

Chase Barbe
702 Working with People
LE5 – AA Meeting

I decided to attend an open AA meeting yesterday from noon to 1pm. Before attending, I spent some time in prayer asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to me what I needed to learn from this experience. The plan was to announce that I was observing the class as a seminary student so people would be clear for my reason being there. However, once I arrived in the space of about 40 men and women, I began to question. I didn't want to create some ambiance that I was potentially better than them and was looking down on them from a scholarly perspective. I wanted to be included in the group and not be an outsider looking in. I thought maybe people wouldn't be as vulnerable with knowing the real reason I was there. In hindsight, I was making it way too much about me.

To start the meeting, the leader gave some introductory remarks and then asked the group if it was anyone's first time. I was the only one. Moment of truth. I stood up and said my name and that I was thankful to be there. No reference to seminary. Everyone was genuinely supportive of me, a stranger. It was this same feeling when I shook people's hands on the way into the building as well. Friendliness and a warm welcome. Making a stranger feel comfortable. I couldn't help but think that most of them remember when it was their first time at an AA meeting, and how uncomfortable it was for them.

After introducing myself, I just kept getting the sense that now everyone thinks I'm an alcoholic and that I'm finally seeking help from my addiction. This wasn't true, even though alcohol and drugs did have a major impact in my life during my college years. I believe that God has set me free from those addictions, if I would even call it that. Am I just in denial? Could I fall back into those poor choices? Denial is the first hurdle to overcome. I do still struggle in

atmosphere's where drinking and drugs are happening. Maybe there is some work in my soul to be done. Either way, I did not feel like I could publicly identify as an alcoholic.

We prayed the sincerity prayer together and laid some ground rules. Then we took turns reading from the Big Book about the story of Bill's conversion from alcoholism to freedom through an encounter with God. It was a great testimony of how God can change someone's life and all the 12 steps are laid out discretely in the narrative. About 20 people had the chance to read and I was going to be the 21st person. I was nervous because every single person would announce their name and that they were an alcoholic. What was I going to say? Just my name? But the 20th guy read the closing paragraphs to the story, alleviating me from having to speak. Why did I struggle so much with caring about what other's think about me? I didn't want to seem superior to them, but I also didn't want to be dishonest.

The leader then opened the room for discussion on what we read. About 10 people spoke up and it was amazing to hear the differences in opinions and interpretations. The first few people talked about how triggering the words 'God' and 'Religion' are to them. They admitted in believing in a higher power because they know that something greater outside themselves has helped them keep sober. I had compassion for them because I knew that behind those remarks, the Church in some way had really hurt them in their past. How I long to sit down with them in love, to dive deeper into their stories and to find the why behind such disgust.

The interesting observation was that these people without being Christian have found true community where people love them, are vulnerable, and hold them accountable. The one rule for gathering is to be sober. All other opinions and perspectives are welcome. One man started talking about how his experience of being sober was thanks to Jesus. He spoke so tenderly as to not create division within the group and there was no sense of him saying he was right and

everyone else was wrong. It was a beautiful demonstration of telling one's story and incorporating Jesus.

After the group discussion, they gave out awards in the form of chips for a certain number of days/months/years sober. A few people had reached new benchmarks and there was great applause and support. Each person would give a little speech on how much this means to them and how grateful they are for the people who have gone alongside them through the thick and the thin. The life change was evident. The raw stories of being so close to suicide and now being 40 years sober were just remarkable. These men and women were experiencing true life change where reconciliation with family and friends were happening. The sense of brotherhood and sisterhood was as clear as day and it is what my soul has been longing for within the Christian community.

It seems to me that the Church in the West has focused more on a church service on Sundays, instead of life change through fellowship with God and each other. How we have strayed from the days of the early church in the New Testament. Where everyone believed that they were a heavenly priest and no longer did God dwell in buildings but in people. Revolutionary. The Church needs to go back to simplicity and start making disciples that make disciples. To do so, it involves getting into the dark places of each other souls and getting honest with each other. It takes a lot of work to invest time and talent into people so life change can happen. Isn't it clear that the way we are doing Church in the West isn't quite working? Could we possibly be adopting an Old Testament mindset to Church even though we theologically know the people make up the Church? The secular world is more evolved in finding freedom through 12 step programs in community with each other. Let's get back to community and true fellowship so that our love for each other will be a witness that Jesus Christ is alive.