**Healing Eucharist Sermon**

**Sunday, November 11, 2017**

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Introduction: My name is Doris and we joined St. Pauls’ in 2014. We were looking for a church where we could celebrate our faith with our expanding family.

Today our service is about healing, in body, mind and spirit. And the story I have to share with you is about my own healing journey through the experience of watching a family member struggle with addiction.

I have chosen to reflect on the story from the Gospel of John, known sometimes as The Healing at the Pool. The lesson tells us about a man who has been an invalid for 38 years and wants to be healed yet creates excuses for why he can’t into the pool.

This passage speaks to my healing journey because it reflects the struggle of many who suffer from addiction. While there is help for those who want to be helped, so often addicts make excuses as to why they cannot stop using or find recovery from their illness. Yet, there is a path forward, a path for recovery that includes: **acceptance, hope and forgiveness**.

As with any chronic disease, there are stages one must go through that are critical to the healing process. Because addiction remains a shameful problem with many misconceptions and stigmas, it is very difficult to get help and support. Therefore, many remain silent about their disease and do not find recovery. Many of us find it difficult to believe that our loved ones have a real disease. Their behavior seems so voluntary. Why don’t they just stop? The reliable scientific evidence tells us their brains are broken and damaged from their disease. Addiction alters the brain and its functions. The lies and manipulation and thievery are symptoms of this brain malfunction. About 10 years ago I joined millions of other individuals and families that are, and continue to be, affected by the current opiate crisis.

I could stand here and defend how I got here, how insidious this disease is, how our son was prescribed opiates, how our health care system fails to adequately treat this brain disease, how big pharma contributed to the destruction of so many lives or how our politicians claim to be interested in solving the crisis but rather use campaign rhetoric to boost their own agendas. **Rather**, I’d like to share with you what I have learned, how our son has found recovery and how this journey has changed me forever. And to be clear, this was not a solitary journey, my husband and family have all been on this road with me and on their own paths as well.

While those who find recovery can recall the day they became sober, I do not recall the exact beginning when I became a member of this group because I failed to recognize, admit or grasp that our son could be using opiates. Like most people, I did not see the signs and behaviors that indicated Keith was struggling with addiction. Once we found out what was wrong, I was too embarrassed to tell anyone what we were going through, even within our own family. What did we do wrong? How could this have happened to us? We’re good parents, we gave our children love and guidance and discipline. We made sure they were engaged at school, participate in their sporting events, went to church, had family dinners together, helped with homework, talked to them about the dangers of drugs etc. etc. So where did we go wrong with Keith?

We tried to solve “it” on our own. We used all our parenting skills but none of these worked. All the while our son was getting sicker and sicker. He continued exhibiting self-destructive and life-threatening behaviors. We felt inadequate as parents and feared that he would succumb to his addiction. We did not want to find Keith like one of his close friends, Andrew, dead from an overdose in his own home.

Addiction cannot be solved with any reasonable parenting skills. Addiction cannot be overturned by any amount of love. This is a disease that requires specific expertise and we did not have that expertise. We had to admit, we were not able to fix Keith. This is the first step towards recovery: first, the realization that there is a problem and second, you accept that you alone cannot solve it.

Acceptance does not come easily. Overcoming the disgrace and shame that comes with addiction kept me from recognizing that I too was caught up in the disease and needed help along with our son. Giving a name to the disease and accepting that I was helpless in solving the problem on my own was how I began my own recovery journey.

There were many dark days and nights. We were exhausted from worry and with trying to get Keith help. We hated it when he was home and feared when he was away. Every time the phone rang we were afraid of what might be on the other end of the call. We were living a 24-hour nightmare that we couldn’t wake up from. We were getting sicker and so was Keith. I honestly do not remember how we got through those days.

 For the past six years, Joe and I have facilitated a weekly meeting for Learn to Cope. An organization started by the mother of a heroin addict whose mission is to help individuals and families affected by addiction. At Learn to Cope we describe what it’s like to live with someone who is addicted to opiates in two ways:

First there’s the roller coaster analogy. Your life begins with that first climb and sudden rush down. Then there are the twists and turns that keep coming faster and faster until you reach that next hill and each time you go around a corner there’s another hill that keeps getting higher and higher and hope you don’t reach the top because you don’t want to plummet down again. But it keeps coming and you can’t get off and it won’t stop. Or the tornado analogy where you get caught up in the cyclone and you’re spinning out of control. On some days, you’re in the vortex where its silent and all around you are pieces of your life swirling and rushing by you only to be swept back into the uncontrollable whirl again that is tearing a path of destruction right down the middle of your house.

So, how did we move forward? Ten years ago, there was very little attention given to the opiate crisis and far fewer experts and treatment options available. Little did we know how costly treatment would be, what level of care was appropriate or where to turn for these answers. We quickly discovered that no matter how much we wanted Keith to get well, we were not able to make that happen simply by wanting it, providing it or through coercion. No amount of begging, pleading or loving could bring Keith recovery. This did not stop us from trying but finally we accepted that we were not in control.

One Friday morning, Keith was living at home and he called to me into his room as I was leaving for work. He said, Mom, I can’t go on like this. I need help. I said okay, like I had said many times before but knew in my heart this was just the next episode. I got a list of detox facilities for him and told him to call to see if there was a bed available and if he found one and needed a ride that I would come home and take him. He did not spend his day calling detox facilities for a bed. Instead he took what he thought would be a sufficient dose of Heroin to kill himself. Thankfully he was not successful.

