

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

16 "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 17 "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon'; 19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

My father was an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous for the last forty-five years of his life, and when I was visiting him, even as a child, he would take me along to meetings.

I always kind of liked them. I liked the story telling, and the openness, and the sense that everyone was in it together. I also absorbed the Twelve Steps and, over the years, I attended a couple of meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics and Al-Anon. But it wasn't just because of my dad.

Addiction is a generational disease, both because of biology and family systems, so I shouldn't have been surprised that it kept emerging in subsequent generations.

Shouldn't have been surprised to find myself in the waiting room of the county jail over and over, or visiting the psych ward, or driving around the streets searching, wondering where my loved one was. Wondering if they were still alive.

I wish I could say that my early encounters with the Twelve Steps equipped me for that. But there's nothing that really equips you for that. Nothing that keeps you from blaming yourself and getting caught in the crazy cycle of trying to fix something that cannot be fixed. Nothing that keeps you from being trapped in a prison from which you cannot tunnel out. Nothing that keeps you from being utterly and completely helpless.

Which bring us to the first Step:

We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Have you ever been at that point? It doesn't have to be alcohol—it could be anything. But have you ever gotten to that point where you were totally crushed, pinned to the ground, unable to stand? Have you ever felt utterly broken?

I wonder if that's where we are as a nation. We've been in denial for a long time about our addiction to White Supremacy. After all, we had a Black President! But racism is a systemic disease. Throughout our history, there have been times when we thought we had it beaten. The period after the Civil War led to amazing

advancements for Black Americans—Black men were able to vote, they were elected to national office—including Black congressmen from Alabama, and they passed all sorts of legislation that led to improved lives for all Americans. It looked like we were moving past our addiction to racism. And then, there was the brutal backlash of Radical Reconstruction, when the Federal government decided to turn a blind eye, and the Southern states implemented restrictions so extreme that they amounted to a new form of slavery.

Over and over, we've had these cycles. We seem to get sober, and everything looks fine—and then, as a nation, we go on a tear that leaves Black people and Indigenous people and People of Color brutalized.

It's as though, every time we think our addiction to racism is behind us, there are still flasks of poison tucked behind couch cushions and stashed in closets for us to sneak little sips along the way. But an addict can't stop with just a taste. Suddenly, America goes on another full-blown bender of backlash that plays out in police brutality and tiki-torch rallies and social media trolls.

It seems like there is nothing we can do to stop this cycle. This disease is so woven into every thread of our national fabric, every stripe of our flag, every law on our books, that we, as a nation, may begin to feel helpless.

But the good news is, admitting that is the first step. It's the first step, but it isn't the last. Because to be helpless doesn't mean that there is no help.

"Come to me," Jesus says, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Oh, my God, do we need rest! So battered are we, right now. As we battle a virus that puts people on ventilators, and an evil that puts Black Americans in a chokehold and in the ground, we all need a chance to breathe. A chance to set down our burdens and crawl into God's lap for just a bit.

But neither the Twelve Steps nor Jesus lets us stay there. Jesus goes on: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Now, a yoke can be a terrible thing. It can be used to increase someone's burden—like the yokes that are placed on the shoulders of women and children all over the world so that they can carry not just one, but two heavy buckets of water day after day until they are permanently bent and stooped.

Too often, the yoke of anti-racism has been placed on the shoulders of Black and Brown people, as though it's their job, alone, to take on the problem.

But Jesus isn't talking about a solo yoke. He's talking about a yoke that connects multiple people so that, together, they can share the one burden—making it lighter

for everyone. Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light, because it lies across the shoulders of all of his followers. We all share it. More than that, Jesus shares it, as well.

The beauty of a Twelve Step group is that everyone is in it together. Yes, each individual is helpless, but each person is also looking to a Higher Power—that's Step Two. And each person is looking to one another. Which is kind of crazy, that a bunch of people who are sick with the same disease, can help each other get well. Yet somehow, by the grace of God, it works if you work it. Step by step.

What if, as a nation, we worked those steps?

Admitting we're helpless against the disease of White Supremacy—and that it's a disease that affects all of us. Believing that a Higher Power can help us. Turning our lives over to that Higher Power. Making a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Admitting the exact nature of our wrongs. Becoming ready and willing to have those defects removed. Making a list of all people and peoples that our nation has harmed. Making amends—or reparations--to them in whatever way is possible. Continuing to take personal and national inventory and, whenever we do wrong, admitting it. Staying spiritually centered. Sharing our spiritual awakening with other nations and individuals who have injustice embedded in their systems.

And continuing to live by all of these principles in every area of our national and individual lives.

That's how you change not just a person—because a disease is never about one person: that's how you change an entire system. *And*, because diseases are never fully-eradicated, that's how you stay vigilant so that you won't get engulfed by another wave.

I can tell you that our family's nightmare had a happy ending—or, perhaps, a happy new beginning. It took a long time, with many false starts. And it was terrifying and painful.

I had a lot of fear, as our trauma became so bad that it couldn't be hidden. I was afraid of the judgment of others. Afraid that it would erode my credibility as a pastor—because, aren't ministers supposed to be able to manage their own family life?

Instead, though, what I experienced was tremendous grace. People reached out to us in caring ways. Church members shared stories with me about their own struggles that they might never have told me before, because they knew I could empathize. During that time—and it was years—the Leonard Cohen song that we heard as our anthem today came to mean a lot to me. “Ring the bells that still can

ring; forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything: that's how the light gets in.”

And there was light. Because we had to admit our helplessness, our brokenness, there was light.

And eventually, there was healing.

Step by step, step by step. We are broken, yes. We are broken as individuals. We are broken as a nation. If we insist on denying that—if we pretend to be great when we're not even good—then nothing can get better. And if we try to fix it on our own, we'll soon be staggering under the weight of it. But Jesus has yoked himself to us, and he is sharing the weight.

We may be crushed on the ground, and helpless. But when we admit our brokenness and our helplessness, God is there to lift us up, so that we can finally move forward, together, step by step by step. Thanks be to God.