

One of the things that we find with God is that He will often challenge us and move us out of our comfort zones. And this is especially true with evangelization. We are all called to spread the faith and pass it on. Sometimes that entails a lot of difficulty. But when we persevere, the Gospel is spread through our words, actions and presence.

Perry Perkins today is a chef and food blogger, but he's also still an active Christian. And some years ago, he felt God calling him to be part of a mission trip from his church to Nigeria.

He found himself high on a plateau overlooking the Sahara in the city of Jos. During the dry season, it's a baking arid tabletop prone to violent dust storms and merciless droughts. Perry, hailing from the cool wet climate of the Pacific Northwest, was far from home as he looked at where he arrived.

He had arrived at Lagos International Airport in January, suffering from a severe sinus infection and punchy from lack of sleep. His first adventure, being forced to leave the airport before his host showed up, was luckily brief and ended happily when he was discovered wandering in the lobby of a nearby hotel.

Three months passed, and in that time he had discovered what it meant to be in the mission field, alone. Previous evangelistic excursions to Mexico and Europe had been in groups of ten to twenty of his best friends, sort of a ministry holiday. To be sure they worked hard, but at the end of each day there was the camaraderie of friends to look forward to. In the desert, Perry was now surrounded by strangers. The work as a tutor was tough, much more so than the physical labor of clearing land and building houses. He spent his days walking a fine line between the teachers that he worked with, who desired that he help in maintaining discipline, and the parents of the children he tutored and lived with, who were sure that the issues at hand were the fault of the teachers.

This, combined with severe homesickness and a terrifying bout of malaria, had left Perry nearly despondent, convinced that he had failed himself, his church and his God.

One Saturday, Perry rose early, hoping to avoid the heat of the day. Taking a bottle of water and his pocket Bible, he walked to the outskirts of town and began to follow a long rusty railroad track into the desert. He walked for an hour or two, humming. Worship song and looking for a likely spot to stop and read. Alone with only his thoughts, he began, again, to question the whole trip. He asked himself what was I accomplishing? Who was I helping? How was I ever going to explain this to the body of believers who had sent me out with their money and their prayers to make a difference halfway around the world?

The temperature began to rise, and Perry stopped to sip from his water bottle. Far ahead, across the flat, barren sands of the plateau, he could see a small dot through the rippling heat waves. From where he stood it looked like a person, someone walking towards him, following the same tracks back toward the city.

Soon Perry could see him plainly, a man, dark and thin, carrying a bundle of kindling on his shoulder, dressed in faded jeans and a tattered white dress shirt. Shambling toward him, his feet were protected from the burning desert flood by thin, weathered sandals. Perry's first reaction was fear. But as the man grew closer, Perry saw that he was elderly, at least 70, though the years of deprivation and harsh surroundings made him look much older.

As he approached Perry the man raised a hand in greeting and Perry suddenly smiled and did the same. At Perry's smile, the stranger broke into a long flowing monologue in his native tongue, none of which he was familiar with. His broad white teeth gleamed in the desert sun as he gestured to himself and then to the desert behind him. Perry shook his head, still smiling, and used the handful of Yoruba that he knew to explain that he couldn't speak his language. The man's smile grew even broader and he continued to chatter happily. Reaching for his water bottle, Perry unscrewed the plastic cap and offered it to the stranger, whose grin became even wider as he took it and drank.

Then, pulling on a leather cord that hung across his neck and down his back, he retrieved a battered skin water bag and offered it to him. Perry undid the wooden stopper and sipped the warm dusty water, tasting the tanned leather of the bag as he did.

The two men watched each other for a moment, unable to make themselves understood. Then the old man reached into the breast pocket of his worn shirt and pulled out a scrap of paper, which he offered to Perry. He pressed the page into his hand, tapping Perry's chest and pointing skyward. Then, touching his fingertips to his forehead, he continued his trek towards town. Perry stood there a moment, feeling the sun burning through the back of his shirt, and sweat trickling down his face.

He opened his hand and found a small, much folded track, written in English, which outlined the plan of salvation. The page showed in simple pictures man's sin, Christ on the cross, and his bridging the gap between God and humanity. Perry knew the track well, as he had handed out hundreds like it in other far off countries. Looking at the dusty, time-worn track, Perry felt tears coming to his eyes. This was it; this was what he had forgotten he thought to himself.

In all the meetings and lessons plans and disagreements and fear, he writes he had forgotten what had put him on a plan, his arm still bruised and sore from a battery of inoculations, and brought him to this completely unfamiliar place. He had forgotten why he had left his family and friends, his home and livelihood. It was all laid out for him again on that scrap of paper.

