

When pain and sin take over our lives, sometimes it can be a bit like a flood of destruction. We might make progress, only to have it come back again, or the sins and struggles can have an affect on the lives of others much like the waters of a flood. It's easy to see why some people can despair. But as a Christian, we are not sitting around on earth waiting for an escape. Earth is not hell. Rather, we as Christians pray the Lord's prayer, and say "on earth as it is in heaven" and "thy Kingdom come." Throughout the season of Easter, as we've read through the readings from revelation and reflected on the victory of our Lord over sin and death, we've been invited to also think about how the new heaven and new earth that John writes of in our second reading we can begin to make present here and now. For while sin is powerful, far more so is the love of God at work through you and me. And it has such amazing power to do great things.

In the 1970s, Bill Borchert found himself doing research, though he didn't know it at the time, for what would become a film and a book. The film was "My Name is Bill W" about the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the book was called the Lois Wilson story: When Love is Not Enough.

You may know the name Bill W. But I knew very little about Lois until I read about Bill's experience with her when he interviewed her. And what I learned is she is a remarkable woman who had been through much with her alcoholic husband, but in this she also saw hope and like him, decided to help those who were impacted by the disease.

Lois was actually known to Bill's wife, Bernadette.

William knew about AA— he had started his career in newspapers and met plenty of hard-drinking reporters whose lives were saved by the organization and its 12-step program of recovery. And, ever since Bernadette had met Lois through some mutual friends, she had been telling her husband what a kind and fascinating woman she was. But not even learning that Lois had founded Al-Anon, the 12-step support group for loved ones of alcoholics, could make William glad to give up a precious weekend day.

His business partners and him had recently produced the 1973 hit movie "Serpico," starring Al Pacino. They were working feverishly on a follow-up, chasing screenplays, talent and money. There was little time for anything

else. “What am I doing here” he thought as they went to meet Lois. We’ll just shake hands and leave early, he thought.

The picnic was at Stepping Stones, Bill and Lois’s cedar-shingle house on an eight-acre plot of woodland in New York’s Westchester County. Lois held the picnic every year, an open invitation for recovering alcoholics and their families to spend a day relaxing in the warm June sun. When Bernadette and her husband reached the top of Lois’s drive, they saw a wide lawn barely dotted with people spreading blankets. They were early. More time squandered he thought.

They got out, and Bill breathed the rich, dusky smell of lilacs. A stream meandered past and disappeared into trees. Bernadette led him across the lawn to a screened porch at the back of the house. There, surrounded by a few friends, sat an elderly lady in slacks and a silk blouse. When she saw Bernadette, she rose and embraced her.

“Lois, this is my husband, Bill.”

Lois, who, at age 82, was no more than five feet tall, looked up at Bill with glistening, grayish-blue eyes and gripped his hand firmly. “It’s wonderful to meet you,” she said in a lively, crackling voice. Bill stammered out a reply, suddenly feeling very foolish. She was so open, so welcoming. She told him how pleased she was that he had come, then invited him to go with a friend of hers named Penny on a tour of the house. In moments Bill was mounting a creaky spiral staircase and entering a long, high-ceilinged room crammed with photographs, plaques, an old Moviola machine and a desk where, Penny told him, Lois had laid the groundwork for Al-Anon by sending letters to the wives of alcoholics in her husband’s support groups.

As Bill made his way through the room, poring over photographs of Bill and Lois, and reading letters from luminaries around the world thanking them for their work, his eyes widened in surprise. He clicked on the Moviola and felt his own movie gears whir. The founding of AA—what a film that would make! And all the material is right here at his fingertips. “I wonder if Lois will give me permission” he thought to himself...

When Penny and Bill returned to the porch, the lawn outside was packed with families eating, laughing and forming a line around the house to spend

a few moments with Lois. Bill watched her greet each person as if he or she were her only guest. They kissed her cheeks, gave her gifts and told her stories of recovery and redemption. "I'm so glad you could come," she replied. "And it's wonderful to hear what AA did for you."

Bernadette and Bill stayed most of the afternoon. When they left, he asked Lois if he could meet with her again to talk about his movie idea.

"Of course," she said.

The following Thursday afternoon, Lois and Bill sat in her living room, drinking tea. Bill turned on a tape recorder, and she began to tell the story of herself and Bill. They had married just before he shipped off to fight in World War I. She still had a picture of him in his second lieutenant's uniform, and Bill could see why she spoke of him so reverently. He was handsome, with a penetrating look, and she said that even at that young age, she believed he would do great things. When he returned from the war, he'd made a great deal of money working in finance on Wall Street, and he had rented an elegant apartment in Brooklyn Heights, just across the East River from Manhattan's thrusting skyline.

