Sunday, July 11, 1976
SHE SIGNED HER LETTER, "HELP ME!"
Matthew 15:21-28

Not long ago, I had a letter from a young woman. In the letter she described how her life was coming apart. She had recently been divorced, then had fallen ill, and was hospitalized. She lost her job. Her closest relatives lived over a thousand miles away. She described how lonely she was. "Her life," she said, "had lost all meaning and she was ready to die." She signed her letter, "help me!"

Individuals ask for help in many ways. Often the request is covered over or veiled and not as plain and direct as this letter writer. For example, one day in a former parish, my wife answered the phone at home on a Saturday afternoon. The woman identified herself and asked to speak to me. I was not home, so my wife continued to talk with the caller a few minutes. At the end of the conversation, the woman said, "By the way, tell your husband that I'm quitting the church."

Later that day when my wife reported the conversation to me, that got my attention. I telephoned the woman and suggested that we talk together in my office the next afternoon. She agreed. When we met, she said nothing more about wanting to quit the church. Rather she began to pour out her problems. It was difficult for her to say the words, "help me," but that's what her whole conversation was saying and once she came to realize this and admit that she was seeking help, she was ready to quit fighting herself and others and begin the road back to wholeness.

Many of do have difficulty admitting that we need help. We cover up in many ways. We like to think that we are self-sufficient, that there is no problem we cannot handle by ourselves. But there come times in all of our lives when we need to be able to say openly to ourselves and to someone we trust, "help me." That's the first step toward healing and wholeness.

One of the most inspirational books I've read in the past year is entitled, "Sill W." It's the life story of Bill Wilson, cofounder of A.A. The story will soon be made into a movie.

In the book, the author tells how difficult it was for Bill to admit he needed help. For years he had convinced himself that he could handle his alcohol problem alone, even though it had gotten him into extreme difficulty time and time again.

One night in Akron, Ohio, after a business deal, he had been working on for days fell apart, Bill Wilson found himself alone with exactly ten dollars in his pocket. He didn't want to admit his failure to his wife back in New York City or to the other persons involved in the business proposal. As he sat thinking and then pacing, directly across from his path in the hotel was the entrance to the bar and with every step he took, he was more aware of the cool inviting darkness just beyond the entrance. He had sought this kind of comfort many times before in his life. What harm would one drink do, he told himself.

But this time, the thought caused him to panic. He felt his knees grow weak; a cold sweat ran down his arms. For the first time, fear overrode his rationalizing mind. Then even as he noticed his hand had actually begun to shake, he felt a small, strange sense of relief. Maybe sanity could be restored, he told himself. But he needed help.

There was one thing he knew he had to do and do immediately. He had to talk to someone who would understand. He couldn't handle the problem alone. Consulting a telephone book, he picked out the name of a minister at random and made a call. Reverend Tunks answered and Bill began his story. He was an alcoholic from New York City, and it was vital that he find another alcoholic to talk with. The minister gave Bill a list of names to call.

There were ten names to contact. As he telephoned them, a few were busy, some were not at home, but the last name on the list, a Mrs. Sieberling, said that she understood his problem and gave him instructions to get to her home. Once there, he told her a little more of his struggle with alcohol. She said she knew a prominent surgeon who also had a serious alcohol problem. He had tried all sorts of cures, but nothing seemed to work. By now he had lost most of his medical practice. A phone call told them that the doctor was unavailable that night. He was drunk and not at home.

The next day, however, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob got together. Mrs. Sieberling ushered the two men into the library in her home and left them alone. Bill started the conversation by admitting frankly that he was not there, as Dr. Bob might suppose, to help him, but because he, Bill Wilson, needed help. Then he told his own story, describing as he had never done to anyone the horror of the suicidal obsession that had forced him to go on drinking and the physical allergy his body had developed. This was in 1935, and then alcohol was thought of only as a moral problem and never as an illness.

These two men talked on for hours. Soon Dr. Bob had opened up and was speaking as frankly and as unashamedly as Bill. When they parted after six hours, they knew something had radically changed in them both. For Bill, it had been a unique, wondrous, and totally engrossing experience. After admitting his deep need to share his problem with another drunk, he had not felt the slightest desire to preach or in any way judge the other man. Two drunks, each of whom had the same disease, had found a new, mysterious, and loving kind of communication.

