

As part of my training for ministry, I spent about six months working as a chaplain intern at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta. One afternoon, I entered a hospital room to find a man about my age there in the bed. I did not have access to his medical charts, and he did not appear to have any obvious injuries or infirmities, so I said, "Hi, my name's Ryan, and I'm one of the chaplains here. What brings you to Grady?"

He invited me to sit down and began to tell his story.

He was from the Pacific Northwest, where he once had a small handyman and general contractor business. He had been married, and he and his wife had a young son. It was not a perfect marriage by any means, but he thought they were reasonably happy together. One day, his wife came to him and told him that she didn't love him anymore, and she took their son and left.

The pain of the breakup of his young family was so unbearable that he began to look for ways to numb it, particularly with smoke and drink. And at first it worked, at least for a little while. But his body began to develop a tolerance, and it began to take more to achieve the same effect. And the hook was set. In his own words, he said he smoked and drank his way through his truck and his tools, through his house, through every asset he had. He smoked and drank his way through his relationships with his extended family

and friends, and before long, he was nearly penniless, utterly alone, and desperate.

He decided that what was needed was the so-called geographic cure. He had some distant relatives in Atlanta, and so he scraped together what little money he had left and rode the bus all the way across the country.

But of course all of his problems followed him to Georgia. And he smoked and drank his way through whatever resources he may have had here.

He found himself, not yet 30 years old, sitting on the curb in front of a store. He was filthy, cold, and desperately hungry. He, in his own words, was not far from death. As shoppers would approach the store, he begged for a few dollars so that he might get himself something to eat. One person apparently took pity on him and slipped him a ten-dollar bill.

He entered the store, fully intending to buy a sandwich to satisfy the gnawing hunger in his stomach. But as he passed the bottle section, he said it was as if something had hold of him, body and soul. And so instead of spending those few dollars on some food, he bought himself a bottle, went behind the store into the alley, and drank its full contents at once. He remembered losing consciousness there in the alley, unsure of whether he would live or die, and not really caring. And when he came to again, he found himself there at Grady Memorial Hospital.

I listened to his story attentively, and we talked a little while longer, and then I left his room to make more rounds. I checked back the next day, but he had been discharged, and I never saw or heard from him again.

As we mentioned at the start of the service today, for the month of June, we're doing a sermon series called *Everybody Hurts Sometimes*. The inspiration for this series and format comes not in response to any particular event, but rather from general observations of those who serve in our congregation's ministries of pastoral care, who have noted that divorce, suicide, addiction, and domestic abuse are issues that have or will affect nearly every person in our community in some way.

Of course, there is nothing exclusively Christian about these topics – they have or will affect everyone with whom we share this planet. And I am by no means an expert on any of these subjects. And so as I see it, my role as a preacher is to put these topics into conversation with biblical texts and our Presbyterian theological tradition.

It's been 17 years since that day at Grady Hospital, but I can still see that man's face. I can still hear the shame and the pain and fear and bewilderment in his voice. I can still see him trying to comprehend how this thing had such power over him.

And as I thought about the conversations we're having today about addiction, I thought about him, and I

thought about a rather strange story from the Gospel According to Mark.

When we come to this story in Mark's gospel, Jesus and Peter and James and John have just been up on a high mountain, where Jesus was transfigured before them, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved! Listen to him!"

And so Jesus and Peter and James and John are coming down the mountain, and a crowd has gathered around the remaining disciples, and they seem to be arguing with one another. So listen now for a Word from God from Mark 9:14-29.

14When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. 16He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 18and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." 19He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." 20And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the

ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" 26 After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. 28 When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

For most of the Presbyterians I know, stories about demons and exorcisms make us a little nervous. We Presbyterians in general are a thoughtful bunch who like to do the work of the church decently and in order, but stories like this one don't fit neatly into categories.

But as I sat with this story, I thought again about the man in the hospital. I imagine his family and friends had done everything they knew how to do to help him, but obviously nothing that they had said or done had made any difference. He was so powerless against his demon that he acted against his own self-interest, even to his basic bodily need for food.

As I thought about his story, I thought about the desperate father there at the bottom of the mountain. I thought about his testimony about the power that his son's had over him.

"Whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down."

"It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him."

"If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us!"

"I believe! Help my unbelief!"

In Mark's gospel, the disciples are always getting it wrong or missing the signs. But in this case, I think they had genuinely done everything they knew how to do to free the boy from what was holding him captive, and I think they were genuinely puzzled about why their efforts had failed.

