

WEEK 2 / DEVOTION



Read Luke 15:11-32

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son is a familiar one. All of the characters and actions in this parable resemble the characters and actions in our opioid epidemic. A child leaves home, parents worry every day, the lost child in their addiction lives in a "far away land," by the grace of God the child may "come to himself" and return

home. The parents and community celebrate the return of the lost child, but the older brother is not thrilled. Did Jesus have our family, church, and community in mind when he told this parable?

Over the next several weeks we will use this familiar parable as our guide to honestly look at the opioid epidemic and ask "What If...?" The hope is that we will not spend our devotion time wondering what if the parents did something different, or what if the prodigal son did not leave, but asking God what can I do to keep this from happening again? What can I do when I meet a child lost in a faraway land? What if I, what if we as the church, were involved in this parable? How could God have used us to prevent, comfort, care for, support and rejoice with the family of the prodigal son?

Read the parable again slowly. Give the characters in the story names of people you know who are directly involved with the opioid epidemic. Ask God where we should be in this parable.

What if God answers our petition?

It is not enough to open the doors of our sanctuary and hope the epidemic ends. We must leave our sanctuaries and enter the story.



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Why We Become Addicted

Have you ever tried to hold your breath for as long as you can? Our brains are created in such a way that we cannot hold our breath too long and lose consciousness on our own. The part of the brain responsible for breathing will override the foolish part of our brain that is trying to harm our body by withholding oxygen. This is the same part of the brain that lets us keep our balance, walk, keep the proper heart rate and breathe all at the same time, without having to consciously think about it. It is the small part of the brain that sits at the top of the brain stem where the nerves enter the brain from the spinal column called the Limbic System. It is in this very powerful area that opioids affect the brain.

When we see a person who is suffering from addiction and wonder why they just do not stop, we might as well be wondering why they cannot just stop breathing. This area of the brain is not ruled by reason or common sense. It is ruled by subconscious desire.

When opioids enter the nervous system, the nerve endings are fooled into believing the opioid is really a naturally produced chemical called dopamine. Dopamine is a chemical that makes us feel pleasure. It is released when we take that first bite of chocolate ice cream, when that special person agrees to go to the prom with us, or when we have accomplished a personal goal. The problem is, opioids cause the body to artificially experience more pleasure and last much longer than ordinary dopamine. Imagine that rush of dopamine after your first kiss lasting all day and making you feel even better!

The addicted person's brain begins to crave this feeling of pleasure. The addicted person's brain cares not about how to pay for the opioid, how the family feels about their addiction, missing work or even food. The addicted brain craves the rush supplied by opioids. Opioids are very powerful and very hard to overcome. Recovery from opioid addiction is a lifelong process, a process that requires courage, strength, endurance and a lot of prayer.



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