

Nehemiah 2:17-18; 6:15
Ephesians 3:14-21
MARK 2:1-12

Sermon – August 12, 2007
Preached at Holy Trinity Church, Kibera
Anglican Church of Kenya

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Amen.

I am happy and honored to be your guest preacher here this morning at Holy Trinity Church. I am the Rev. Francis A. Hubbard, a priest of the Episcopal Church in the USA, a fellow Anglican, and your brother in Christ. I am here at the recommendation of Canon Wycliff Balongo of All Saints’ Cathedral and by the kindness of your Vicar, who also brought me to this church and to this neighborhood for a brief visit the day before yesterday. Thank you, Vicar.

I come to Kenya as part of a team of five people from an American organization called Global Outreach for Addiction Leadership and Learning which works in several countries around the world helping people who are dealing with alcoholism and drug abuse to experience **healing**.

We are here in Kenya working with a Kenyan organization, based in Nairobi, called the S.A.R.A.H. network. “SARAH” stands for Substance Abuse Recovery And H.I.V. /A.I.D.S. [and we have representatives of the SARAH staff here as well, who I will also introduce later.] Canon Balongo is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the SARAH Network.

Personally, I am the rector of the church which first supported the creation of the S.A.R.A.H. Network in 2005. I am honored to finally be here in Kenya myself. I am the leader of a church which is deeply involved in the struggle against addiction, and a church which has many immigrants to America in it, including immigrants from six African countries, of which Kenya is one.

Now that I have given this rather long introduction to explain what a *mzungu** like me is doing in your pulpit, you may wonder, “So what?” What could I and the other guests in your church today have to offer you?

First of all, I offer you appreciation and applause for your dedicated and determined presence in Kibera. I know churches in America which have faced fewer challenges than you face which have simply given up. **You have not.** You have a beautiful and well-built church building which is a witness to the presence of God here and the potential of this congregation as a **SERVING COMMUNITY**, as your service leaflet this morning describes the THEME FOR TODAY. I understand from your Vicar that in recent months the people of Holy Trinity have reflected on some of the difficult situations from your congregation’s history, and have faced these memories forthrightly and boldly, including having worship services of healing, reconciliation, thanksgiving

and blessing. Again, I applaud you: there are churches I know in America which have not (so far) faced their own histories with such honesty and energy.

But of course, building a building for worship is only a start. And facing the past and healing past hurts is only a start. What about the present – and the future? **What kind of church do you want Holy Trinity to be?**

You have launched a theme for 2007 based on the great work of Nehemiah in leading the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem over 2,400 years ago. Let me quote the words of Nehemiah 2:17 which must be very familiar by now: “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”

That is the **diagnosis** of the problem which Nehemiah gave. Diagnosis is very important: without diagnosis, you do not know what the problem is, and if a person does not know what the problem is, how can a person design a solution? But if you went to a medical clinic, even a clinic like the one you have here at Holy Trinity, and all you got was a diagnosis, it is not likely that you would get well. You might well say to the person in the clinic, “I knew I was sick when I came here, now all you have told me is the name of the illness; how can I get well?”

Of course, Nehemiah did more than diagnose the illness: he prescribed some medicine. He said, “Let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”

Suppose you were ill, and you were diagnosed at the clinic, and you were given medicine, and you left the medicine at the clinic on purpose because you refused to take the medicine, how could you then get well?

So the story continues after the verse from Nehemiah I just quoted. Nehemiah spoke to the lay leaders of the Jewish people when he said, “let us rebuild the walls.” The lay leaders responded in the very next verse, “Let us start building.’ So they committed themselves to the common good.”

They knew they had to lead. They made a commitment to lead: Nehemiah could not, of course, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem all by himself any more than your Vicar and your Curate, dedicated as they are, could do all of the work that God is calling Holy Trinity to do!

What comes next in the book of Nehemiah is the account of hard work. The whole of Chapter 3 is a list of people, by personal name, family name, job title or home village, who personally worked on rebuilding the walls. It was not just Nehemiah and the leaders, it was hundreds of people.

They faced opposition from enemies in their community. They faced hardships. They had to give generously of their time, their skills and their money.

But the final verse we read this morning from Nehemiah gives the results of their labors: “So the wall was finished, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.” Fifty-two days! This great work was accomplished in 52 days – and before they started there was nothing happening, and the people were depressed, discouraged and apathetic. Surely the Spirit of God was in that place, and was poured into those people.