He'd also, however, begun drinking. Not enough, at first, to affect his work. But enough to eventually snowball into a powerful addiction. Soon, he was arriving at the office hung over, insulting clients and cutting out early to drink. He would disappear for days into underground speakeasies, surfacing only when he ran out of money. Lois, frantic, would be left to nurse him back to health. After the stock market crash of 1929, he lost his job and the apartment, and he and Lois crammed their belongings into her father's house on Brooklyn's Clinton Street. Only when Bill's drinking landed him in the hospital for the fourth time did he reach out to a God he had never believed in and realize that faith and fellowship were his only hope.

"He founded AA after meeting a fellow alcoholic named Dr. Bob Smith, on a trip to Akron," Lois told him. "When he got back to New York, he began a support group at our house. Though, if you had seen it back then, you wouldn't have called it that. It was mostly just Bill going to the Bowery and pulling drunks out of the gutter to pray with them and talk about their addiction. They weren't exactly a welcome sight. But all I could think was, they were keeping Bill sober. So I didn't complain that he wasn't working,

and that they weren't paying him anything for his help. I got a job at Macy's and did the cooking and cleaning at night."

It was a precarious life, made more so when Lois's dad died, leaving Lois and Bill to pay the mortgage on the house. Bill's AA group was growing, but Lois's job wasn't enough to make payments. One day, a foreclosure-warning letter arrived from the bank. Lois showed it to Bill as he got dressed for a meeting downstairs.

"We need to talk about this," she said.

"Not now, sweetheart," Bill answered.

"But, Bill, we're going to lose the house!" she said.

"Well, these men are waiting for me," Bill said. And he dashed downstairs.

"At that moment, I realized something that sounds very strange," Lois told Bill. "Bill's AA groups were working wonders. But they were becoming like his drinking—consuming him. Not even sobriety could curb the effects of alcoholism! I felt so helpless, so trapped by this spiral of addiction, that I

stomped out to the front porch to get some air. I was all set to yell at the trees when I happened to notice a long row of cars parked in front of the house. I peered through the car windows and saw that, sitting in each car, was the wife of one of the men at Bill's meeting. They had driven their husbands there and parked outside to make sure they stayed. They were that desperate."

"That's who I need to talk to, I thought. They'll understand. And I ran to the street and asked the women into the kitchen for coffee. As soon as I told them how mad I was at Bill, even though he was sober, they all cried out that they were mad at their husbands! Well, I knew right then that we wives, and anyone else related to an alcoholic, were sick and needed our own support group. And soon after that, Al-Anon began."

Lois and Bill had many more conversations like that—several years' worth, in fact. She told him much about her and Bill's life, but mostly he paid attention to the parts about Bill. That information was what he needed for the television movie *My Name is Bill W.*, which premiered in 1989, starring James Woods as Bill and JoBeth Williams as Lois. The movie was a hit, garnering seven Emmy Award nominations.

But Lois didn't live to see it. She died in 1988 at age 97. Bill moved onto other projects and stowed the tapes of our interviews deep in a box.

More than a decade later, Bernadette and Bill moved to South Carolina. He was unpacking his office when he came across a stack of tapes buried beneath some papers. He took one out. It was wrapped in a green band, which he had used to mark Lois's interviews.

A strange feeling came over him. He inserted the tape into a stereo he kept in the office and pressed play. Lois's vivid, crackling laughter filled the room.

Then her voice came in, in that no-nonsense New England twang. "If your husband or wife gets cancer or some other terrible illness, do you walk out on them? Of course not. Well, alcoholism is a disease, and I couldn't walk out on it."

Bernadette came in. "Is that Lois?" she asked him.

“Yes,” he said, putting a hand to his face.

“How wonderful that you still have those tapes,” Bernadette said. “We should listen to them again.”

Yes, he thought. Listen. “Did I ever really listen to Lois,” he wondered. He remembered not even wanting to meet her, driving grudgingly to her house under a warm June sun. What if he had never pulled up that narrow drive? Never stepped onto that screened porch and seen her welcoming eyes? Bill realized he would never have made his movie. But, more important, he would never have met the woman who changed the way we think about alcoholism.

Lois had made Bill promise to preserve her anonymity in Al-Anon. But now that she had died, Bill realized that the world needed to know just how profound her insight and contribution had been. That afternoon on her porch, seeing those wives lined up in their cars, Lois didn’t just find a support group. She learned the true, terrible reach of alcoholism. The way it affects whole families, anyone connected to an alcoholic. Without her support of Bill, there would have been no Alcoholics Anonymous. But

without her recognition of her own need for healing, millions would still be battling a disease they didn't even know had hurt them.

