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Josh Love
jlove@CitySquare.org

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Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire

Josh Love

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom 15.1). In this article I will attempt to deconstruct the notion of addiction as a moralized category shaped by those with systemic power. To do so, it is necessary to affirm that the nature of life in the triune God is central to lived experience. First, addiction, at its root, is essentially self-endangerment, as described by Michael Welker¹ in his work *God the Spirit*. According to Welker, self-endangerment is enacted any time an individual conceives of life apart from godly community. Through such an egocentric disposition, the self is endangered. Habitual enactment of this egocentrism produces destruction of the individual and the community of which he or she is a part. St. Augustine calls this the *inward curve*. If we are honest we see that the inward curve can also be used to identify the self-endangering elements of addiction. However, under these parameters it is understood that everyone affected by sin also enacts a form of self-endangerment. In other words traditional addicts are not the only ones addicted to destructive tendencies. Therefore sin is more than an immoral act, and addiction is more than substance abuse. With this understanding of self-endangerment, sin becomes a power at work in the world. I refer to this power, which draws us into the temptation of self-endangerment, “the spirit of this world.”

Merriam-Webster defines *addiction* as “a strong and harmful need to regularly have something (such as a drug) or to do something (such as gamble).” The antonym for addiction is *sobriety*. This is not a definition of addiction, at least not functionally, that I subscribe to. However, the question still remains: What is addiction? To be honest, my time in urban ministry over the past ten years has taught me to ask a different question, namely: “*Why* is addiction?”

If addiction is a strong and harmful need to regularly have something or do something, I am uncertain the description excludes me. I could come up with a list of ten things off the top of my head for which I have a strong and harmful need to have on a regular basis. Those ten things might be described as vices rather than addictions but on a certain level I see very little difference. When I realized this, I began asking, “If the definition of addiction describes my own life, what am I trying to accomplish in adult urban ministry?” This was a difficult question to explore when I began to immerse myself in the life of gang members, drug dealers, and substance abusers.

“Why is addiction?” As with any question worth asking, the answer can best be found through a story, through a lived experience. The following story is what led me to this presentation. When I asked God “Why is addiction?” I was led to a simple confession, “I am John Dunn.” I first uttered this phrase on bended knee in a closet. It wasn’t the last time I said it, and I have found the need to utter it many times since. *I am John Joseph Dunn*.

The real John Dunn is my brother—or as he put it, “a brother from another mother.”

John grew up in a poor historic African-American neighborhood in Abilene, Texas, called the Stevenson Neighborhood. His father was absent for most of his childhood. His mother worked long hours away from

1. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2013).

home. The Stevenson Neighborhood saw a rise in old-school gang activity in the 1980s. By the 1990s a significant portion of adult males had been put into prison under the US War on Drugs, which some have come to call the “mass incarceration movement.” With the depletion of male role models in his community, and in an attempt to find belonging, John was “jumped” into the Cripps at the age of fourteen. By nineteen John was a suspect on several accounts of arson, one account of grand theft auto, illegal possession of firearms, and distribution of narcotics. Making matters only slightly worse, as I have come to believe, he was addicted to the product he sold.

I know, after this description, it doesn’t appear that John and I are anything alike. Still, I maintain that I am John Dunn. One day I was visiting John at the Abilene county jail, waiting for the latest charges to process at the courthouse. He was crying and so was I. Our incoherent sobs were muffled over the ancient visitation phones. I was wondering how I could keep doing this kind of ministry. He was wondering if he would ever outlive the sentencing of all his convictions. And then he pleaded with me, along with my roommates, to front the cash for his bail. With his plea he made a series of promises. “This time I can do it. I promise. I can be like you guys. I’ll do everything you tell me to do. I’ll dress differently. I’ll stop cussing. I won’t do drugs or drink. I’ll go to church. I’ll go to college.” On and on he went—listing all the ways he would change and become a “good” person. In short, he promised to become a middle-class white male consistent with proper Bible Belt suburban church culture. Let me say that again. When John promised to be “good,” he promised to become a middle-class white male consistent with proper Bible Belt suburban church culture. He promised to become like me.

At that moment I realized I hadn’t been preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, because his gospel is for the poor and the oppressed, the slave and the sick—all the things that described my brother John. JOHN. How he was and where he was. As for myself, I was preaching the gospel of the rich, white man. I thought salvation for people like John meant helping them look more like me. I realized that looking like me had a lot more to do with my privileged circumstances than it did looking like Jesus. It broke my heart, and it broke my far-too-unexamined faith. But you have to understand: I learned through failure. I saw this story all the way through. The short version is that John did try to become just like my roommates and me and, because that is not who John was and not what John needed, he ended up going back to jail for a long time. Don’t hear me wrong. I didn’t intend to preach the wrong gospel. I had great intentions. Still, the gospel John heard was not the gospel I thought I was preaching.