This man, this missionary, who Perry had met by chance along the railroad tracks in the desert, he had understood what Perry had forgotten, that the message is what is most important. Perry says that finding the opportunity to share the plan of salvation, regardless of race, position, or even language, was what mattered. Perry turned to thank the man to see if he could help him with his load of sticks, but he was gone.

Across the wide, empty expanse of desert that lay between Perry and the edge of the city, there was nothing but the dusty railroad tracks and blowing white sand. He returned to Jos that afternoon with a new sense of purpose. He realized that he might not accomplish what he was sent to do, he might even fail miserably at it, but he could take advantage of every opportunity to share the message through his words and actions.

Looking back on the months he spent in Nigeria, Perry thinks of all the things that he learned - what true poverty looks like, what real perseverance is and what it can accomplish, and how our God, in his infinite love and wisdom, can use any opportunity, overcome any barrier to remind us how simple his calling really is. The missionary who changed his life did it with only a smile and a wrinkled piece of paper.

God has changed our lives too. And what was on that piece of paper is what we celebrate each time we come to Mass. God's Real Presence coming to us on our altar. His Body and Blood, given up for us. His love which knows no limits, and bridges the gap that sin created.

For the man that Perry met, he helped him to remember this truth. That in Jesus, we don't have just a great prophet, we have God Himself. And that man walking in the desert had clearly chosen to place Jesus at the center of his life. And the challenge that we are given this week is to do the same thing, with the reminder that doing so poses challenges.

In the Gospel, Jesus and His disciples are headed to Jerusalem and they pass through Samaria. Samaritans didn't much care for Jews as they were of different sects, and so knowing that Jesus and the disciples are headed there they are shown no hospitality. And so James and John suggest calling down fire and brimstone to destroy them all. Jesus rebukes them. The then though meet up with two people who want to follow Him, and Jesus speaks of not having a home, and to the second man who wants to first bury his father, Jesus says "let the dead bury their dead" and lastly to a man who wants to bid farewell to his family he says no one who looks at what was left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God. Now these come across as pretty harsh. Family is important to Jesus it goes without saying. So is He saying you can't be annoyed with people like James and John, or tend to your fields, your family or that you have to be homeless to be a Christian? Not at all. The point is that if you are going to say "I am a Christian," this has to be the center of your life. Perry and that other man he met were doing what they were doing for a reason, because Christ guided them more than anything else in our life. So the first thing we want to consider is where is our heart or our priority? Is it around the job, the youth sports, the material things or whatever it might be, or does God center what we do, meaning we pray, we go to Mass, and have God as our primary focus.

Second, are we willing to be challenged by God? Perry and the man he met were far from home for a reason, because God challenged them. God challenges us as well. And sometimes the mission will be quite challenging, in fact it often will be. Maybe God is calling you to marriage, to be a mentor or coach, to be a catechist, or to the

priesthood or religious life. All of these things are great, change is difficult. However change is necessary for true growth. Sometimes we can resist the promptings of the Spirit, but when we have that foundation of God at the center, we'll learn how to listen to Him and do what He asks us to do because He comes first.

Lastly, the difficulties in the mission will always be there. Being rejected by people and having nowhere to live doesn't sound like a recruiting pamphlet. But in all of our missions, there is the challenge. Parents deal with the ups and downs of raising kids and inevitably there are a lot of tough days. Priests have great days and days where we wonder OK God why did you send me to this parish. Parish volunteers have moments where things work out so great, and moments of disagreement and difficulty too. There is no smooth sailing in our vocation. And part of the reason Jesus uses the exaggeration of saying don't say goodbye to the family or bury your father is to challenge the person to ask themselves is the cost more than I'm willing to pay. We have to lay everything aside to follow Jesus, even when it's hard to surrender. We can't be a disciple at certain times but not at others. Our faith isn't like a project we set aside and resume later. Remember where Jesus is going: to Jerusalem. There to suffer and die to carry out the Father's plan because there he will let go of everything to carry out the Father's will. And remember Jesus' words to us all: as the Father sends me, so I send you.

So as we walk forward shortly to receive Communion, let's ask ourselves if we are willing to walk with Him, and truly and completely in every way set all worldly goods aside and do His will. The mission will at times be incredibly hard, but we will never walk alone and in the process as He journeys with us, when we open ourselves up to doing what He asks us, this God of surprises will do so much through us as we journey with Him from this world to the heavenly Kingdom.