[So in our Old Testament reading today we have diagnosis, treatment and cure: the disgrace of Jerusalem could be taken away by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, a great crowd of previously discouraged people were empowered to rebuild the walls; they succeeded in 52 days. And, accomplishing that feat together brought them closer together as a community and raised their morale to accomplish more missions afterwards.]

Today is August 12. Fifty-two days from now is October 4. I wonder what Holy Trinity Church could accomplish in 52 days?

Let's ponder that while we reflect on the Gospel reading.

Diagnosis: there was a man in Capernaum who was paralyzed, and needed to be healed by Jesus. Prescription: he needed to be carried to Jesus despite any obstacles there might be – including Jesus' popularity! Solution: four friends volunteered to carry him to Jesus no matter what it took to get him there.

When they couldn't get in the door of the house because of the crowds, they carried him up on the roof, then removed the roof right above Jesus and lowered the man down through the hole in the roof so that he was right at the feet of Jesus.

What did Jesus do? Did he pose for a photograph with the paralyzed man so that their picture would be in the newspaper the next day – and then tell the four friends to carry him away? Did Jesus give a lot of money to a local politician in Capernaum to “do something” about the problem of paralyzed men – or perhaps, for the politician to hire some of his friends and relatives to “think deep thoughts” about the problem of paralysis? (That's the way some people do things in my home state of New Jersey in the USA, but I don't know if this ever happens in Kenya.)

No, of course Jesus did not do those things. First, he saw – and acknowledged – the faith of the four friends. What good friends this man had! And please note – not one of these four friends was an apostle, they were all lay people – not a Curate or a Vicar or a Rector or Canon or Bishop among them. They made the commitment to go and bring their friend to Jesus. They used their caring hearts, their brains and their muscles to carry out their missions, just like all of us can and do, and, like the people of Jerusalem, they didn't give up when they faced an obstacle.

Second, Jesus offered the man what he knew the man needed most: forgiveness. And then, he healed him physically: Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And the man did – not after a university had done a study of the problem of paralysis in Capernaum but immediately. Jesus said, “Stand up on your own two feet.” And the man who was paralyzed stood up, and walked, and went home – made new.

What would it be like if just four members of Holy Trinity brought someone who had a serious problem about which the person felt helpless and hopeless, and that person experienced healing, transformation and new life by the power of God? What if the people of Holy Trinity found out they had that power just by reaching out to each other in special ways? How would you like our Lord to say to **you** – or to your parent or brother or sister or friend – “STAND UP. You are no longer helpless or hopeless. Your life can be different.”

The **empowerment** I am talking about is happening to millions of people all over the world right now, one day at a time – amazingly, when they acknowledge that they are powerless and let go and let God be their Higher Power. The paralytic could not heal himself; only when he turned himself over to Jesus could he be healed.

Diagnosis: paralysis. Prescription: to be carried by four friends to Jesus. Solution: carrying him to Jesus, who healed him and **empowered** him to stand up, forgiven and well.

St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written to one or more Christian communities just a generation after the resurrection of Christ, when the number of Christians in an entire city might be fewer than worship in Holy Trinity Church on a Sunday morning, when no Christians anywhere had a fine building in which to worship, or owned even a scrap of land as congregations. Not only that, Christians at that time faced a government which either didn't know or care they existed or might be hostile – and in fact St. Paul himself was in prison at the time he wrote this letter.

But the power of God can **never** be imprisoned!

The problem: all Christians needed to be empowered by God to deal effectively with the many crises and problems of their lives – their lives as individuals, as families, and as congregations. The prescription: St. Paul prayed “that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with **power** through His Spirit, and that **Christ** may dwell in your hearts by faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love...so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

WOW. What a prayer. What an opportunity. But – did this offer come with an expiration date, like some special offer in a newspaper advert? Did this offer only come to those people who subscribed to the same cell phone plan as St. Paul? Or was it limited only to members of the same tribe as St. Paul?

Of course not. This offer stands firm in scripture because it is offered to all people in all places and in all times who turn themselves over fully to Christ, whether in Ephesus, in America, or Kenya, or anywhere else.

And this spiritual power is given to not just a few select leaders, like St. Paul himself, or to *mchungajis*** like your Vicar and me who have “Rev” in front of our names in church bulletins, but to all people who turn away from other powers and principalities and turn their wills over to the true God and ask God to be their Higher Power.