Through that experience I learned that addiction is not to one thing or another. Addiction is not ultimately about a *thing* at all. At its root, addiction is captivity to a false identity, and my addiction was the same as John’s. My identity was *self*. That is, it was ME and only me. Time, resources, beliefs, dreams. They all revolved around me. I was addicted to myself. Worse yet, I thought I was the solution for other people’s lives, too.

In truth, I was afraid of *otherness*. I was afraid of actual relationships, connection and community with anyone that was different, anyone who was not me, anything I could not control. So I did what we do when we’re afraid of others. I tried to make the other *me*. When John went back to jail, I realized that any attempt on my behalf to help him was like snatching him from the frying pan and throwing him into the fire. I wasn’t sure how deep my “self addiction” went or how I had contracted it exactly. But I didn’t want to offer John a simple trade on self-obsessions. That is, one addiction for another. In that moment the most important question in ministry ceased to be “How can I help people like John?” The most important question became “If I’m an addict, what is my addiction?”

To clarify: I am certain I had good intentions. I am certain I loved God—or at least the God I am comfortable with. I am certain I wanted to help. The problem, as I discovered, was that I deeply believed the story of our culture, instead of the story of the cross. Among other things, the story assumes being a specific kind of person, with a specific kind of life, doing specific and sanctioned kinds of things, is what makes a person “good,” and that since all people should be good, everyone should be that specific kind of person. More to the point, the American story is this: the world revolves around me, and my good ole individual self, my pull-myself-up-by-my-own-bootstraps self. I am the hero of my life’s story and my preferences are supreme. The only thing I need is . . . me.

As mentioned earlier, St. Augustine had a term for this self-interested approach to life. It was the *inward curve*. The focus of life becomes so intensified on the self that we are lost to the power of sin. To an extent this is the root of all sin. We might even state that *sin* is the inward bend. For further reflection, consider the divine nature revealed in the life of Jesus. When we confess that Jesus is the exact representation of God, we are confessing a triune God. That means we are confessing a God founded in a love focused on others, outside of the self. That is, a divine self, which is public in nature rather than privatized, self-seeking, or homogenizing. By God's very nature he does not seek to destroy or convert that which is different. All of created reality flows from this central, relational experience. A relationship between and among things is the only way life exists. Relationship is not something God *likes*: God *is* relationship.

Practically speaking, when a member of a community alienates his or herself from the whole, it is effectively cutting off all access to the resources necessary to thrive and live. This is what the addict does at the very root, regardless of the flavor, shade, hue, or tone of the addiction. Theoretically, the term cannot possibly accommodate addictive behavior; however, the word *sobriety* has been co-opted and can even *function* as a form of even deeper addiction to the self, especially when it authorizes egocentric lifestyles of consumption and accumulation. In short, sobriety has come to mean the American dream. The sobriety of the rich and the addiction of the weak are often determined by laws, which are usually determined by those in power. So again, sobriety is not the opposite of addiction. Rather, I have come to believe that the opposite of addiction is connection to community, connection in right human relationship. Which in the end is reconnection to the image of God.

John is black Hispanic; I am white. John is from a poor background; I am from a privileged background. But where John is addicted to drugs, I am held captive by another inward curve. John's addiction is a substance; my addiction is a lifestyle of self-serving power. Unintentionally, even against great personal opposition, I became a product of the American dream, the heart of which fosters an intense temptation to the inward curve of the self. Individually realized life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If you were to bake an inward-curve cake—these would be the ingredients. Maybe on the surface these ideals seem innocent enough. At first glance they might even seem like God-given rights, but if you look deep and hard at the revelation of Jesus Christ, the addiction to our American dream begins to come into focus—and perhaps we can see the depths to which it has pervaded our faith. To clarify: freedom is good; opportunity is good; even security is good. Privatized life imagined apart from interdependence and the sharing of diverse community (to each a private kingdom) is a denial of requisite realities indispensable to the sustenance of human life.

