



## Feeding our Addiction

Text: Luke 15: 11 – 32

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It never really happened. I know you've all seen the video footage, nightly, on the news of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and that footage sure looks realistic – but of course we know it never really happened because for weeks, months, yay years, BP and other petro-giants have assured us that this sort of thing was now impossible. It couldn't happen.

Oh yes, it's true that there have been some disasters in recent history. For example:

- January 29, 1969: Blow Out of a Union Petroleum well off the coast of Santa Barbara; 200,000 gallons of oil spilled into the ocean, covering 800 sq. Miles and contaminating 35 miles of coastline.
- July 6, 1988 : North Sea off Scotland: 166 workers killed in explosion and fire on Occidental Petroleum's *Piper Alpha* rig in North Sea; 64 survivors. It is the world's worst offshore oil disaster.
- Nov. 10 1988: 700 miles off Saint John's, Newfoundland: *Odyssey* spilled 132,000 tonnes of oil.
- May 24, 1989: The *Exxon Valdez* hits a rock in Prince William Sound. 11 million gallons spill into the sea, leading to millions of dead birds, seals, sea lions and other sundry wildlife. 1300 miles of coastline contaminated.
- June 8, 1990: The *Mega Borg* released 5.1 million gallons of oil as the result of an accident and subsequent fire. The incident occurred 57 miles south-southeast of Galveston, Texas.
- August 10, 1993: Three ships collide just off the coast of Tampa. 300,000 gallons of oil are released in Tampa Bay.
- November 28, 2000: Oil tanker *Westchester* lost power and ran aground near Port Sulphur, La., dumping 567,000 gallons of crude oil into lower Mississippi.
- Nov. 13, 2002; Spain: *Prestige* suffered a damaged hull and was towed to sea and sunk. Much of the 20 million gallons of oil remains underwater.
- Mar 23, 2005 Explosion in BP factory in *Texas City*. Killed 15 people. BP fined \$21 million for being "egregiously negligent". Largest fine in US history.
- 2009: BP fined \$80 million for further safety violations *at the same plant in Texas City*.

But that, you see, is all, "old news." It goes way back to, well, last year. BP (the same BP that had been fined over \$100 million for negligence and killing people) assured us all that events like this could never happen again, that sufficient safeguards had been put in place to protect both the environment and human life, and so there was no need to worry. Why would anyone not trust BP? The coast was clear, in the words of US Republican Presidential Candidate John McCain, to "drill, drill, drill". Those who were afraid of more off shore drilling were dismissed as tree-huggers, enviro-nuts, even (and here's the kicker) soft on terrorism – because if we don't drill, we'll have to depend on them nasty A-rabs, and you can't trust them as far as you can throw them.

Well, you may feel like a fool today for believing BP and the other petro-giants, but before you beat yourself up too badly for naiveté, let's all remember that, until a month or so, no less an intellectual than Barack Obama was similarly sucked in. According to the *Reuters* news agency on March 30 of this year (that's about 6 weeks ago):

President Barack Obama unveiled plans on Wednesday for a limited expansion of U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling in an effort to win Republican support for new proposals to fight climate change.

Opening up parts of the U.S. Atlantic coast, Alaska and possibly offshore Florida to exploration is Obama's latest effort to woo legislators needed to pass a climate bill.

