

Sometimes the world can seem to be a very dark place. Indeed, in the Passion that we just heard proclaimed, darkness is a theme; Judas leaves into the darkness; the mob comes in the night; Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin in the night. And then there are the forces of darkness that run throughout the Passion too; cowardice, envy and jealousy; betrayal and most every sin you can think of.

It doesn't start that way. Jesus is welcomed with palms waved as a crowd sings "Hosanna" thinking him to be perhaps a new king who will liberate. But when he does not liberate from the power of Rome, the crowd quickly disperses forgetting about him. However, we know full well that He does liberate, but it is a different kind of liberation. One from the power of darkness and sin. One that replaces fear with hope and mercy.

We too, are called to do this. But for that to happen, we have to open our eyes to the reality of pain in our world and choose to do something about it. Hopefully the more we come to Mass, the more our eyes are opened.

Katie O'Connell, who is a teacher, had her eyes opened one day in a 20-minute conference she had with a parent that changed her forever.

One of her students in middle school was a boy named Akif, who was happy and good-natured. She recalls his thick, black glasses only magnified his smiling eyes. He was a bit immature as middle school boys often are, but he was kind to his classmates and did not misbehave. His homework however was chronically late. He struggled to keep pace with the class, even when he assured her he understood the assignments. Katie gave him effort grades when she could, but the problem was getting worse. By November, despite messages left on the home answering machine, it was time to meet the parents.

At her middle school, they collaborated for conferences, meaning teachers worked together. Akif's work was incomplete in most subjects, so other teachers joined the meeting. Katie was grateful she wouldn't be alone. Her colleagues could show her how they resolved issues with parents. She needed to learn, she thought to herself, and she really wanted Akif to succeed.

Akif's father entered the classroom uncertainly. His blue acrylic sweater, oversized and misshapen, hung on his thin frame. The old Mobil gas

station logo with the flying red horse covered his chest. She realized he carried no coat on this cold November morning. Yet despite his disheveled clothes, his graying beard was neatly groomed and his hair was covered with a white crocheted cloth. It's intricate weave looked handmade. He walked in nervously, quickly sitting in one of the empty desks they had circled for the conference.

The teachers welcomed him and began introductions when his thin hand went into the air to stop them from speaking. In a shaky voice, he asked to speak first. Katie was surprised, but could sense his anguish.

He poured out his story. Akif was his youngest child. They'd moved from India, and he worked two full-time jobs to support his family. As he spoke, Katie noticed he wouldn't make eye contact with them. Then he shook his head ruefully and explained his wife and children also worked. Everyone pitched in however they could. In India, he said, he devoted time to his children. But here, with all of the demands, he hardly saw them. He couldn't guide and help them anymore. The more he spoke, the more Katie understood what he was trying to say: He blamed himself for Akif's struggles.

All of God's creatures need attention," he stated. "Whether it is a tree or a deer or a child, they all need the same thing. Nurturing. I have not been able to give Akif what I gave my older children. I can't give him the attention he deserves. I keep telling him he must ask his teachers for help with his schoolwork. Surely, they will understand. That is their job."

Then he stopped. His head hung as he covered his face with his hands. He began to weep.

No one in the room moved. Katie felt suspended in time. She was overcome by his humility and desperation. She knew in that moment, she was in the presence of something far greater than herself. He embodied selfless, unconditional love. His burden overwhelmed him, and he begged for mercy and help from complete strangers.

"I would be forever grateful if you could give Akif help," he said, as tears rolled down his cheeks.

The teachers sat in shocked silence. She forgot all about being a first-year teacher. She prayed for the right word and spoke from her heart, reassuring Akif's father that they would help his son succeed however they could. For the first time, the man looked directly at her, and he saw his face relax with relief. Then he bowed his head and thanked her deeply.

The teachers created an action plan for Akif. There were lunch periods and before school sessions to help him. As a teaching team, Katie looks back and is sure they focused on study skills and homework strategies. But she honestly does not remember the details. He moved on to high school, and she lost track of him. But that parent-teacher meeting changed her in powerful ways, as a teacher, but also as a person and eventually a parent.

Those 20 minutes taught her about selflessness, honesty and love. Katie witnessed the sacrifice of parent and the burden created when our best isn't enough. She learned people can surprise her, and not to assume things before she heard someone's story. And she was taught the beauty of vulnerability and the importance of asking for help. The conference was one of the most important lessons of her life, all in 20 minutes.

For us, Mass is about 60 minutes or so each week. But this week, we enter more deeply into what the Mass, and indeed our faith is all about - our best not being enough on our own. Our pain and hurt. Our need to ask for help. The very lessons Katie learned in that conference - selflessness, honesty and love. And we are invited to learn how to ask for help, and how to pass it on in the way that Jesus does.

Sin is ugly. It can paralyze us. And like an effort grade to a student who is struggling, we can ignore it for a time, thinking we are doing good enough. But eventually it catches up with us. And that's why so much of our faith is about doing what Akif's father did, and asking for help. The Passion shows us how ugly sin is by bringing it all out into the open. But it also shows us God's response to sin - Jesus Christ - His Son - who is there to show us the way. To teach us. But most importantly, to liberate us. So whatever sin you may carry, turn it over to Him. Pray. Come to the Masses and Services this week and think about how much you are loved. On Holy Thursday we celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus gift to us as food for our journey to remind us He is with us every step of the way. Good Friday we reflect again on the Passion, read from John, and venerate the Cross and come to an empty church stripped of everything saved for the Cross to remind us we are

loved. And a week from now, we celebrate the Easter Vigil, reminding us that death and sin do not have the last word, but hope does. For us, like Akif's father, we just need to get past our pride or ego, and remember that we are broken, but we are not alone - God is with us and loves us to the end.

But with that, we need to open our eyes to what Jesus did, and follow him. A child's teacher's job is to teach a large group in the classroom, not have special sessions for one individual. But so many teachers go above and beyond just the requirements of their position because they want to help a student to truly succeed. Katie and her fellow teachers saw a man in pain, and they did something about it. God saw us in pain, and He did something about it. So what about us? Do we follow the crowd who drops their branches or do we follow Jesus into the pain of those in our lives who are hurting? Being a listener, journeying with a person as they battle an addiction or other sin, helping a child or parent with something, being patient, saying something positive or a kind word, showing empathy, and so many other random acts of love have such incredible power in a world where so many like Akif's father can feel isolated, and so many focus just

on themselves. The Passion is a gift of Gods love but also a challenge to look for ways daily to do what Jesus did - to bring light into the darkness.

Yes, sin is ugly and it will always be in the world because we as humans abuse our free will. But just as one father and son were liberated from their pain through the love of a group of teachers, the sacrifice of our Lord liberates us all if only we have the courage to reach out, and let Him reach in. So reach out to Jesus, let Him help you, and use the love the Master teacher gives you to go out to bring His love and hope into a hurting world.