Bill looked at Bernadette. "I think I need to write a book about Lois," he said.

Bernadette grew quiet. "I think that's a wonderful idea," she said. "When will you start?"

He looked at the tapes. "Right away," he said. "I've got everything I need."

In fact, Bill reflects, he had been led there years before, not knowing that that day when he first visited Stepping Stones, a plan had already been set in motion.

A plan was also set in motion from the moment of creation. God looked at what he created, and saw that it was good. And while sin enters the picture, as does chaos, darkness, and calamity in our lives time and time God intervenes. This culminated with the birth, life, death and ultimate resurrection of the Son. And in our second reading today, we hear the

endgame. "Then I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more....The One who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." God, having intervened time and time again, achieves the final victory. As Bishop Robert Barron puts it, the isn't God having a fit of anger and destroying the world, but rather God performing a cleansing and rescue operation on humanity. Whether meeting a broken man in a hospital ravaged by alcoholism; meeting you and me where we are at. God is always there for us.

Revelation can be misread by some as a guide to when Jesus may return, or when the world will end. But it's not meant to be that. Rather, it gives us the hope not just of heaven, but of God being present here and now, still with us, and inspires us to help do what Bill and Lois did, to bring light to those in darkness. To love one another as Jesus tells the apostles at the Last Supper from which our Gospel is taken.

As a starting point, we reach out to God. Bill Wilson was at the end of his rope when he did that, as his illness of alcoholism had taken over. He had to acknowledge a higher power and his powerlessness to combat it alone.

All of us are impacted by sin. But God's mercy will ultimately triumph. Asking for help can be so difficult, but we need to do that by seeking out God's mercy through confession and by coming to Mass. By naming our sins and asking for God's help to formulate an action plan to combat them. And knowing that even if we fall again, His mercy will be there.

But so too, must we be like Lois who lived out the commandment to love one another as I have loved you. Bill was meeting the needs of some and doing something very important. But so was Lois. The wives in the cars waiting for their husbands were also dealing with the effects of alcoholism. It didn't just impact the alcoholic; it impacted the whole family and friends of the alcoholic. And because Lois opened her eyes to this, millions of people have been helped. Loving our neighbor is tough, because a person can often come across as unlovable through their actions. But look at what happened because of Lois believing in her husband; of seeing the potential. When we strive to love our neighbor, we work for the unconditional love of Jesus who forgave from the cross, we strive to love those who are hard to love, and those who may be forgotten. We open up our eyes to see the person caught up in sin or addiction; the person who may feel alone and isolated or bullied; the person in pain and do something

about it like Lois. From working at a food pantry or soup kitchen to being present to a troubled teen or bringing Communion to the homebound or praying in front of Planned Parenthood and counseling a person to choose life, God gives us so many opportunities to seize the moment like Lois did when she saw those women hurt and alone in the car waiting for their husbands to finish a meeting. Hopefully we seize the moment when it presents itself.

When I was first ordained and started writing homilies, I had a tendency to often refer to movies. So often this occurred that as a going away present from Holy Name, the first parish I was at I was given a movie quote book. I still enjoy movies, but try to avoid being the movie of the week homilist, and my pattern now is to find a story that strikes me and share it. I figure if Jesus can start his homilies with one too called a parable, maybe that's not a bad way to preach. But as I was writing the homily this week, I couldn't help but think of a line Morgan Freeman said in the film Bruce Almighty, where an average go gets the powers of God for a week when God, played by Freeman, decides to vacation. Of course Bruce, played by Jim Carrey, is quickly overwhelmed, and in a conversation where the Almighty opens his mind, God says to him people keep asking me for a miracle, but that's

not how it works. The exact quote is: "Parting your soup is not a miracle, Bruce. It's a magic trick. A single mom who's working two jobs and still finds time to take her kid to soccer practice, that's a miracle. A teenager who says "no" to drugs and "yes" to an education, that's a miracle. People want me to do everything for them. But what they don't realize is *they* have the power. You want to see a miracle, son? Be the miracle." I couldn't agree more. In two weeks we'll celebrate the feast of the Ascension, and hear the question "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" We don't need to look to the sky to see Jesus. The world God created is a beautiful one; it just has a lot of people who get lost; a lot of false shepherds, and needs more workers in the vineyard. So like Bill and Lois Wilson, may we see God in our lives and reach out to Him, but also like them may we be the miracle that is the hands, face and voice of our God who makes all things new.