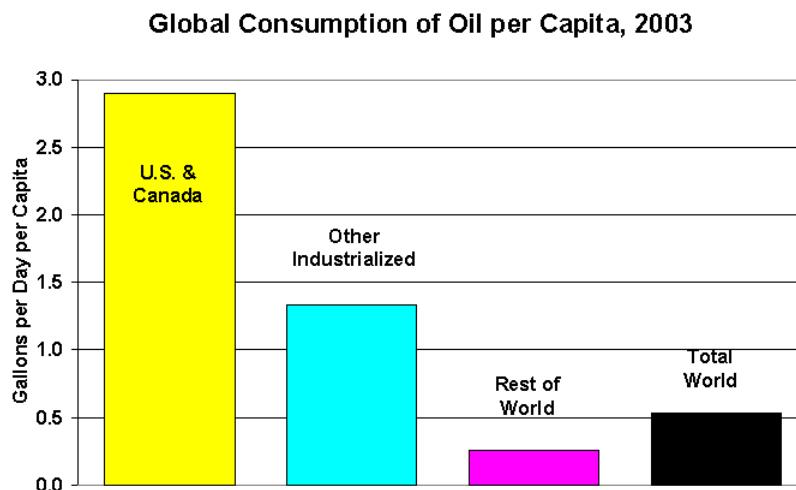
Some senior Republicans in Congress called the drilling announcement a step in the right direction but said Obama did not go far enough. Environmental groups and some congressional liberals condemned the plan for endangering wildlife and coastal areas merely to give oil companies more profits.

Exxon Mobil, the biggest U.S. oil company, called the announcement a "meaningful, potential opening."

On the surface, it's difficult to understand how, after 40 years of one environmental disaster after another, an enlightened, quasi-liberal President like Obama could endorse an expansion of North American efforts to pump every available gallon of oil out of the ground. And yes, this is not just a US effort – currently, as we speak, a well is being sunk just off the coast of Newfoundland that is twice as deep as the one currently fouling the Gulf of Mexico. We might wonder how this could happen. We get it when the Canadian government approves this sort of thing, because both our current government, like the one which preceded it, quite clearly, has no environmental conscience or commitment whatsoever. But how is it possible that Obama, someone so seemingly enlightened in other areas, could be so naive, so willing to accept the assurances of an industry with an unwaveringly horrible record of one environmental disaster hot on the heels of another? Strangely enough, however, the explanation for Obama's actions is found in the words of another US President, this time no less an authority on environmental matters than George W. Bush. In his State of the Union address just four years ago, in January 2006, the great "W" summed up the problem in just one sentence: "America is addicted to oil".

In the year 2005, the Global per capita consumption of oil was 1778 kilograms per year – or, to state that another way, every man, woman and child on this planet consumed about 1800 kg. of oil per year. In that same year, every citizen of the good old US of A consumed about 7885 kg of oil per year, or 4 1/2 times the global average. Bad on them, eh? But here's the kicker. Every single man, woman and child in Canada consumed 8472 kg of oil in 2005, 600 kg *more* than the average American, and almost five times the global average. Of course, we weren't alone in our oil gluttony; Canada's per capita consumption of oil was exceeded by the citizens of at least a few other countries, countries like, let's see, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, the mighty Luxembourg, and the leader of them all, Qatar. It's safe, therefore, to conclude that if George W. Bush is right, and America is addicted to oil, then Canada is lying dead drunk in the gutter with crude dripping out the side of our otherwise unconscious mouths.

Here's how that's looks when it's represented graphically:



Addicted to oil. Jack Henningfield is a professor at Johns Hopkins University whose area of specialization is the study of addictions of various sorts. He has written extensively on the subjects of alcoholism, gambling and substance abuse. In

an interview on CNN, Henningfield was asked whether there was any real sense in which our North American attitude towards addiction could be described as a true addiction. Here's what Henningfield had to say:

"Oil addiction is not an addiction in the medical sense, like a drug addiction or tobacco addiction. But it is an addiction in the sense that powerful behaviours are involved. They're difficult to change, and it can be agonizing for people to change. When it comes to substance addiction, the brain rewires itself to depend on the chemical. Similarly, in the case of oil, our nation has been rewired. Our national infrastructure has been wired by cheap, plentiful oil".

