

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 23, Year B, October 14, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "The Five Step Program"
Mark 10:17-31

over the years, through parishioners and friends who have been active in AA or similar groups, I've learned some of the basics of Twelve Step programs; and I have found them surprisingly relevant to the church environment; in particular, I recall hearing statements about who is welcome at Twelve Step meetings; namely: if you accept their approach, you are welcome; if you are not sure about their approach, you are welcome; even if you disagree with their approach, but something leads you to want to attend their meetings anyway, you are welcome

I think that we in the churches need to make sure that our concept of welcome is as broad as that; and especially that we are loud and clear to people outside of churches that this broad welcome applies to all of them; I'm especially led to reflect about this as our focus today is on our New Member Vestry Commission

the Twelve Step programs' understanding of God is summarized by the phrase "God, as you understand God;" the church certainly has a definite understanding about God, but we welcome people to church to learn about that; we can't expect them necessarily to have it already; and I believe this approach is something to emulate as we promulgate our church's beliefs with humility and with respect for other individuals' or other groups' understandings of God, which may differ from ours; even as we deal with groups of fellow Episcopalians we may find people who have different theologies, different politics, or different moral positions than ours; whoever we're dealing with, we need to express our willingness to talk about our differences

another thing from Twelve Step programs that is relevant to church has to do with fellowship and friendship; I've heard about people attending Twelve Step meetings just for the fellowship and friendship, because it did them good to be with people who shared the same kinds of experiences they'd had; but those folks also recognized that they didn't get any better just from attending meetings for the fellowship and the friendship; it was only when they'd gotten serious about their recovery and taken action, by doing the Twelve

Steps that they actually experienced improvement in their life

I hope it's obvious to us what this has to do with Christian life in the church; I've known many people (and for certain periods of my life I'd put myself into the same group) who came to church for fellowship and friendship, but missed out on it having much impact on their lives because they hadn't taken the actions necessary for it to change their lives; what actions might these be? the church doesn't have something as defined as a Twelve Step program, but it does have something comparable; in the Catechism (Book of Common Prayer p 856) is this question: "What is the duty of all Christians?"

the answer our Catechism gives could be called our Episcopal 'Five Step' program; it is this: "The duty of all Christians is to (show fingers - 1) follow Christ; to (2) come together week by week for corporate worship; and to (3) work, (4) pray, and (5) give for the spread of the kingdom of God;" these are the actions which change our lives and bring us ever closer to God

(step 1) is to follow Christ; it does not say to just 'believe in Christ', as in a mental state; to 'follow' Christ is activity that requires us to match our intentions, our actions, and our words to Jesus' and to to live a Christ-like life; we heard Jesus say it in our Gospel passage today: "come, follow me"

(step 2) to come together week by week for corporate worship; obviously meaning to attend church regularly

(step 3) to work for the spread of the kingdom of God; through service, through outreach, and through evangelism; through church programs or through individual and family actions on our part

(step 4) to pray for the spread of the kingdom of God; daily, as part of whatever other prayer concerns we may voice

(and finally step 5) to give for the spread of the kingdom of God; presenting your pledge card annually is one way to do this; and recall that our pledge cards this year are two-sided, with the giving of money on one side and the giving of volunteer time and skills on the other; and our UTO giving is another way intentionally to spread the kingdom of God

fellowship and friendship are important, but they are always the side benefits of church; they are not why we're here; we're here to get on with the program, with the actions which will change our lives and change the world; and us living the program, is the best way to invite others in to take part in following Jesus along with us