



Poland Presbyterian Church
At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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5th Sunday after the Epiphany
February 8, 2015

Mark 1:29-391

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Free Indeed”

Last week we heard about the first miraculous healing done by Jesus, in the synagogue, of a man with an unclean spirit. Now, immediately afterward, Jesus moves to the house of Simon and another healing occurs. Word travels fast. By evening Jesus was deluged with people who were in need of healing in body, mind, or spirit. Out of his compassion for the people, Jesus healed them. And then, at daybreak Jesus found a quiet place and there he prayed. He didn't go back into town and begin healing what no doubt would have become a steady stream of people seeking wholeness, but rather Jesus left that place and began to travel throughout the Galilee proclaiming the message. And what was the message? The message was and still is that this Jesus came so that the world might know the true nature of God: that God is love and we are loved extravagantly, beyond our wildest imaginations and that the desire of God is that all people might be healed and made whole. Today we set aside a time to raise our consciousness about addictive behavior and to claim wholeness and healing, for ourselves and others.

Adam and Eve were in the garden before they ate the apple and they were naked but they did not know they were naked. Do you know why? They hadn't invented mirrors. Sometimes we live our lives as if they hadn't yet invented mirrors; the kind of mirrors that reflect the deep longings of our human souls; the kind of mirrors that make us self aware, able to see our own addictive behavior. And we all have addictive behavior. It rises up out of our anxieties.

My mother turned 90 last November and she isn't quite as mentally sharp as she used to be. But she still remembers how to play her favorite card game, Canasta. So when I can, at least once a week, I play Canasta with my mom. But she plays very slowly now. And I admit that it makes me very anxious to play with her. So I have this bag of Werther's chewy caramels at her house. And while I wait for her to make a move, I pop them into my mouth. Sometimes I pop them in my mouth at the rate of about 1 every three minutes. I can read the package and so I know that three of these beauties are worth 170 calories. Ten of them equal half of my daily intake of calories and I am trying to lose weight, not gain it. Half of my daily calories in sugar is not exactly healthy living. Yet I sit there for an hour and pop these chewy caramels into my mouth like they

were baby carrots. Now, it's not like my mom buys them for me and keeps them there to deliberately tempt me. I shop for her groceries. I could stop buying them, but I don't.

What is your addiction? Maybe it's sugar or chocolate or overeating. What do you do when you are anxious? Do you work late hours five nights a week rather than face coming home to active children and a frenzied mate and all the daily problems of living that face you when you walk through the door at night? Does the fear of economic insecurity keep you so anxious that you spend as little as possible and hoard as much as you can? Are you unable to stop playing candy crush, or put the Iphone down and stop texting, or spend a day without looking at Facebook? Our addictions are many and varied and the only difference between them and those these courageous young men are battling is the speed at which they destroy our lives.

Alcohol and drugs work faster at that. Deaths from drug overdoses are greater than those from auto accidents. In fact, in this country drug overdoses are the leading cause of death from injury. 120 persons die every day in our country from drugs and 6,748 are treated in emergency rooms. From 2010-2012 death from heroin overdoses doubled in every state in the union. The cost to our country is staggering; over \$56 billion per year in Ohio alone. In Ohio drug overdoses rose 372% in the ten years from 2000 to 2010. It is a fact that over half of all families in our country are affected in some way by drug and alcohol abuse. Look around, that's every other one of you. Half of you have been affected - in your family of origin, that is your parents or siblings, your own family - spouses and children and spouses of children, and your extended family, grandchildren, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Or maybe its you and maybe you are struggling with it now.

