Taking “What About me?” to a New Level a sermon by The Rev. Bill Eberle prepared for Opioid Addiction Awareness Sunday Brunswick County, North Carolina April 29, 2018 Readings 5th Sunday of Easter in the Revised Common lectionary: [1 John 4:7-21](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html#nt1) [John 15:1-8](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html#gsp1) [Psalm 22:24-30](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html#ps1)

Taking “What About me?” to a New Level

With whom do you share life?

There are some people whose whole life is bound up in themselves. The central question for them is: “Well, what about me?” How can I hang on to what I have? You would think that those who have less would center on the question: “Well what about me?” How can I hang on to what I have?

You would think that people who have very little would focus on hanging on to possessions. But it doesn’t seem to be the case. People with very little seem more willing to share. Generally, people who travel on mission trips are amazed by the generosity of Third World Christians. Folks I’ve met on trips to Haiti seem to have another idea: that we are all in this together. It is as if we are all one family.

Now the Bible has this bizarre belief that we all have the same Father in heaven, our creator God, who formed us with the family characteristic of self-forgetful love even to “seventy times seven forgiveness. Do you remember that Bible story? Peter asks how many times he is to forgive his brother. At least one standard for forgiving in the Old Testament is three times. Peter doubles that and adds one, “seven times?” he asks. Jesus says, “seventy times seven.” In other words, this is beyond counting you don’t “keep score” with forgiveness.

“What about me?” is probably a non-helpful question, too self-centered rather than centered in God’s family. So, when the Bible asserts we are all God’s family there is a clear practical application in everyday life. We are branches meant to be grafted into “root stock.”

It is a commonplace in our culture to talk about dysfunctional families. At some level, we have a template of the family probably based on Norman Rockwell pictures and early TV shows about families. All sorts of factors have combined to produce other positive configurations, single parent families, grandparents raising grandkids, divorced spouses with joint custody; these and some others have become mainstream with the same underlying reason for being: “Ideally, family is where you are always welcomed back, where you are not turned away, where you are forgiven innumerable times.”

This is the pattern for family. Forgiveness is at the core. Let’s be clear: **Forgiveness is NOT a license to then go and do wrong**. When Jesus tells one woman her sins are forgiven he says—in the same breath— “go and sin no more!”

Jesus gives us a picture of the forgiving father in the stories in Luke 15, the lost coin, of the lost sheep, and the lost son—the prodigal one. You remember him and the older brother, the “good boy” who was so filled with self-righteousness that he cut himself off from his Father’s love. The elder brother lived in, abided in the question, “what about me?”

Now, you know that on this Sunday when we consider the increasingly vociferous epidemic of substance abuse disorder, we will *have* to move to consider what questions this epidemic prompts in us. For those of us who have the blessing of NOT being addicted this chronic medical condition with regular relapse—for us non-addicts we are tempted to call this a moral failure. We are tempted toward the sin of condemnation, the self-righteous separation of ourselves from those caught up in this morbid cycle of bad decisions and bad behavior. We would even separate the addicts from the family of God to cut off any responsibility we might have to care for our brothers and sisters.

So, substance abuse disorder—a medical condition—challenges us to abide in God. First John chapter four tells us, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen…The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also”

“That’s harsh, man.” Yeah it is. That’s the Bible for you, telling it like it is. So, let’s not pull any punches it IS very hard to love—which is to say make sacrifices—in other words extend genuine, practical forgiveness.

In John 15, Jesus tells that “abiding” in the vine of God’s love means you will be pruned. Hopefully the first thing to get lopped off is self-righteousness—"look at what a ‘good boy’ or ‘good girl’ I am. I’m not like those younger brothers or sisters who desert the family for good times until the money runs out (family money)”

Yes, addicts lie, steal from those closest to them, and will forsake pretty much everything--their own comfort and safety—all to escape the devastating revenge the morphine molecule exerts in withdrawal: diarrhea, no sleep, incredible pain. It is like a parasite that won’t let go. Do addicts say, “I wish I had never let this thing inside my brain”? Of course, they do! Are they ashamed of all the bad things they do to keep withdrawal at bay? Of course, they are. So, shame allies itself with the fear of the pain of withdrawal to create a quicksand of helplessness; sucking people ever deeper to an inertia of surviving from dose to increasing dose of opioids just to keep from sinking further.