Another clarification: I don't want to deny the overwhelming goodwill, and often good work, of most faith communities and NPOs that wish to help people find healing from addiction. But my caution and challenge is this: wherever we seek to address addiction through conversion or homogeneity—that is, from poor to rich, from unemployed to employed, from homeless to self-sufficient, from uneducated to college graduate, from abuse of illegal substances to abuse of the American dream, from black culture to white culture, from you to me, wherever we merely seek to make people into our own image of self-centeredness, we've deepened the problem. I pray that we reflect deeply on what we are attempting to save people *to*, and not only what we are attempting to save people *from*. Universal sameness is not a solution to the destructive forces afflicting our communities.

I am John Dunn. I remind myself every time I sit down with an addict. I AM *them* and I need the reminder of what I am doing as an urban minister. Every time I sit down with an "addict," as defined by our culture, I have the privilege of walking *with* them to freedom. We get to walk toward the cross together. We have to! In Christ there is no slave or free, no addict or sober. The cross has done away with our moralized categories of human identity. At the cross we no longer view each other from a human point of view. Salvation is more than just forgiveness of sins and a home in heaven. Here, salvation is an emergent, new reality of a vulnerable and often intimate relationship. It's about holy reconciled community. "We have this ministry of reconciliation," Paul says (2 Cor 5.18). It is the ministry of the cross. The wonderful cross is the death of the inward curve. It is that place where we lose our life to save it.

Truth is, I do not do urban ministry to save addicts. I do it because I have come to believe that it saves me as well. I don't do it as a hero. I do it as a fellow addict in need of relationship. **I am also evangelized.** In coming

to solidarity with the outcast I can't help but confess my own sins—which privilege would otherwise cover up and, by extension, would otherwise continue to perpetrate destruction in my life and in the lives of those close to me. The universal power of the cross is the power to save us from the global destruction that is born of our self-centered lives. Salvation is to follow the God of self-emptying love, who asked us to take a cross and follow him. Because of this love, I have come to believe salvation is something that happens between people, in relationship, and *for* the sake of relationship to the glory of God. God, the one who is three.

Before bringing this conversation to a close, I would like to offer a few reflections, or suggestions, on taking steps toward a healthier framework for ministry on the margins. Counselors and ministers seeking to work with the weak, the addicted, and the marginalized are really called to be midwives of new life, rather than distributors of salvation. When the addict turns to the cross of Christ, they are turning towards new life. As the unborn babe turns to face the world outside the womb, so too does the one enslaved by the spirit of the world turn towards the cross. To meet Christ at the cross is to engage in birthing pains. The suffering may be great, but the joy that lies ahead is incomparable with present sufferings. While the help we can offer here is minimal, it is important. In this time of birthing pains, when the addict comes to the cross, we must stand in unconditional solidarity with him or her. Just as it was with Job's friends, the best we can offer is holy silence. There are no words or wisdoms, theological or worldly, that can accomplish the birthing process. It is a process that must be accomplished through divine liberation and in the midst of community that is the divine's vessel on earth. Like any other gift, liberation can only be accepted by the one to whom it is given. We cannot put ourselves on the hook for other people's healing processes, nor can we choose Christ for them. Our job is simply to love unconditionally. Our outpouring, our unconditional love, which is a sacrifice of self on the altar, is salvation in us. It is the fruit of divine life. It is death at work in us so that life may be at work in others. Taking up the same way of life by invitation and by imitation is salvation for the other.

Ministers of the gospel are empowered by the Spirit to come alongside the weak in efforts threefold: (1) in coming to the weak unconditionally *as they are*, without an agenda of homogeneity; (2) by immersing in the life of the weak to reignite the spark of the holy publicly; and (3) through mutual confession of sin, joining the weak on the path towards the crucified Lord.

This directing to the crucified Lord is not an act of coercion or command, nor is it an act done only with words. We should mimic Paul, who brought a demonstration of the Spirit's power by displaying that Christ has been crucified. We are called to point people to the cross by carrying one with them and alongside them. One last thought: I will suggest that we can't call this process of healing uniquely "Christian" unless it includes the creation of a new, diverse, and subversive community, a community that shares in each other's lives and hardships. In short, a community dedicated to following the example that Christ set with his small community of twelve, which is also exemplified in the earliest chapters of Acts. It's not YHWH's salvation until it has born the fruit of holy community.

JOSH LOVE LIVES AND WORKS AMONG THE POOR OF DALLAS, TEXAS, WHERE HE SERVES AS A CHAPLAIN AT CITY SQUARE, A NONPROFIT DEDICATED TO FIGHTING THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF POVERTY THROUGH SERVICE, ADVOCACY, AND FRIENDSHIP (JLOVE@CITY SQUARE.ORG).

