

In 1964, Jean Mizer, a teacher and guidance counselor, wrote a story about how an ostracized teenager died. In her words:

It started with tragedy on a biting cold February morning. I was driving behind the Milford Corners bus as I did most snowy mornings on my way to school. The bus veered and stopped short at the hotel, which it had no business doing, and I was annoyed as I had to come to an unexpected stop. The boy lurched out of the bus, reeled, stumbled, and collapsed on the snow bank at the curb. The bus driver and I reached him at the same moment. The boy's thin, hollow face was white even against the snow.

"He's dead," the driver whispered.

It didn't register for a minute. I glanced quickly at the scared young faces staring down at us from the school bus.

"A doctor! Quick! I'll phone from the hotel . . ."

"No use, I tell you, he's dead." The driver looked down at the boy's still form.

"He never even said he felt bad," he muttered. "Just tapped me on the shoulder and said, real quiet, 'I'm sorry. I have to get off at the hotel.' That's all. Polite and apologizing like."

At school the giggling, shuffling morning noise quieted as news went down the halls. I passed a huddle of girls. "Who was it? Who dropped dead on the way to school?" I heard one of them half-whisper. "Don't know his name. Some kid from Milford Corners," was the reply. It was like that in the faculty room and the principal's office.

"I'd appreciate your going out to tell the parents," the principal told me.

"They haven't a phone, and anyway, somebody from the school should go there in person. I'll cover your classes."

"Why me?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be better if you did it?"

"I didn't know the boy," the principal admitted levelly. "And in last year's sophomore personalities column I noted that you were listed as his favorite teacher."

I drove through the snow and cold down the bad canyon road to the Evans' place and thought about the boy, Cliff Evans. His favorite teacher! I thought. He hasn't spoken two words to me in two years! I could see him in my mind's eye all right, sitting back there in the last seat in my afternoon literature class. He came in the room by himself and left by himself. "Cliff Evans," I muttered to myself, "a boy who never talked." I thought a minute. "A boy who never smiled. I never saw him smile once."

The big ranch kitchen was clean and warm. I blurted out my news somehow. Mrs. Evans reached blindly toward a chair.

"He never said anything about bein' ailing." His stepfather snorted. "He ain't said nothin' about anything since I moved in here."

Mrs. Evans pushed a pan to the back of the stove and began to untie her apron.

"Now hold on," her husband snapped. "I got to have breakfast before I go to town. Nothin' we can do now, anyway. If Cliff hadn't been so dumb, he'd have told us he didn't feel good."

After school I sat in the office and stared blankly at the records spread out before me. I was to read the file and write the obituary for the school paper. The almost bare sheets mocked the effort. Cliff Evans, white, never legally adopted by stepfather, five young half-brothers and sisters. These meager strands of information and the list of "D" grades were all the records had to offer.

Cliff Evans had silently come in the school door in the mornings and gone out the school door in the evenings, and that was all. He had never belonged to a club. He had never played on a team. He had never held an office. As far as I could tell, he had never done one happy, noisy kid thing. He had never been anybody at all.

How do you go about making a boy into a zero? The grade-school records showed me. The first and second grade teachers' annotations read,

"Sweet, shy child," "timid but eager." Then the third grade note had opened the attack. Some teacher had written in a good, firm hand, "Cliff won't talk. Uncooperative. Slow learner." The other academic sheep and followed with "dull," "slow-witted," "low I.Q." They became correct. The boy's I.Q score in the ninth grade was listed at 83. But his I.Q. in the third grade had been 106. The score didn't go under 100 until the seventh grade. Even the shy, timid, sweet children have resilience. It takes time to break them.

I stomped to the typewriter and wrote a savage report pointing out what education had done to Cliff Evans. I slapped a copy on the principal's desk and another in the sad, dog-eared file. I banged the typewriter and slammed the file and crashed the door shut, but I didn't feel much better. A little boy kept walking after me, a little boy with a peaked, pale face; a skinny body in faded jeans; and big eyes that had looked and searched for a long time and then had become veiled.

I could guess how many times he had been chosen last to play sides in a game, how many whispered child conversations had excluded him, how many times he hadn't been asked. I could see and hear the faces that said over and over, "You're nothing, Cliff Evans."

