

Theology For Those With An Addicted Member Of Their Family

WITS END

Rev. Dr. Deborah Rahn Clemens

“We are at our wits end!” That is often heard when meeting with family members of people suffering from substance abuse. Perhaps you have used it too. It comes after a long history of moms, dads, aunts, uncles, sisters, and brothers, and children trying to find a way to put an end to the trauma they are suffering. The household members will usually admit they have tried just about everything: professional advice, therapy, inpatient, outpatient therapy, pleading, praying, scolding, cajoling, interventions with employers and police. Economically the family income gets swallowed up either by fraud, loss, or costs associated with professional agencies, fines and penalties. The family feels literally like they are at their wits end as to what to do with or do for the familial addict. This essay is meant to offer a Christian theology or perspective for you if you are living this reality.

The secular clinician has recognized that addiction does not affect a single person but puts an entire family into crisis. Unlike other diseases, the family often suffers for a long period of time without any support from neighbors, family, or friends. If an individual suffers from cancer, for instance, the community empathizes and understands. Words of care, offers of prayer, and gestures of kindness often are extended. When a family member suffers from addiction, however, these common supports are often lacking. This is because there is still a great amount of stigma attached to the plight of the addict. Families attempt to keep the illness hidden for fear that they will be judged and or misunderstood. Unfortunately, many do not seek help until the nuclear family is already exhausted.

Addiction treatment in America is now a booming business. Due to the overwhelming crisis, the number of counseling services, in house detox centers, rehabs, and recovery houses have exploded. There are now millions of professionals employed to offer possible behavioral and medical solutions. Since this is part of the American health care system, costs and insurance requirements are exorbitant. While the scientific field has much to offer a family as to the biological/ chemical causes and effects of harmful substances, and the field of psychology can assist with current talk therapy and behavioral modification, family members are still nevertheless on the front lines of the trauma. Professionals go home. Scientists can walk away from their labs. Parents and siblings can not walk away, or forget about their loved one who is sick. They continually bare the emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial burden of the disease. It “hits home” all day, every day.

Behavioral health models, while rightfully recognizing how addiction is a family disease, readily diagnose families. Terms such as dysfunctional co-dependent, enablers, and denial are used to describe household dynamics. Regardless of how much truth there might be, such labels are devastating. Many concerned family members take on the label and convict themselves as being guilty. They so desperately want to find an end to the crisis they will sacrifice their own self esteem. Are we dysfunctional? Yes (But what family isn't?) Are we co-dependent? Yes (Is that not true of every family unit?) Do we enable? Yes (Isn't it a parent's calling to enable a child their business?) Have we been in denial? Maybe. (But most often we just innocently did not understand what was happening).

Truth or no truth, these labels are not helping. The first lesson in Christian ethics is to Stop labeling, Stop judging! Some secular solutions offered to family members in the struggle for recovery can also be troubling from a Christian perspective. Families are sometimes advised to practice tough love, help the

victim hit bottom, make and hold to clear boundaries, save yourself, and kick him or her out. There have been times, of course, when such radical treatment by families have resulted in a turn around by desperate addicts who then come back willing to start traveling on the rough road to recovery. However, there have been equal times that such withdrawal of familial support has led to irreversible tragedies! The dead cannot come back to testify that those choices may have been a mistake.

Christian theology makes no allowance for us to curtail support or limit loving. Where does that leave us? That leaves us at our Wits End. Wits end might just might take us to the gate of a Gospel message. The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) is probably the most relatable Gospel story for Christians who have addicts in their families. The parallels are obvious: A young man no longer wishes to live within the confines of the household in which he was raised. He drains a huge amount of money from the family. He severs himself from loving. He seems to neither care whether his loved ones live or die or anything about their needs. He goes out on a binge of risky and scandalous living. He breaks the family code of decency. He ends up broke, lonely, homeless, and ashamed. There was nothing the family could have done to prevent him from acting this way. Eventually he hits bottom. He “comes to his senses” and recognizes that he has squandered much of his life away. He now is able to appreciate the value of life within the family. He considers how he might be restored to some sort of normalcy. He prepares a “mea culpa” speech.

That’s the part of the story that is so wonderful for family members to contemplate. There is the hope and the dream we hold when our prodigals are missing. We want them to come to their senses. We want them to realize the evils of their ways. We want them to come back into the fold repentant and apologizing. We want them healthy and changed.

