

On March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023, I had the opportunity to attend an open 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous meeting which was held in Fort Lee, New Jersey, at Church of the Good Shepherd. I arrived at the site of the meeting about 15 minutes before it began. As I've never attended any meeting that was like this, I honestly did not know what to expect. However, my worries and anxiety of being in a new setting quickly was dissolved as many people who were already present and those who were arriving greeted me with warm handshakes and smiles. With each interaction, I was welcomed with friendly introductions and a conveying of genuine happiness that I was in attendance. One interaction that was particularly memorable was with a woman named Donna. She asked if it was my first time, to which I responded that I was in attendance to observe for a class. She, in seeing my awkwardness stemming from being in a new setting assured me, saying, "It might be a little uncomfortable, but please feel at home."

The meeting began promptly at 7:30PM. I was caught off guard as the meeting was called to order and the serenity prayer was recited by those in attendance. One thing that was interesting was the self-identification each person made. Whenever someone spoke, the individual identified him/herself by stating, "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, an alcoholic." To which the rest of the group responded, "Hey \_\_\_\_\_." Two things stood out to me. For one, I thought it was incredible the vulnerability and humility each person showed. In identifying oneself with the title of alcoholic, each individual was admitting that he or she was someone who identified with the greater group. No one was "above" or "below" another. Also, I think this interaction, although it might seem habitual or customary, showed me that each person was being acknowledged for who they were and were welcomed by the greater gathering.

The meeting progressed as the main speaker moved up to the lectern to share his story. The gentleman, whose name was Mike, shared about his 32 year journey of sobriety. What was notable about the entire setting was that as soon as he started speaking, the entire room noticeably gave the speaker their undivided attention. For myself, this was cause for reflection on our church culture. It showed me that everyone genuinely wanted to be there and hear this man's story. I wondered what our churches would look like if the pews were filled with people whose desires were to hear the things Mike had to say. I think this also made me reflect on the need of our churches today to make spaces where individuals can share their stories. In his sharing, Mike reiterated that his story is not special but was the story of many of those who were with him in his AA journey. However, even though there was nothing out of the ordinary about what he was sharing, there was a general consensus in the room, seen in their attentiveness, that his story was important and was worth listening to. He spoke in a common vernacular, and often even used profanity. But I think it allowed people to be able to connect with him as a peer, rather than seeing him as someone who was above them.

Another aspect of his sharing that stood out was the phrase he repeated multiple times, "progress not perfection." He focused on steps 9 and 10 of the 12 step program, focusing on the key words "continue" and "improve". His point was, although people often come into these meetings seeking instant gratification or quick fixes, the journey that was ahead of them was one of progressing towards a goal. For someone who has now been sober for 32 years, I thought this was incredible humble of him to acknowledge that he himself was not yet perfect. This gave pause to me in thinking about how too often, in looking to those around myself, I do not look to progress but only expect perfection. But the change that Mike and many others who were in the room were seeking and advocating for was gradual improvement as they worked toward a goal.

As the group shared following the talk, one thing that was brought up was the idea of being able to laugh at our pasts. In reflecting on our shame filled culture, especially in many of our churches, I thought this was extremely counter-cultural, yet so necessary. Mike shared a similar sentiment in his talk where he said that AA is not a group of professionals, nor is it a hospital. Being able to acknowledge our own shortcomings and to laugh about how we have messed up in the past showed me that it is ok not to take ourselves so seriously. Often times, I find myself wanting to hide my past mistakes and current flaws. But what these individuals showed me was that it is ok to not be perfect.

Ultimately, the life change that these individuals were seeking was to be able to step away from their temptations, not looking solely to the negative aspects of alcoholism, but seeing the hope that lies ahead and looking to all the wonderful things that they can enjoy. And the methodology of not prescribing a generic cookie cutter answer but sharing and listening to the victories and struggles of different individuals was a powerful example that was set for me. Especially thinking about my current ministry context of working with college students, it is easy for me to prescribe a disingenuous band aid of platitudes and adages. But what I learned and have reflected on was that the church should be a place for the broken. And in looking to each person's brokenness, we don't judge or shame them, but are able to empathize with them knowing that we are also people who aren't perfect, dealing with the same things. I think this allows us to meet people where they are and journey alongside them. The church will be able to learn how to see each day, each victory, each struggle, of each person.