Twenty-third Sunday *per annum* Wis 9:13-18 Phil 9-10, 12-17
Year C, 2025 Ps 90 Lk 14:25-33

Philemon's spiritual awakening

If you're not familiar with the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, I suggest that read over them carefully and give what they say serious thought, for the Twelve Steps are deeply imbued with Christian ideas and offer, for many people, even those who do not struggle with addictions, a practical basis for orienting their spiritual lives.

The Twelve Steps state that recovering addicts must face their past, and making a "searching and fearless moral inventory" of themselves, must admit to God, to themselves, and to another human being the exact nature of their wrongs. This sounds very much like the traditional examination of conscience that any of us make before we go to confession, where we admit first to ourselves, and then to God and another human being (the confessor), the *exact nature of our wrongs*. The exact nature. Without euphemisms, without evasions, without vague generalities. Exactly and precisely the wrong that we have done, and to whom, and the good that we have failed to do.

According to the Twelve Steps, recovering addicts must make a list of persons they have harmed and be willing to make direct amends to them all. This sounds very much like what a penance is really meant to be, to make up for, as we are able, the wrong we have

done: restitution, if and where that is possible; reconciliation, if and where that is possible; a pledge and sign of amendment of life. Then the Steps require recovering addicts to continue taking personal inventory, and whenever they are in the wrong, to promptly admit it. It's not just about the past, it's about the present as well.

The steps require a searing honesty with oneself about oneself, and then, in humility, admitting wrongs before God and before others. Those recover and find peace and reconciliation who stop defending themselves, who throw off denial, who make themselves vulnerable before the truth. But being truthful with oneself about where one is wrong or has done wrong is hard, and because of that it is rare, but if done in a spirit of true repentance and conversion, it can lead to a spiritual awakening that changes everything. This spiritual awakening is mentioned in the twelfth and last step, along with the resolution to practice the principles of the steps in all aspects and affairs of one's life.

It is just this kind of spiritual awakening that St Paul is trying to bring about in Philemon, as we heard in our second reading. In the letter, Paul writes to Philemon concerning a man named Onesimus, who had been Philemon's slave, a runaway slave. Onesimus had ministered alongside Paul for the gospel for some time and had become a valued companion in Christ. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, "no longer as a slave," but as a brother. Onesimus had become Paul's "child," and Paul calls him "my own heart."

It is clearly Paul's expectation that Philemon should repent of holding Onesimus as a slave and should be reconciled with him completely, making amends and receiving him back as a brother, that is, as an equal. Philemon, confronted by the truth of Paul's entreaty and by the person of Onesimus, will have to make a fearless moral inventory and, repenting, make amends, which will lead to reconciliation and a spiritual awakening. But this will happen only if he can admit the truth of his wrongdoing to himself, before God, and before others. Only the truth will set Philemon free. Accepting the truth of his wrongdoing, admitting it and atoning for it, is the only way forward, the only way to freedom.

It is not my intention for us to reflect on the question of slavery as it is mentioned in the bible or as it has been found in human cultures and civilizations throughout all of history, even in our own country.

The question that arises for me as I reflect upon Paul's letter to Philemon is this: why is it so hard for us to admit our faults, to admit that we have done wrong, that we have sinned? We know we have faults, that we've done wrong, that we have sinned, but we have a very hard time naming the "exact nature of our wrong." Instead, we get defensive, and evasive, and we obfuscate. There's something in us that makes us want to hide, even from ourselves, our defects of character. But if we will not honestly and truthfully and sincerely admit our shortcomings to ourselves, to God, and to another, then the shame and burden of those shortcomings will remain with us, and like a spiritual cancer, fester and turn us into

lesser beings, ruled by fear and spite, by anger and denial, by resentment and destructive behavior. Isn't this just like the addict who will not admit his addiction, who will not see the destruction it brings upon him, his loved ones, his friends and associates?

I often see this dynamic in my work in the confessional, where one person will sit in front of me, and face to face, humbly make a courageous, insightful, painfully precise and sometimes heart-wrenching confessions, while another will retreat behind the screen and from that safe and sheltered place still offer only a superficial and perfunctory admission of sin and guilt. Through the sacrament, the forgiveness of God comes to both sets of people, but only those who are truly defenseless and vulnerable before themselves, God, and another will experience the full power of the redeeming grace that Christ Jesus alone can offer.