And remember, **God's** power never has outages!

I am here today in witness to the reality that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, triumphant over sin and death, and offers abundant **life** to those who turn their wills over to him, even when those people are facing life-threatening diseases like addiction to alcohol or addiction to drugs.

Addiction is a **disease**, not a sin, although it is a disease which leads people to commit many more sins than they would have otherwise. We all are sinners, we all fall short of the glory of God, we all are in need of redemption by the saving blood of our

Lord Jesus Christ. There has only been one perfect person in the history of the world, and it's not me or you; it's Jesus.

Addiction is a disease, not an illness. It is an uncontrollable, all-consuming desire to consume something (often alcohol or other drug) regardless of what happens as a result. Addiction is an uncontrollable attraction combined with an allergy: people cannot control their use of something that makes them sick and makes them act crazy.

[Addiction is a disease. In the days that Jesus walked the earth in person, there was a disease that made people who had it feel ashamed, and caused them to be thrown out of their families, their villages, and their places of worship. The disease was...leprosy. What did Jesus do to lepers? He touched them, healed them, and sent them home to rejoin their communities. We can do the same with addicts: we of GOAL and the SARAH Network reach out to addicts, offer them a way to end their crazy behavior, and invite them to be part of communities as part of their continuing healing, and encourage them to join faith communities.

This is especially important because] people who have the disease of addiction to alcohol or drugs sometimes act in ways that spreads another deadly disease which also carries the burden of shame in our world today: H.I.V./A.I.D.S.

Jesus is also reaching out today to those who have H.I.V./A.I.D.S. and offering his love to them today. No matter what, Jesus loves.

Diseases of addiction are, like H.I.V./A.I.D.S., **not curable**: there is no pill that any alcohol addict can take which will make it possible for that person to take one or two drinks and stop. There is no pill that someone with H.I.V./A.I.D.S. can take today which will banish that disease from their bodies. BUT: while these diseases cannot be cured, **they can be treated**, and treated in ways that make the lives of those who suffer from them far, far better. And the treatment I am talking about today is **free**, and **is available** now and can happen in Kibera and at Holy Trinity.

[But first let me say a little more about the disease of addiction. Some people may not believe that being addicted to alcohol and drugs is a disease, and some people may be just a little defensive when listening to a sermon about addiction to alcohol or drugs.

So imagine for a moment, please, that I myself am addicted to...bananas. (I pick up a banana and display it.) Imagine that bananas are not merely my favorite food, but the food I eat instead of a regular meal – even though bananas made me break out in an itchy rash all over my body.

You would say, “This man has a disease, an allergy – this man needs to see a doctor”, would you not? Of course you would.

But suppose in addition to causing me to have an itchy rash all over my body, suppose I nevertheless continued to eat bananas, and to eat more bananas than anyone you know? Suppose I was never able to eat just one banana, that instead I would eat as many as were in my home. Suppose when I got paid, the first thing I did was to buy so many bananas that I ate them until I vomited and passed out, and didn't have enough money left to buy food for my family?

Suppose I hid bananas all over my home, bananas in the boot of my car, bananas behind books in my office, even bananas behind the altar and bananas in the pulpit? Suppose I just couldn't get started in the morning without a couple of bananas?

And suppose I couldn't drive safely after a few bananas, I lost my license for driving under the influence of bananas, and I was always in debt to the banana-seller on the street? And suppose, when someone said to me, "I'm glad you're not addicted to pineapples, because it would be much harder to try and hide a dozen pineapples" – suppose that I didn't think that was funny, but punched him, broke his nose and got arrested by the police?

Then, I would clearly be addicted to bananas. I would have an insatiable craving for bananas and would want to eat them endlessly no matter what. I would have a disease that made me do crazy and sinful things. I would have to stop.