Here’s the rub: Part two of the story. The son does not get the chance to give his prepared speech. He does not get the opportunity to negotiate the terms, or agree to the conditions for his reentry. He is not expected to enter a program, repay for the damages, or understand the consequences of relapsing. The father runs to greet him (an action in itself humiliating). He dresses him up, gives him new jewelry, throws a big party, and appears to be in denial of the extent of the previous trauma and pain. Could Jesus be demanding that we in the church, in the Christian community behave in this way? Are Christian parents required to forgive, forget, restore, unilaterally? Is this ancient tale encouraging more of the dread denial, co-dependency, and enabling?

The objection of the elder brother (Luke 15: 25-32) is a necessary addition for it exposes and legitimizes the very feelings family members may be harboring: It acknowledges anger, confusion, a sense of unfairness and injustice, and downright hurt feelings. “How could our prodigal be welcome back so gleefully? How can the family celebrate those who has caused it so much pain? They damaged our reputation, shrank our inheritance, scorned us publicly and dragged our good name through the mud. What about us? We have worked hard, remained loyal, not caused the others any shame. Why haven’t we been rewarded similarly? “

These emotions are real and should be raised and may be shared by parents, children, and siblings. Here’s the thing about families: Like it or not, they are what they are and they are ours permanently. Although we think we want to be liberated, free of the injustice and pain generated by others, Jesus lets us know that true liberation is not in letting go of them (damning them, banishing them away) but in allowing ourselves to seek their salvation as well, inside the community. Let us say that again another way. As Christians we know we are never better off alone. We are not our own. We are meant for

unity. Therefore, the salvation/ recovery, of even the prodigals in our midst to full restoration or place in the family must be our priority.

If we do not identify exactly with the elder brother and share his protests, perhaps we identify with the prodigal's mother. Yes, the prodigal's mother regardless of whether we are mothers, fathers, children, or siblings. Where is she in this story? If she is there at all, she is silent. She is helpless. She is ignored. She is unable to go out in the streets searching for her child. She is not permitted to demand any restitution of her personal pride or property. She is at her wits end.

The mother in this ancient tale must depend on the father's power and mercy and generosity of spirit if her family will ever hope to remain intact. She must trust that he will provide the resources needed to be able to celebrate and gather in joy again. She must hope that the day will arrive when the turmoil will come to an end and peace will be restored and they can know comfort and safety and reconciliation.

What we must remember is Jesus told this parable to teach us about God's character, God's personality. The father in Jesus parable is God the Almighty. He is God the Lord of heaven and earth. He is God who creates and recreates. He is God who is pure eternal Love. We need not, should not confuse the father of the prodigal son in this scripture with any of us.

We are not asked to love with such outrageous radical love. We are only asked to remember that even if we may be in an outrageously out of control earthy family, we are equally in an outrageously loving family from heaven above. We are legitimately in the family of the one true God. We live within the household of the one who already sacrificed everything for us. Through our baptism we share the same DNA with the Son who is totally sinless, forgiving, and willing to pay off all penalties and costs. We are in that family. So are the prodigals among us.

The power is in the hands of the father God exclusively. The prodigal could have come back crawling, prepared to offer penance and been totally rejected. But he wasn't. He could not have been rejected for God the father is incapable of not loving. God is Love. Grace is the foundation of the Christian message. All those in the family of God can trust, can believe this. Those, like the elder brother can hear the assurance that even though others seem to receive more than they deserve, there will always been plenty of riches overflowing in store for him. The greatest miracle is the miracle of life. An addict in recovery is a witness to the miracle of resurrection. Even if the recovery period does not last, how can we not give thanks for that?

So, in conclusion, Christian family members can know that even if they are at their wits end, the love of God is boundless. No love that individuals in the family can give is ever useless, ever wasted. The more we are able to give the more love will be provided. Once we realize that we are not in control and need not be in control of this situation we can act again in freedom. Now we can advocate for reform, invest in recovery programs, enter therapy, encourage our suffering children, provide for, advise, wait, pray, and try try again. Now we can share our experience with others and support other families going through the process. We can put the labels aside. We can forget about judgement. Where is the stigma or shame in knowing we are part of the body of Christ? The lost will be found. This we believe. It is simply, not up to us. God will accomplish this ... in God's good time.