

Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles
“Steps 10 & 11: Keep At It—Consciously, Intentionally, Stubbornly”
Luke 11:5-12

In the movie *Evan Almighty*, that came out now several years ago, Steve Carrell plays an average guy with a regular job and a normal family—until God, who looks a lot like Morgan Freeman, shows up and tells him to build an ark, because there’s about to be a big flood in his town. This story should be sounding familiar to you. It takes a while for Evan to take seriously the possibility that God is actually talking to him. But eventually he realizes that God won’t leave him alone, so he just gives in and begins to listen to what God is telling him to do. Eventually, his whole family gets involved.

[film clips from “Evan Almighty”]

I wish God would show up as Morgan Freeman in *my* life. I wish God would take things over in some clear, visible, obvious way, so that I didn’t have to work so hard at figuring out what voices and which events in my life are God talking to me, and what is just life the way it happens. I don’t want to be a screwball who imagines into things some magic or meaning that isn’t actually there. Someone who thinks God is calling them up frequently might be delusional. But still...I would like it if God were a more *real* presence in my life. A voice and a face I could recognize as readily as I do Morgan Freeman’s. If God just had some way to call me to attention...because I am so darn prone to wandering away.

How do we develop the kind of sensitivity it takes to hear God speaking to us, when that voice comes only in a whisper? What does it take to notice God’s presence when it appears not just in a Bible story or at church, but in what happens to me *today*? How can I be guided by the Spirit in those moments when I’m feeling anything *but* sure of the right thing to do?

We are coming to the end of this series of twelve steps that we’ve been immersed in all summer, the 12-step spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous. As I’ve preached these sermons each week--not only to you but to myself—I’ve become convinced that the point of all of them is to guide us back, over and over again, to the third step, which is to *surrender*. Every other step is a tool for knowing ourselves well enough and trusting God fully enough to make a decision we have to make not just once, but every day—maybe every *moment*: let go and turn our often-out-of-control lives over to God’s care and direction.

Many of the steps invite us to focus on knowing ourselves: take inventory of your inner life; confess and repair the ways you have hurt other people; acknowledge that in the most persistently troublesome areas of your life, you really might be powerless to improve yourself. Today we come to the tenth and eleventh steps.

The tenth step is a reminder to stop regularly; to pause long enough to see what’s below the surface of your life. “We continued to take a personal inventory and, when we were wrong, we promptly admitted it,” that step says. Smart. Those AA folks know that when you don’t stop long enough to look at yourself in a mirror that tells the truth, when you’re on automatic pilot, everything that goes wrong looks like it’s somebody else’s fault.

The eleventh step is another ‘stop’ message. “We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God...” the eleventh step reads. Here’s what that means: *keep practicing* the presence of God—until God’s face and voice are as familiar—as recognizable—to you as Morgan Freeman’s.

Take the time to *practice*, this step says. Some vague belief in a higher power is easy. It takes practice to get to the point where you’re willing to invite that God into the hard places in your life, to remember God in the moments when you actually need God most. *Practice* to recognize the scrapes that call for surrender instead of hanging onto control until everything that matters has your fingernail marks in it. You can only *find* the presence of God in those moments by *practicing* the presence of God all the rest of the time. You *learn* to pay attention to the Spirit’s nearness, so that you won’t miss it when it slides in quietly next to you.

I’m starting to think that the things that matter most in life are things we can’t make happen all at once, no matter how hard we try or how much we concentrate our effort. If you’ve been watching the Olympics this last week, you’ve seen swimmers and gymnasts and runners who are so clear about what they want to accomplish that they’ve spent their whole lives practicing. Every day. They get up at 5:00 every morning and jump into a pool of icy water. They keep running on all those hot days they don’t feel like it. They stay with their workout schedule on the days they can’t even remember why this is important.

I’d like to be an Olympic athlete. I’m pretty sure I don’t have the gifts. But if I did, I doubt I’d have the discipline. I think I’m more like a character from a story I used to read my daughter, called *Frog and Toad Together*. Do you know this story?

Frog bakes a batch of cookies. “We really ought to stop eating,” Frog and Toad both say after they’ve had several cookies. But they keep on eating. “We *must* stop,” they resolve, and then they eat some more. “We need willpower,” Frog says, as he grabs one more cookie. “What’s willpower?” Toad asks, with his mouth full of crumbs. “Willpower is trying very hard not to do something you want to do very much,” Frog answers. And then he goes on to list a whole bunch of things that they can do to help their willpower: put the cookies in a box, tie the box shut, put the box up in a tree. Toad points out that if they wanted to, they could just climb up in the tree and untie the box. Frog gets so frustrated with his friend’s not understanding that finally he just dumps the rest of the cookies on the ground. “Now we have no more cookies,” Toad says sadly. “Yes,” says Frog, “but we have lots and lots of willpower.” “You can have your old willpower,” Toad says. “I’m going home to bake a cake.”

Just like willpower, we can’t force spiritual transformation to happen inside of us *right now*. It’s not about concentrating harder or talking ourselves into it. It’s about training, about practice. You learn to play Bach on the piano by practicing scales with your fingers on that keyboard every day for years. You train to win swimming races by getting in the pool and swimming laps every day. You develop forgiveness, gratitude, courage by practicing. You *keep practicing* them, until that those character traits grow naturally inside of you—even when you’re not thinking about them.

The same truth applies for how we come to see God. We learn to recognize God's voice by searching for it. Listening to it in our prayers until we know what that voice sounds like. We keep walking on the path of service and justice and self-giving because that's the same road Jesus walks on, and we just might run into him there. We pay attention to the Bible's stories because they give us clues about the ways God has appeared before in faithful people's lives. Because those are the same ways we might find God showing up in ours.

It's not the practices themselves—the prayer, or Bible reading, or worship, or service—that *are* God. You don't have to do those things to earn God's favor. They have value because they exercise our senses, the senses that need to be alert so that we'll notice *every* time God is present. When we engage in the practices of faith, we are training ourselves to recognize God's face, to know the sound of God's voice.

Because the truth is that God will show up, almost every time, in the moments when you weren't looking for God at all. It's when you're all about doing whatever it is you do in your normal, everyday life, that God is most likely to disrupt your schedule, or startle you out of your routine, or shift things so you see them differently. Those are the moments you practice for. Trained your senses so that when it happens, you'll see that interruption as a call to attention instead of an annoyance.

The passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke contains the lesson Jesus repeated most often about prayer. He said over and over again to his disciples: "Just keep at it." If it feels like you're knocking on God's door and he's not opening it, Jesus says, keep knocking. Be persistent, even stubborn. Keep doing it as if somebody is listening. Show up looking for a miracle to happen. Keep on beating down that path to God's door, the writer Frederick Buechner says, because the one thing you can be sure of is that the path you beat down—even with your prayers that seem automatic or un-sure or 'not working'—that's the same path that God can use to find you.