One of the things that I admire most in people who are recovering addicts is that I find in them a refreshing lack of defensiveness. Granted this is a generalization and there are surely exceptions. However, I'd wager that, on the whole, those who have truly internalized the Twelve Steps are far less defensive about their own faults and failings, both past and present, than the rest of us. And they are far more likely to admit, upfront and right away, when they've made a mistake, when they've said or done something that is off, awkward, unkind, or just wrong. The kind of soul-searching that they've gone through, the searing encounters with the painful and sometimes ugly truth about themselves, have made them better

equipped to accept their faults and failings, even when others must point those out to them. Unflinching truth and honesty, while painful, ultimately lead to humility and to a healing encounter with mercy. Having been shown mercy and most importantly having accepted mercy, they have learned to be merciful toward themselves and toward others, even toward those who are not yet able to face themselves with such honesty, and perhaps never will be.

Now if it's that hard to be that honest with ourselves on an individual basis, should it surprise us that many people also have a very hard time being honest when it comes to naming and facing our collective faults, failings, and sins?

Here, the question of slavery, raised by Paul's letter to Philemon, is quite useful. It can get us thinking about own nation's collective reckoning with slavery and America's many other historic and current faults and failings, exemplified, just for instance, in our nation's shameful and sinful use of concentration camps, which we called by different names, like plantations, or Indian reservations, or the relocation centers that held citizens of Japanese descent during the Second World War, or the immigrant detention centers of today, now given such garish and crude names like Alligator Alcatraz, which the indecent have even visited as if it were a tourist destination. Euphemisms do not excuse the inexcusable, they only seek to conceal it.

Acknowledging, admitting the "exact nature of our wrongs" as a nation is not unamerican nor unpatriotic any more than acknowledging one's pasts or present sins is masochistic self-loathing. In the past twenty or thirty years, much progress, I thought, was being made in overcoming the unrealistically cheery and chummy whitewashed "happy days" version of American history. But recently, in the past several years, a backlash has mounted from certain quarters that has all the characteristics of vicious denialism. And so fly the accusations of being unamerican and unpatriotic simply for telling the truth, uncomfortable as it may be, for casting off the carefully cultivated myths that seek to conceal and explain away or even justify a nation's faults, failings, and sins.

It's hard work confronting and coming to terms with our own sins or with the sins of our nation's past. But other countries have done it before, and to their credit and betterment, most recently and famously, Germany, in the aftermath of the rise of Nazi nationalism and authoritarianism; Japan, in the aftermath of its war expansionism. These countries, having conducted a searching and fearless moral inventory of their past, teach their histories with truth and transparency, celebrating their nation's glories and achievements with rightful pride, but also admitting the exact nature of what they have done wrong. That takes courage. Real courage. And it produces a people who are stable, steady, and secure.

I will not belabor these examples, chosen, yes, because they may provoke, but really they are meant only to illustrate, perhaps uncomfortably, the main point and question, which is: why is it so hard for us to admit our own faults, both personal and collective? Those who can and do, achieve spiritual sobriety, are made whole, are reconciled with others and with themselves, and are spiritually awakened as the power of truth sets them free. Those who cannot and do not, continue to rage, while violence and destruction and chaos reign all around them, or at least within them.

Why, though, such vehement evasion, such angry denial? The answer: pride and fear. Pride will deny the truth, and fear will flee from it. A diabolical combination if ever there was one, pride and fear, which together lead to humiliation and destruction. But why is it so hard for us to admit our own faults, whether personal or collective? In think, in part, it is because we've bought into the myth – the diabolical lie – that if we're not absolutely perfect, then that means we're vulnerable, damned, doomed. But that is precisely the lie. To allow oneself to be wounded by the truth is the first step to being freed by the truth and to be free for the truth. The more truth, the better. Even if it is hard or uncomfortable. Especially when it is hard and uncomfortable.

To return to the image of the Twelve Steps, sobriety is more than not drinking alcohol to the point of inebriation. Sobriety is also and mainly a state of mind, a state of soul. The sober mind has the ability to appraise things, even itself, realistically, in the light of truth, as it

is not under the influence of half-truths and whole lies, evasions and deceptions, that carefully crafted cocktail meant to intoxicate and to make the mind deny the evidence before it and lash out against it.

Sobriety of mind and soul depend on letting in the light of truth, especially upon those things about ourselves that our pride and fear would rather keep hidden in the dark. This, I believe, was St Paul's desire for Philemon, that the truth should set him free. And to be free, Philemon would have to confront the wrong he had done to Onesimus, admit it, ask for forgiveness, atone for it, and then in humility receive him back as a brother in the Lord.

May God in his merciful love grant each of us the grace to be courageous and unflinching in embracing the truth, so that we might admit our faults, and living soberly, set our hopes completely on the grace brought to us in the truth of Jesus Christ, who has called us to be holy in every aspect of our lives, to be holy, just as he is holy (cf 1 Pt 1:13-16). Casting off all pride and fear, may we be set free by the truth: to repent, to make amends, and to live once again in the bonds of mutual love and peace, as befits Christian disciples who are, in truth, brothers and sisters in the one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom the Father has reconciled all creation to himself (Col 1:20), and who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.