We knew we had to protect him from himself and took him to the emergency room and agreed to have an involuntary commitment so that he would not be able to do any further harm to himself. We sat with Keith throughout the night in the ER while he detoxed from Heroin waiting for a bed in the psyche unit. We had 72 hours to come up with a plan before the mandatory hold would be over. At which point Keith could do whatever he wanted. We called Keith’s brother and sister to let them know what was going on.

When our other son Erik and his girlfriend came to the hospital she shared with us that her family had been dealing with addiction for several years as well and told us of a treatment program in NH that had helped her sister. We called and they had an opening and once Keith was medically cleared they would accept him.

The Plymouth House treatment facility in NH is a strict 12 step program. This means no medication is offered to treat addiction or withdrawal symptoms and they provide treatment by training their residents on the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Keith was willing to go, but was only playing lip service to get out of the hospital and did not expect that this program would help him.

The next day we drove him to NH. I remember saying to the Intake person, that we were done with Keith and if they couldn’t help him, then he was on his own. He was not welcomed back to our home. The coordinator agreed that our decision was the best course of action. He then told us that we could visit on Sunday during which we would be invited to attend a meeting for families that explains their program, the disease of addiction and what we could do to support our loved one in recovery.

I remember saying to Joe when we got in the car, that it felt like we were dropping him off at college and that he would never return to live in our home again (one way or another). Only this wasn’t college. But this was a moment of clarity for us and moved us one step forward on our journey. We prayed all the way home. It was a long silent ride home.

We had no more gotten home when the doorbell rang. I answered the door to find an old friend whom I had not seen in years. What a great surprise, a reprieve in our day which was exactly what I needed. We welcomed her in, tried to make her lunch and catch up on the usual pleasantries one shares when seeing an old friend after a long time apart. She stopped me and said, Doris, I know Keith is at the Plymouth House, so is my grandson. She told me she had just heard about Keith and couldn’t decide if she should reach out or not. She almost drove past my exit but felt compelled to come by and offer us some support. I thank God, every day for sending her because I wasn’t sure I was going to pull through. She was the light I needed. Here was a messenger that I could see and who understood exactly what we were going through. And she told us we were going to survive. This time I dared to hope for a better outcome.

We attended family meetings at Plymouth House and learned about the brain disease called addiction and how we could support Keith. We learned that relapse is part of recovery. We learned how to provide clear boundaries for all of us to follow. Through these lessons we also learned to hope.

Keith began to fully participate in the treatment offered. He accepted that he too was powerless over this disease. After a few weeks, we were visiting with Keith and talking about his experiences. He told us that he had had a spiritual awakening and accepted that a higher power was helping him find truth and recovery. All of a sudden, I saw my son for the first time since he became addicted. His old voice, his old self, Keith was still in there. It was as if he had been covered in a dark, hardened shell that suddenly split open and inside I saw my son. I felt such an intense feeling of love for him at that moment. Another moment of clarity, and I knew he was going to make it. I knew we were all going to make it.

I realized how I had hardened myself too and put up walls to protect myself from further hurt. I could not love the person my son had become, an addict, and as such had not been able to truly love Keith. I realized that I was given this moment of grace to restore my love for my son and renew my hope for recovery.

It was not a smooth process going from this moment to long term recovery. There were many more lessons to learn and fears to overcome. But through the next several months we continued to see Keith grow and change and get better. We continued to support his sobriety in a healthy way. As he puts it, once we gave him the opportunity to get well by letting go and not trying to fix him, he was able to do the work he had to do on his own. He did not have one brilliant moment of truth but rather several moments of awakening and understanding that has led to his wellness.

As our journey continued we also had to learn forgiveness.

We had to forgive Keith for all he had done. He did not choose to become an addict. He was sick and frightened, hurting and alone and we didn’t understand. We had to forgive ourselves for holding on to the denial of our son’s disease for so long. We had to forgive ourselves for all the mistakes we made along the way. We had to forgive others who didn’t understand and made caustic comments or offered advice on how to be better parents. Throughout Keith’s recovery he has been offered many moments of forgiveness as he made amends to those he had hurt along the way.

We have learned so much about ourselves, our son, this disease and God’s plan for us.

We did the best we could under the circumstances and have thankfully come out on the other side whole and very different people than where we first began. We are all flawed. Sometimes grace does not come gently. The disease of addiction is merciless. It is up to us to open our minds and hearts to those who are still sick and suffering. We have been transformed into more loving, compassionate and empathetic people. Our expectation and images of ourselves as parents has changed for the better because before this experience we did not know how to truly love someone including our own son, and now we are able to do so fully. We have embraced the change and have become filled with a purpose to channel our love into a healing force.

We are privileged to be a part of Learn to Cope, that provides us an opportunity to help other parents and families just starting this journey, to offer them support, love and resources to get them through the difficult days and dark nights. We provide them with a safe place where they are not judged but accepted. We offer them hope for recovery and help them to learn forgiveness for themselves and their loved ones.

We are so proud of our son and the man he has become. Keith is not living a diminished life because of his addiction instead he has transformed himself into a wonderful individual who helps other suffering from addiction.

I hope that by sharing our story this will give you and others the courage to fight for one more day, and then one more day, and one more after that.

We close our weekly Learn to Cope meetings with the Serenity prayer.

Please join me in saying the Serenity Prayer found in your leaflet.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;

courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

enjoying on moment at a time;

accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

taking, as He did, this sinful world

as it is, not as I would have it;

trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;

that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him

forever in the next.

Amen.