So I would go to your Vicar after the church service (I turn towards him) and say, "Vicar, I have a problem. I am powerless over my desire to eat bananas." And I would tell him all that I have been doing. And your Vicar would say to me, "That is a serious problem. You have a **disease**, Reverend Francis, which is **incurable**, but is **highly treatable**. You only have to do two things, after you see a doctor to help you get through banana withdrawal: do not eat bananas, and go to meetings of Banana-eaters Anonymous. We have such a meeting here at Holy Trinity, in the school, tomorrow night at 6 pm. You're invited. The members of the group all have the same disease you have: they are powerless over their consumption of bananas. But they have turned their wills over to God to help them not to eat bananas, one day at a time. It's free. And **it works**. And they don't act crazy as long as they don't eat bananas, go to meetings of Banana-eaters Anonymous, and follow the 12 Steps – here's a copy. It is hard work, following these steps, but **FOLLOWING THEM CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE.**"

Admitting to your Vicar that I had such a problem would already mean I had admitted the reality of the problem, which means I was already on the way to the beginning of healing. I cannot emphasize that enough: admitting a problem, admitting a weakness is an opportunity to **let God be our strength**, which is the **only** way we can be healed. As St. Paul says (2 Corinthians 2:10), "When I am weak, then I am strong," for then "the power of Christ may dwell in me."]

This is the spiritual power I spoke of earlier. Addicts can begin to experience healing when they admit they can't heal themselves, and they ask God to take over their lives. Otherwise, [bananas or] alcohol – or drugs – would continue to take over their lives until they were dead.

Of course, first people have to get through denying they have a problem.

Earlier this week, I visited the reptile exhibits of the National Museum of Kenya. I will tell you, the pythons and cobras made quite an impression on me – not physically, I am very happy to say, but on my imagination.

So imagine with me that the disease of alcoholism is like a giant python. (I walk out of the pulpit to the floor in front of the altar.) An alcoholic might say, "Pythons don't exist," while at that moment a python comes into a room where he is standing. Then he might say, "Pythons exist, but not in this country," as the python gets within a meter of

him. Then he says, “Pythons are in this country, but I’ll never see one,” as the python curls around his ankles. (I look at my ankles.) Then he says, “I’m in complete control of my python,” as the python wraps itself around both of his legs and his waist. “I can pull my python off me whenever I want.” The alcoholic may insist that he is in complete control until the python of alcoholism has wrapped itself around both of his arms and his chest. If he does not then admit that he is powerless over his python then, and ask for God’s help, he will be crushed and eaten by his python. (I get back in the pulpit.)

That happened to one of my parishioners who was 25 years old. A really nice guy, fun to be with, likable. But he went out drinking one night – again, not for the first or only time – but this time, when he came home, he went to sleep and never woke up.

The python of alcoholism killed him.

It doesn’t have to be that way. My friend Terry G., who is with us here this morning, has been sober for 24 years. (I motion and he stands.) My friend Bruce, who is also with us here this morning (he stands), has been sober for 42 years.

This has been possible because they admitted they were powerless over the disease of alcoholism and they joined a group called Alcoholics Anonymous, and committed themselves not to drink – one day at a time.

They both still have the disease. They both have pythons with their names on them. But both of their pythons are curled up in the corner, asleep, and they have been asleep for a long, long time. And Bruce and Terry want their pythons to stay asleep, because they both know what it is like for the python of alcoholism to be curling around their legs, ready to make each of them its next meal.

If there is a python in your life – and you admit it’s there – talk to Bruce or Terry after church. They have been AA members for years and their lives are so much better, **BY THE GRACE OF GOD**, it’s hard to imagine. They have been to AA meetings here in Nairobi. **AND** – there **could be** an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting **HERE**, at Holy Trinity – bringing this **miraculous healing, life-saving power of God right here**.

THAT is something I devoutly believe could happen in less than 52 days. **THAT** is a miracle that would take far fewer people than rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Starting such a meeting might take only, say, four people who want to **try** to stop drinking. No one is expected to be perfect, only to give our wills over to the only one who **is** perfect, God.

Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is not a church program; it is a program which the church could allow to hold a meeting on church property. While Alcoholics Anonymous was founded 72 years ago by devout Christians, they decided to make it a spiritual program which would be open to anyone – Christian, Jew, Muslim, Sikh, someone of another religion, or even someone with no religion, because God offers healing and new life to everyone, even to those who do not yet know who is making the offer. That is why A.A. talks about “God as (each of us) understand God.” That said, people like you could help to start an A. A. group.

A.A. is free and open to anyone who desires to stop drinking. Alcoholism is a disease which, like diabetes, is **treatable**, and with **long-term treatment**, stops making people crazy. This is not a “quick fix”; no one gets “all well” in a week. **BUT** – people

can start getting well in a week, even in a day, and can make progress, progress that is amazing.