They met again the next day and talked more. Together they began to dig deeper, to take the first tentative steps toward self-examination. This was the beginning of A. A.

In the process, Bill and Dr. Bob had stumbled onto several principles which had been in existence almost since the beginning of the human race and which Jesus Christ gave new emphasis in his ministry, but which had never been applied to the problem of alcoholism.

The first step which we have been talking about is to know yourself well enough so that you can admit you need help. Some years later, A. A. put the first principle down in these words, "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable."

This principle, however, applies to much more than the disease of alcoholism. It is the first step toward healing of any kind. It's what the woman in the story from Matthew read as our scripture lesson did. She said to Jesus, "help me."

2. The second step for us, after we have admitted our need for help is to find someone who will listen to us and understand and not just be judgmental. Bill Tilson, in his day, knew that probably for him, only another alcoholic would understand his problem. Most other people would see alcoholism not as a disease, but only in moralistic terms.

All of us from time to time when we need help, need someone who will listen to us and understand. The deepest meaning in life comes from our relationships with others. A person's life begins to lose meaning, purpose, and direction most rapidly when he or she becomes estranged from other human beings. That's what the woman who signed her letter, "Help me," was saying deep down. The deepest desire of all of us is to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be at one with us.

St. Augustine wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." St. Augustine was right as far as he went. A better way to say it would be, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and for one another and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee and in one another."

At the heart of our Christian faith is the fact that God came to us in a person, in the man Jesus Christ. This coming to us in a person was in answer to our deep need to find relationship with God and one another. Part of the meaning of "being born again," is to find new relationships with other human beings — to know that you are loved for yourself.

So, whenever we say, "help me," we are in fact among other things asking for a human relationship, we want to be loved and accepted by another person or persons and for a relationship with God. Part of our relating to God comes through our relationship with another person. We are loved by someone and through that someone, by God.

3. The third step in the help process is learning to love ourselves properly. When we are loved by someone and accept that love and God's love, then we are ready to love ourselves. That too is part of being made whole.

I am often impressed and appalled by the prevalence of the sense of low self-esteem that I find among people who are seeking help. Sometimes people have even confused V their low self-esteem with the Christian faith. One person told me that a Christian is made by crossing out (putting a horizontal line through) the personal pronoun, "I" thus forming a cross. Another said, "I was taught to put myself down," or "It's a sin to love yourself."

One of my favorite questions to people is, "What do you like about yourself?" Many people block on the question because they feel guilty about identifying and admitting affirmative thoughts about themselves. They're afraid it will sound like bragging. It's much easier for most of us to identify and talk about our problems and failures and weaknesses and inadequacies. I'm not suggesting that we simply gloss these over, but they are only one side of each one of us.

In helping a person who has asked for help, it's often useful to ask, "What are some of the strengths and inner resources of your inner self? What in yourself can you count on?" This, too, is part of knowing ourselves, to be honest about our strengths as well as our weaknesses.

What in yourself can you count on? Take that question home and think about it. Maybe you have a sense of humor that helps put matters and problems in perspective; or maybe you have the capacity to see the real behind the false and defensive in people. Or maybe you have the capability to accept and use creatively whatever happens to you. Your initial response to a disappointment or tragedy may be discouragement, depression, or resentment, but you are the kind of person who soon begins to assimilate, learn from, and act positively in relation to the events. If you know this about yourself, then you can count on yourself to eventually respond to any situation in a positive manner.

Of course, we all have weaknesses and problems which affect us adversely. All of us are also vulnerable and defensive because we are finite human beings. We need to accept that about ourselves. But our power to grow does not come only from our ability to analyze our liabilities, but to know and employ our resources and strengths. Rather than it being a sin to think well of yourself and have confidence in yourself, it is a sin not to find your strengths and rejoice in them.

Our faith teaches that God seeks to work through us to each other. That's why Jesus Christ gathered disciples. "You are to be ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through you," is the way the Bible puts it. I believe God wants to make this appeal through persons who have assimilated the love they have received, learned to love themselves properly and who therefore are able to love their neighbors and God.

So do not be afraid of asking for help from another person. That's the first step in any healing process. Then find someone whom you trust who can listen to you and help you. Learn then to love yourself properly and to trust God in the process. This means a certain kind of commitment on the part of each one of us. It means offering our growing selves each day to God by employing ourselves in someone's behalf. This is all part of what the Bible means when it says we are to be born again. Amen.