When my generation was young the drug of choice was alcohol. We don't talk too much about the end results of alcohol abuse, since that's a legally available substance. But the cost is high when you count the end effects like gastro intestinal bleeding, liver disease, early dementia, and accidental falls related to over indulgence. Today the drugs available are far more insidious, like prescribed opiates that often get people hooked. In my day we always thought that the typical heroin addict was an Afro American male in his twenties from the inner city. Today it is just as likely to be a 16 year old white female in a village like Poland. Illegal drugs from cocaine to psychadelics to heroin each have their own particular road to bondage and death. For that is where all addictions lead, whether they are quick to harm or slow getting there. All of our addictions from food to work to money to harmful substances, lead us to a place where we are no longer free to be the loving, creative, gracious creatures we were created by God to be. Nobody knows the grace of God so well as the one who has been freed from an addiction. Nobody knows the healing power of Christ's love as much as the one who has been brought back from the edge of death.

If you are familiar with 12 step programs you know that any 12 step program is basically the same as the steps for living into our identity as Christians. We believe in one all powerful God. We know that we are powerless without God; empowered only by grace, and so we seek to turn our will over to God. We do this everytime we pray the Lord's prayer. And if we are brave enough we look into the mirror and make an honest

effort at self examination. If we are serious about our Christian life we do this fearlessly and persistently, confessing our sin both privately and publically. Then we can open ourselves to receive forgiveness and healing. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive others", we pray. Reconciliation between us and those we have harmed by any behavior is necessary for true forgiveness to take place. Sometimes others are not willing to be reconciled but we must make the effort nonetheless.

Like Paul, we do the thing we do not want to do and the thing we want to do we do not do. The process of self examination, confession, and forgiveness is continual, not just once and we're done. One day at a time we are healed and transformed into holy people. One day at a time, with the help of God, we come back to center and once again find balance.

Jesus was our best example of that; centered and grounded. We never see him too anxious over events taking place around him. But I imagine that all of those people crowded around him, clamoring to be healed, hungry to be taught, must have drained Jesus's human energy. It must have stressed him out a little bit. Jesus knew how to handle anxiety. At the end of a long day or the beginning of one about to unfold, Jesus went away to a quiet place, away from the crowds, and he prayed. Through prayer and meditation he increased his conscious contact with God. There can be no better way than this to relieve the anxieties of our lives.

Healing happens in community. We see that as the disciples bring Jesus to Simon's mother-in-law and he heals her of her fever. She gets up and begins to take her place in the community by serving others in the example Jesus has set for us. These fifteen men and their director, Phil, part of a community of more than 60 men, living together in a Christian community with the goal of recovery from addictions, are here today because they, too, have been healed and are now compelled to go out to churches each Sunday to serve others. When we have experienced the healing love of Jesus we have no other response than to share this good news with others. Those are the 12 steps.

Substance abuse is not something to be hidden away in secrecy. Even Jesus was tempted as we are. And Jesus suffers with us when we suffer from the effects of substance abuse. Recovery is possible. Teen Challenge is just one of many programs out there to help families on the road to recover. But Teen Challenge is different than other recovery programs.

There are three important aspects of their program that I believe in. And I am familiar with recovery programs, both from my own family as I am one of the 50% and through working as a chaplain to the alcohol treatment unit at the National Institutes of Health. First of all, their higher power has a name – Jesus the Christ. Secondly, this is not a 28 day program that simply scratches the surface, but a year long program for recovery. Rehabituating a life of substance abuse doesn't happen in 28 days. It is a lifelong process and 12 months or more gives a much better start to that process. And thirdly, this program is affordable. It is affordable because the expenses are lower than standard disease model programs and because the men and women in teen challenge contribute to the cost of the program. They work and they must tap other resources. It is

affordable because Teen Challenge receives funding, not from government programs, but from churches and individuals that believe in the program as we do. This allows even those without resources the same chance at recovery. When you leave today there is an offering plate in the Narthex with a Teen Challenge sign where you can leave anything you feel moved to offer. We will have a reception in the parlor right after worship if you would like to meet these gentlemen and we are going to lunch at the Royal Grill Buffet in Boardman Plaza and you are welcome to join us there around 12:30.

Freedom from addictions begins with an attitude of humility and gratitude. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the Son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." In humility and gratitude please join me in this prayer attributed to one of the wisest theologians of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.