[The other option for those with addiction is continued craziness – and then death. I had another young man in his 20's whose father was in my church and who I visited when the young man was in jail because of his problem with heroin.

Drugs are like the cobra. The needle is like the fangs of the cobra, which kill unless the person receives immediate treatment. But to get treatment, the person has to seek treatment.

One day, his father got the phone call that every parent dreads most. It was the Los Angeles Police Department – 3,000 miles away from the young man's home – calling the father to say they had found his body, behind some bushes next to a highway in Los Angeles. His body was so decayed that they could only identify it by dental records.

The cobra of drug addiction got him.

Don't let the python, or the cobra, get you. Or your brother, or sister, parent, son, daughter, cousin, friend. Alcoholics Anonymous saves lives – if people learn about it, want to come, and come.]

If you want there to be such a group here in Kibera, perhaps hosted here by Holy Trinity, tell your Vicar, talk to [Bruce and]Terry G. about it after the service – stand up please [– talk to the people from the SARAH Network – stand up, please, Don and Douglas – after the service].

[And for those of you who may have family members or friends who you care about who you think may have a problem with alcohol or drugs, I have news: YOU have pythons in your lives, too.

Alcoholism and drug abuse makes everyone in the family of the addict crazy. There is help for family members and friends, too. My friends Helen and Terry W. (stand up, please) have long experience as members of **Family Support groups** for the family and friends of addicts. They help enormously too.

There could also be a Family Support Group here at Holy Trinity. Talk to Helen or Terry W., or to the staff members of the SARAH Network who are here, after the service.]

People who are HIV+ need help, too. They also have a disease which is currently incurable but **is treatable**. There are medicines which can help to keep them alive. And in many places, including here in Kenya, there are SUPPORT GROUPS for people who are HIV+ which are helping those people know they are not alone, that there are others like them who truly understand what they are going through, and who can help them make the best of a very difficult situation.

God loves and cares for people with HIV/AIDS. God loves and cares for people who are addicted to alcohol and/or drugs. And God loves the family members and friends of addicts. [And God has sent, is sending and will continue to send spiritual power to the people of this church, inviting them to join together in support groups in accordance with their needs to begin their healing, and then to invite others to experience

the liberating, empowering love of God when people come to God with their weaknesses, admit their powerlessness over such diseases as addiction and H.I.V./A.I.D.S., ask God to be their Higher Power, turn their wills over to God as they understand Him, and, one day at a time, walk, stumble or crawl if necessary the 12 Steps.]

This church has the **potential** to be a **lighthouse** in Kibera, because the same God who empowered the Jewish people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, who empowered the four friends to carry the paralyzed man to Jesus, and who sent his power out through the prison walls which only imprisoned St. Paul's body still lives and offers new and better life to all who fully turn to him.

If you, the people of Holy Trinity, start one support group, maybe two, maybe all three in the next 52 days, **what miracles might God do for you and through you!**

Don't let the pythons [and the cobras] win. God can conquer all, but only if those facing problems give God permission to do so in their lives.

Too many people are facing these diseases of addiction and of H.I.V./A.I.D.S. with as much chance as a football team with no goalkeeper and no defenders. The people of Holy Trinity can join God's team and help keep people alive – and by the grace of God, with lots of hard work and commitment, transform lives as well. With Alcoholics Anonymous, a Family Support Group and an H.I.V./A.I.D.S. support group, miracles can happen. Three groups – how appropriate for a church named Holy Trinity! Let us work hard so that when God announces the score of the next match, it will be, “Holy Trinity 3, Pythons [and Cobras] nil.”

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August 12, 2007

NOTES:

The Main (English-speaking) Service at 9:45 am was one of Morning Prayer and sermon, and I was told that the congregation was used to a sermon of about 30 minutes. The parts of this sermon in [brackets] were omitted when it was delivered as part of the Youth Service at 8:15 am. There was a handout distributed at the end of the service with information on addiction, A.A., the 12 Steps and a list of A.A. meetings in Nairobi either in English or in Kiswahili. Terry G. was present at both services; the other GOAL Project and SARAH representatives were present only for the 9:45 service.

**mzungu* is a Kiswahili word meaning “white person”.

***mchungajis* is a Kiswahili word meaning “shepherd”, applied to clergy.