



Hitting Rock Bottom

We can't seem to fathom that we can be desperately broken and entirely loveable all at the same time.

My pastor went to an AA meeting the other day. Not because he's an addict, but because he's heard stories of lives restored through the 12-step walk out of addiction. His visit was born out of curiosity and a desire to create the same healing atmosphere within his own congregation.

Mark arrived at the meeting alone and unsure of what to expect. When he walked in, no one ignored him, but no one asked him awkward questions, either. Instead, everyone offered either a hearty handshake or a knock-you-over pat on the back as they introduced themselves.

Someone was receiving a 9-month chip that night, and when they stood at the podium and announced their sobriety, the audience lit up with cheers and deafening applause. But then a middle-aged lady drug herself to the podium—head hung, eyes downcast. She said, "Today I should be celebrating 60 days sober. But, damn it, I drank last night."

My pastor cringed. What would happen? For as much applause as was awarded victory, how much shame would accompany failure? But there was no time to sit in fearful silence, for before the last syllable was out of her mouth the applause rang forth again, this time even more rowdy, full of whistles, cheers and celebration of ownership.

Mark was so overcome he had to leave. He cried in his car for an hour before he could drive home. The question ringing in his head: How could he get that in *his* church? How could he create a place where confessions of brokenness and humanity could be welcomed with as much accolade and fanfare as victory and success? That's what church *should* be.

So why is it that "church" is more often a place where we don nice clothes and happy faces, squish the dark places of our soul into the crevices and hope that no one who knows the "real" us will corner us with any "real" questions? Jesus said the sick need a hospital, but we've created a social club with membership requirements. We can't seem to

fathom that we can be desperately broken and entirely loveable all at the same time.

Maybe that's the secret of AA. Everyone there has found rock bottom and they admit it, yet they have also found a place where they are loved "in spite of" and they accept it.

Not so for many Christians. Somehow, somewhere, many of us bought into the belief that we are only lovable when we are perfect. We live our lives the best we can, and beat ourselves (and others) up when failure inevitably occurs. Unfortunately this quest for moral superiority can pose a bigger problem to our spiritual vitality than hitting rock bottom.

Brennan Manning writes, "Paradoxically, what intrudes between God and human beings is our fastidious morality and pseudo-piety. It is not the prostitutes and tax-collectors who find it most difficult to repent; it is the devout who feel they have no need to repent.... Jesus did not die at the hands of muggers, rapists, or thugs. He fell into the well-scrubbed hands of deeply religious people, society's most respected members" (*Abba's Child*, p. 80).

Does that shake you up a little bit? It made me swallow hard and acknowledge that there is, in fact, a little Pharisee living inside me. Although I am disgusted by their judgmental presence throughout the Gospels, I live like they do, dismissing the wounded and worshipping the upright. I let my aversion to sin blind me to the faces of God's beloved.

Jesus' followers were sinners. Many had "a past." Yet he called them brothers. They knew what rock bottom looked like, and they found Jesus there. Maybe it's silly, but I want to hit rock bottom, too. (Gently, of course!)

I no longer want to find myself standing above those who are in darkness, waving useless platitudes and "I-told-you-so's" while avoiding my own personal darkness. I want to become more like the One who embraces the prodigal with the same arms he offers the obedient son. He loves them the same. Those in AA understand it already. □

—Susan Reedy