Addicted to oil. Now addiction, by nature, is not so much a state as a process that goes through several stages. Kids don't become addicted to tobacco when they take their first smoke, despite dramatic advertizing campaigns claiming otherwise. It's true, of course, that if you never take that first smoke, you never become addicted, but it's equally true that there are many people, and I'm fortunately one of them, who had one or two smokes as a kid, finds the whole thing revolting, and is never tempted again. For those who do become addicted, however, that first smoke, first drink, first joint is the first step in a process that becomes ever more inexorable. One drink leads to another, then it's one every night, then it's a binge every Friday, then it's booze in the office, then it's doing whatever is necessary to get that drink. And if the process continues unabated, it leads inevitably to loss, to sadness, and ultimately to death. Psychologically, as well, there are many stages on the addict's journey, travelling through a sense of intrigue at a first tasting of this forbidden fruit, through mild concern about how it's starting to feel necessary, through denial to despondency, and ultimately, again, if the pattern is unbroken, to despair. In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus tells the story of an addict, this young man we all know as the prodigal son. Jesus doesn't use the language of addiction, but we know this kid is an addict because nothing else will explain his appalling behaviour. So desperate is he to feed his craving that he tells his father he wishes he were dead, just so he can get his inheritance to squander on booze, gambling, broads and drugs. It's quite the life, and he ends up in that sad place where most addicts will spend some time at least, in the gutter with the pigs. It's a very sad story, and a story which is all-too-familiar in any household which has been visited by alcoholism, or addiction to gambling, or to drugs, or, if one accepts it as a true addiction, to sex. This is a young man who knows the spiral from Corvettes, fine wine and fancy clothes, to the trough he must share with the swine.

It is a classic addict's journey.

So where on this journey are we in our addiction to black gold? How hooked are we, really, to oil? Well, to help answer that question, let me read you a little section from the website of an organization that understands the dynamics of addiction perhaps better than any other, Alcoholics Anonymous:

Most of us have been unwilling to admit we were real alcoholics. No person likes to think he is bodily and mentally different from his fellows. Therefore, it is not surprising that our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker.

We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking. Despite all we can say, many who are real alcoholics are not going to believe they are in that class. By every form of self-deception and experimentation, they will try to prove themselves exceptions to the rule.

The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death.

We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed.

If you remove the word "alcohol" and insert the word "oil" that passage describes perfectly where we are at, in North America, in our relationship to oil. We are still at that most dangerous stage of the addict's journey, where on the one hand our unabashed consumption is doing huge damage to ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually, but on the other hand, we deny that reality with all the dwindling resources available to us. My grandfather was an alcoholic, although my grandmother had little time for such gently couched language, and simply described him as a "god-damned

drunk". Stories are legion in my dad's family of how their father would hide bottles all over the house – one of his favourite spots was the tank on the back of the toilet, because then every time you flushed the rush of fresh water would help keep the booze cool. My grandmother would run around the house looking for hidden bottles, and when she would find them she would flush them down the toilet with much drama, or smash them on the floor and leave the shards of glass for the old fella to step on. In one famous story, my grandmother, a fine church lady, was hosting the women's group in her living room when old Willie came stumbling down the stairs, drunk as a skunk and buck-naked, screaming at her because she had found his last bottle and pitched it. Incidentally, I never knew my grandfather because the booze killed him before I was even born, and I never knew my grandmother because the stress of living with old Willie took care of her, too. We, too, are now at the stage of looking desperately for every last barrel hidden somewhere around the house. We'll drill in Alaska, poke wells into nature preserves, transform the Gulf of Mexico into a cesspool, threaten the already depleted fish stocks off Newfoundland, turn the province of Alberta into a barren place as we suck the last drops out of the oil sands – on and on it goes, all the while exhibiting the other classic behaviours of an addict in denial as well. "I won't drink on Friday night, just to prove I can still manage my liquor." Or, "I'll quit smoking for Lent, just to show you I can". So we have our Earth hours and our Earth days, we ride our bikes to church one Sunday a year, we install compact fluorescents even in the face of mounting evidence that they are more environmentally dangerous than traditional bulbs, we take biomass out of the food chain so we can augment our dwindling supply of oil with ethanol. I find that last one quite a lovely irony; drunks cut their alcohol with water to make it last a little longer, and we cut our gas with alcohol to gain the same effect. It is, all of it, classic denial behaviour. And none of it is terrible in itself, I suppose. It seems to be a stage on the journey that addicts must go through, and yes, it's better to take one Friday off than it is to get bombed every Friday night, and of course it's better to bike to church one Sunday a year than it is to fire up the ol' Escalade every day. But like every other addict in history, we are fools if we believe that these minor course adjustments will save us, or even significantly slow the descent into the trough.