And so when they got to the house, they asked Jesus in private, "Why could we not cast it out?"

To which Jesus replied, "This kind can only come out through prayer."

This kind can only come out through prayer.

That's a strange thing to say, isn't it? I mean, even though the disciples weren't the sharpest tools in the shed, they had all grown up as faithful first-century Jews. Surely they were people who at least nominally understood that to pray means to attempt to connect with the divine. Just exactly what kind of prayer is Jesus talking about here?

I think he's talking about a prayer of surrender.

In a church I once served years ago, there was a young man we'll call Richard. He was a hotshot lawyer in town specializing in criminal defense. He and his wife had two young children and they lived in a very nice home and Richard drove a nice car. From the outside looking in, he had it all.

One day Richard called me and invited me to go to lunch with him at his club. At the appointed hour, he picked me up, but we did not go the country club or the yacht club. We went to the local clubhouse of a group called Alcoholics Anonymous. It just so happened that that day was Richard's birthday – but not the one listed on his driver's license, but the anniversary of the day he got sober and began working program of recovery from his addiction to alcohol, and as his pastor, he wanted to celebrate that day with me.

It was an open meeting, and as I looked around the room that afternoon, I was struck by what I saw. The 100 or

so people in that room were a perfect demographic and economic cross-section of the adult population of our city. It was lunchtime on a weekday, and some folks were dressed in pressed shirts and jackets, others in coveralls and work boots, and a few looked like they hadn't changed clothes in several days. Some folks appeared to be in their teens and early 20s, and others looked to be in their 80s or better.

The women and men in that room had nothing in common with each other except that they shared a common problem – they had come to understand that they were powerless over alcohol, so much so that their lives had become utterly unmanageable. But they also were there because they had discovered a paradox the only way to gain power over addiction is to come to terms with their powerlessness, and to willingly surrender their will and the care of their lives to a higher power.

Some of you, perhaps many of you, are familiar with 12-step recovery programs. The testimony that has been shared by so many in those rooms is that despite their own best efforts, despite all their best intentions, and despite all the efforts of the medical community and the therapeutic community and even the faith community, they are unable to cast out the demon of addiction by themselves. This kind, it turns out, only comes out through prayer – a prayer of surrender, a prayer that admits powerlessness, a prayer that seeks the willingness to surrender the will and the care of life over to the divine.

It's a posture of prayer that is modeled for us in the life of Jesus himself.

In the creed, we say that Jesus won victory over death. The third day he was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and from thence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.

But the paradox is that Jesus not win by calling down fire from heaven on those who opposed him. He won by surrendering his will and the care of his life over to God. He won by going to the cross. He had every right to be angry and resentful at those who had wronged him so grievously. But he won by praying, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Part of what makes the gospel so compelling and powerful to me, is that it's so utterly paradoxical. For his entire ministry, Jesus kept preaching and teaching that the way to move up in life is to intentionally move down. The way to become greatest of all is to become least of all and servant of all. The way to lead is not from on high with scepter and spear, but bent down at the feet of others with wash basin and towel.

The disciples had fought with everything they had against a demon, but the demon remained. When Jesus rebuked it and cast it out, he said to them, "This kind only comes out through prayer.

The prayer is not, "God, give me the power." The prayer is, "God, I am powerless. I have tried to fight it with everything I have, but it's still got me. So I surrender. I turn my will and the care of my life over to you."

That's a countercultural prayer if there ever was one, isn't it? Because we live in a culture that teaches us that we should pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, that we can engineer or medicate or think our way out of any problem. That teaches us that asking for help is a sign of weakness, that to surrender is to bring shame upon ourselves.

But the paradox of the gospel is this – when we admit powerlessness, we experience the power of God. When we ask for help, we show our strength. When we surrender our will and the care of our lives over to God, we truly begin to live.

This kind only comes out through prayer.

About 800 years ago, a saint of the church wrote a prayer that many folks are still praying to this very day. I invite you to join your hearts with mine as we pray it together.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

Where there is injury, let us sow pardon.

Where there is doubt, let us sow
faith.

Where there is despair, let us sow
hope.

Where there is darkness, let us
sow light.

Where there is sadness, let us sow
joy.

O Divine Master, grant that we
may not seek so much to be consoled as
to console,

To be understood as to
understand

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

It is in pardoning that we are
pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born
to eternal life. Amen.¹

¹ Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226)