. Kindness and justice return as virtues; unfriendly competition goes out of style. And finally the spiritual dimension opens up and we do take our place among the progressive, exciting and admired people on the planet.

Such it is with the promise of Jesus, such it is with the phenomenon of faith. It's free, but it ain't cheap. "Those who make comfort the great subject of their religion seem to mistake the proper end of ministry. Holiness is the great end. There must be a struggle and trial here. Comfort is a cordial, and no one drinks cordials from morning to night," wrote John Henry Newman. But the miracle of transformation, of recovery from addiction, of renewal of the kind of faith that works under all conditions is a gift. It is a

miraculous gift we give ourselves by allowing God to give it to us. Here is John Locke: "A miracle I take to be a reliable operation, which being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature is taken by him to be divine."

As the medieval proverb goes, "Christ lets us sink, but does not let us drown." It is in this sense that Christian knowledge is always something more than belief, something more than what the intellect can affirm. the heart has its reasons the mind cannot fathom.

Listen to the voice of a latter day holy one, Teilhard de Chardin:

If we do not believe,
The waves engulf us
The winds blow, nourishment fails,
Sickness lays us low or kills us.
If, on the other hand, we believe,
The waters are welcoming
And sweet,
The bread is multiplied,
Our eyes are open,
The dead rise again,
The power of god is as it were
Drawn out by sheer force
And spreads throughout all nature.