When the Social Justice team planned this little "Bike to Church" event this morning, one of the team members asked me to preach on the subject of the environment; "you know" quoth she, "one of those environmental sermons you preach now and then that scare the hell out of us and end up by telling us there is no hope because we've gone too far". Well, I guess I didn't think I'd been quite that negative in the past, but perhaps so. In any event, moving as we are to the conclusion of this sermon, let me try to strike a more balanced tone. Because that's the way the story of the prodigal son ends as well. The time comes when this young man quite simply hits the bottom. He's eating and sleeping in the pig sty, he stinks, his wealth is all squandered, he has no friends, nobody wants to be near him. So he decides to go home and, famously, his father runs down the road, wraps his arms around him in an embracing welcome, and throws a party because "the one that was lost is now found". I hope it was a "dry" party. In any event, it's a lovely picture of reconciliation and restoration, and it's the ending to the story we all like to remember. We all want to know we can go home and be welcomed when we do. A more careful reading of Jesus' story, however, suggests a more nuanced ending. Yes, the boy is welcome, but it's also made very clear that some of what has been lost by his behaviour can never be restored. The father says to the older brother, "look, everything I have is still yours" – what's done is done, the younger boy has blown his boodle, and there's no more to be drawn from the family well. And it's not just his money that's gone; it's also his relationship with his older brother. His brother emphatically does not run down the road to greet him – in fact, his brother is furious that this young, drunken abusive brat has come home and uprooted the family once again. The story doesn't tell us whether the two brothers were ever reconciled. We don't know. It's an open question, just as it often seems to be an open question in circumstances such as these. When Jesus tells his deceptively simple little story, he makes no attempt to sugar coat the reality that the harm done by addiction is lasting, and sometimes permanent. My mother, and Nancy's mother, were both addicted to smoking, and it killed them both; it's a simple as that, and nothing can ever change the fact that my kids grew up without a grandmother because of that addiction. We don't blame our mothers for that, but we don't deny the reality, either. Will the coast of Louisiana ever recover? Can global warming be stopped? Will the scars from the oil sands ever heal? Will there be fish off the coast of Newfoundland in 10 years? I don't know, and it's not for me to say. As it was in Jesus' story, these are open questions.

Alcoholics Anonymous offers a wonderful program for alcoholics who make the decision that the time has come to conquer their demons. The program is based on one very simple conviction: that once you are in the grips of an addiction, you cannot beat it by yourself. So AA walks with addicts, and helps them in very concrete ways to restore

their relationships with God, however God is understood, with their families, with each other, and above all, with themselves. Step by patient step, alcoholics are shown how to reconnect with people who care about them, and with the divine energy that makes new beginnings possible. And they are not just shown or told; they are literally handheld as they walk step by step through the process. And the best thing is this: the process works. Not every time. And not for everybody. But remarkably, for many, many people, the process works. And it works sometimes for people who have descended so far into the depths of hell that you would never have thought there could be a way back out. So is there hope? Yes there is.

But here's the thing: the first step of the 12 in the AA process is standing up and admitting, without qualification or compromise, that you are an alcoholic. It was only when the boy in Jesus' story faced up to who he was that he could start the journey home. The 12 steps work, but you can't take step # 2 until you take step #1. And step #1 is admitting that you are hooked. We're not there yet in our addiction to consumption of fossil fuels. We're still looking for hidden bottles, turning the lights off for one hour in spring time, and pretending we'll be OK. Is there hope? Yes, there is. But the first step is admitting we're hooked. The question is whether, collectively, we'll take that step before the damage done is irreparable.