God, I offer myself to you—to build with me and to do with me as you will. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of your power, your love, and your way of life. May I do your will always! Amen.

In AA and many other 12-step programs that is known as the third step prayer, the third step being, “Made a decision to turn our will and our life over to the care of God as we understood God.”

The clause that jumped out at me the first time I heard it was, “Relieve me of the bondage of self.” Most people in the grip of addiction are simultaneously in the grip of self-absorption. That can take various forms, such as simply and totally disregarding the feelings and needs of others, being pathologically concerned about others’ opinions of oneself, having an inflated opinion of oneself, having a chronically low opinion of oneself, to name a few. Just to be clear, I don’t think addicts have cornered the market on self-centeredness, but it does seem to be one of the hallmarks of that disease.

The overarching characteristic of this bondage of self is that it leaves little room for God. It stands in opposition to the freedom that comes with knowing and accepting that there is a being, or force, or spirit, greater than oneself.

Such talk might seem superfluous in church, where we all believe in God. BUT—and you knew there was a but, didn’t you?—But how often do we believers think and act as if everything depending on us and our efforts alone?

Obviously, I can’t answer for you, but I can tell you that, more often than I care to admit, I worry and fret over a problem—or potential problem—for an agonizingly long time before it occurs to me that I might pray about it, that . . . well, it often goes something like this: “Wait a minute . . . there is something I can do. And the first step in that is to stop doing. Stop fretting. And ask for God’s help.”

Sometimes the prayer is nothing more than “Help! Help me to release my knuckle- and mind-numbing grip on this.”

Rarely, when I’ve done that—okay, never—have I heard God say, “Michael, you need to go here, do that, say this.”

However, frequently have I had this experience: I take a breath (something on my own I’ve forgotten to do), slow down and the problem before me seems clearer. Sometimes it’s merely that I’ve shut up and someone else says something filled with wisdom, offering a way through the situation at hand. That happens at Vestry meetings, for example.

Another example is an incident in my former parish. It was moments before, again, a Vestry meeting, and I was frantically searching for a document needed in that meeting. I was tearing my study apart, looking in file folders, drawers, stacks of paper, and by grace (there’s no other explanation) it occurred to me to ask God for help. I don’t even know what the prayer was. I would like to think it wasn’t, “God, help me find that sheet of paper,” but something more general, like, “Help!” I took a breath, accepted my inability to make things happen, to power through, and then, calmly, I looked in the first file folder in front of me (one in which I’d looked two or three times already) and there was the document I needed.

It's a pretty mundane story. No falling off an ass. No blinding light. No voice from heaven. The world was not changed, but I was. The I in this case was bondage of self—my fear that I would fail, that others would think ill of me would find me out as incompetent I, I, I, me, me, me. When it became less about me and more about the good of the parish, God’s will (though those words didn’t go through my head), the help washed over me.

Now, before I leave this humble example, please understand that the point is not that I found the document but that, however briefly, I was relieved of the bondage of self. It wasn’t all about me any more. In fact, had I not found the paper I would still have gone into that meeting in a calmer state, better prepared to do what we were there to do—to seek and do God’s will, to further God’s kingdom in the world, or in the words of today’s Collect, to “show forth God’s power among all peoples,” in however small an increment.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on a sabbath day. When God’s will presented itself to him he healed the woman who had been crippled for 18 years.

Please note that in this case the cure is not the startling thing. It’s pretty clear that cures were expected—business as usual, during business hours. As the leader of the synagogue said,” Six days a week you can come and be cured.”

The point at issue is legalistic, theological in terms of the practice of the faith. That religious leader is concerned only about breaking the rules pertaining to the sabbath. Maybe he’s motivated by the weight of authority, maybe he’s caught up in the political/religious movement against Jesus. Maybe he wants to show everyone one there who is boss (and it seems like it’s more himself than God). We just don’t know.

So . . . he might have been in need of some relief from bondage of self. Jesus might have known that. Jesus was clearly unconcerned about others’ opinions of himself. He, God incarnate, was clearly concerned with this child of God who had been suffering for years. He also, pretty clearly, was concerned that everyone in attendance should understand that God’s grace and love and power are more important than rules we humans devise.

What he says to the woman is, “You are set free from your ailments.” To the leader he says, “This woman, a daughter of Abraham, should be set free from this bondage.”

Freedom is the message—freedom from a disease, yes, but also freedom from the notion that we, by our efforts and rules and regulations, make God act on our behalf.

So, to paraphrase and amend a bit the Collect, we gather together in unity of Spirit in order to set aside our bondage to self and to show forth God’s power among all peoples, to the glory of God’s Name.” + + +