What do you need when you are in the grip of quicksand?

“Too bad you have fallen in there, I feel sorry for you”

“You know, if you hadn’t stepped in there, you wouldn’t have that problem sucking you down to destruction” OR

“Here’s my hand, I’m going to pull you out or find resources that will allow you to extricate yourself AND I’m not going to let you pull me in with you”

I added the last part to the quicksand, crisis, assistance because when people don’t see addiction for what it is, they don’t help people find treatment for their disease or they deny that there is a problem. Or, on the other hand, they shame the person with substance abuse disorder, tell them to just stop using or even try emotional blackmail: “If you loved me, you’d stop!”

The opioid epidemic begs for our help. We all need to understand he basics of substance abuse disorder. Stigma, condemnation doesn’t help. Trying to discover a past failure in the addict or in the people closest to the addict doesn’t help.

So, what does help? Everyone who has substance abuse disorder can benefit from encouraging, honest support. Drug abstinence works for some but not for all. Some people need medically supervised treatment with medication. With a relapsing disease it takes a long time for the body to shed all its effects. You need to be prepared for a relapse. You need to be prepared spiritually, mentally, relationally and practically—if you live with, or in proximity to, an opioid addict you need to have overdose reversing medication. HEAR ME NOW! If the person has been in total abstinent recovery and they relapse to their usual dose before abstinent recovery they will most certainly overdose and very likely die unless given overdose reversing medication immediately.

As we begin grasp this, our response necessarily involves a sacrifice—an offering up to God—of time: time to learn, time to practice vigilance, time to practice understanding. This also calls us to be channels of forgiveness for bad decisions, bad behavior, that is to say wrongs done.

You see substance abuse disorder—alcohol or opioid—challenges everyone to a new level of generosity of spirit. AND we don’t have to rely on our own inner resources because God is eager to pour his Spirit into us, to equip us, to draw our faith communities to reflect God’s self-forgetful love as communities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Let me expand what I said at the beginning tell you the expanded text: **What about me? What can I do, that God would have me do?** The bulletin insert for Opioid Addiction Awareness provides entry points for us to discover the ministry God is offering each of us personally.

Each of us can pray, can learn more, can forgive, and can discover some practical ways of “hands-on” compassion. I talked several days ago with a woman helps with newborns who are born addicted and must gradually go through withdrawal. I talked to a man who has set up a kind of listening post for teens during lunch hour in one of our schools as a mode of prevention.

I guarantee that God is giving you opportunities to combat the stigma associated with Substance Abuse Disorder—maybe starting with yourself. You can see the big picture by reading an investigative reporters book, Dreamland. I know reading that book changed me.

**Well, what about me? In the face of the public health crisis “What *would* God have me do?”**

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*I wrote this sermon which I will preach at St. James Plantation Community Chapel on April 22 as I would preach it aloud. It is meant to be oral speech. It is personal yet can be adapted by other preachers. Those with immediate experience with the epidemic have testimony and examples that I don’t have and will be able to improve and augment. I chose the lessons that some churches will regularly use on this Sunday.*

*Preachers who choose their Bible passages for preaching might consider Luke 15 or at least the story of the prodigal father and the lost son(s).*

*All of the portion of the psalm (*[*Psalm 22:24-30*](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html#ps1)*) spoke to me in preparation for this Sunday especially the first halves of verses 27 and 29. Loving God by loving the humanity God created (*[*1 John 4:7-21*](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html#nt1)*) and staying grafted in God (John 15:1-8)* *speaks volumes to me about this public health/spiritual epidemic based in greed, selfishness, an entitlement to be free from pain of any sort—all of which are contrary to the Gospel I read. The conclusion of the book Dreamland speaks to the overarching issues.*

*I hope you will use the information in the bulletin insert for Opioid Addiction Awareness Sunday as it includes very helpful information not in the sermon as well as next steps and resources for next steps. I believe that purpose of preaching is not just to inform people but to be a channel for God transform them. I have been praying for all those who will have some sort of observance of Opioid Addiction Awareness Sunday in Brunswick County. I thank God for what God will do through us and for us.*

*Fr Bill+*