A child is a believing creature. Cliff undoubtedly believed them. Suddenly it seemed clear to me. When finally there was nothing left at all for Cliff Evans, he collapsed on a snow bank and went away. The doctor might list "heart failure" as the cause of death, but that wouldn't change my mind.

We couldn't find ten students in the school who had known Cliff well enough to attend the funeral as his friends. So the student body officers and a committee from the junior class went as a group to the church, being politely sad. I attended the services with them, and sat through it with a lump of cold lead in my chest and a big resolve growing through me.

I've never forgotten Cliff Evans nor that resolve. He has been my challenge year after year, class after class. I look for veiled eyes or bodies scrounged into a seat in an alien world. "Look, kids," I say silently. "I may not do anything else for you this year, but not one of you is going to come out of here as a nobody. I'll work or fight to the bitter end doing battle with society and the school board, but I won't have one of you coming out of there thinking himself a zero."

Most of the time -- not always, but most of the time -- I've succeeded.

Jean's story won a writing competition in Reader's Digest and was turned into a short film. But while it's more than 50 years old now, its message is timeless, and perhaps more timely than ever. And that's because in a world where we are on the one hand more connected than ever, in reality so many in the world are more isolated than ever. We badger one another over religion and politics, trash one another on social media, bully one another whether we are kids or adults, and forget about one another because we never have time for one another due to our busy schedules.

Jesus though doesn't intend for it to be this way. Indeed we are sent to minister to one another. The Resurrection was the confirmation of Jesus' call to mission not just because he had been raised from the dead but because his claim to be a universal savior was vindicated. The risen Lord sent out his disciples to preach to all nations. He had already given them a mission strategy. In fact in the Acts of Apostles we see how the disciples put this strategy into practice. There is an urgency as Peter and Paul preach, heal, exorcise and claim that the kingdom of God is very near.

They offer the peace of Christ, not by coercion but as a free gift. We are called to make the same offer.

No one did that for Cliff. And the pain consumed him. But his teacher saw what happened and it changed her for the rest of her life to realize that she was sent too to help others in need. As she put it, no one would come out of her class thinking themselves a zero. And as Jesus sends us like the 72, a number symbolizing how Christ is for all nations, we are called to have that same mentality with one another. To see that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. So how do we do that?

It starts with something basic, something Saint John Paul II called the “personalistic norm” which boils down to the statement that as one is created in the image and likeness of God, the only response I can give to a person is that of love. And how much we need this in the world, because we’ve become so depersonalized. A person on a computer or magazine is seen sometimes just for their body not their soul. People find keyboard courage and slam people online with vicious and vile comments rather than having an argument or discussion that is thought out. And we bully one another, slander one another and gossip about people sometimes all the

while being nice to their face. It wasn't actions that killed Cliff; it was inaction. So as a starting point, maybe we can think about how we treat people and start thinking about things we shouldn't do that maybe we do that have crept into our way of life and change them.

Second, we can work on building our relationships with one another. Jesus sends out his disciples for home visits and invites them to deepen relationships with these people. Time is such a great gift. Think of that line in the Gospel: "Do not move about from one house to another." Take the time with that household and work with them, be present to them. I'm reminded of this when I visit people and celebrate the anointing of the sick; I can't make the person's illness or struggles go away, but yesterday as I left a hospital visit I could tell how happy the person was to pray with me and feel God's peace through that sacrament. While it's part of my vocation to do visits to the sick, all of us are called to be present to one another, and it's through our presence; our listening, our availability, our time spent with others that God's love can flow through us and do so many things. So many of us are busybodies; remember last week while exaggeration was used with respect to the people who wanted to bury their father and say farewell to their family, the point was discipleship and following Jesus

require us to be totally committed. A big part of that is being there for one another. We need to continually strive to build our bonds and relationships with people in our own family but also be open to the promptings of the spirit about new things God may be challenging us to do like teaching faith formation or going on a mission trip.

Third, we have to prepare for adversity. “I am sending you like lambs among wolves.” And in the second reading, we are reminded peace was only brought about through the suffering of the Cross. As I’ve said many times, all of our vocations require engagement with our families and the world as we are all called to spread God’s love but help people understand what that means. And at times there will be push back whether a parent is helping their children learn right from wrong or we are engaged on social media or with a neighbor about what the Church teaches and why. Through it all, God will be with us, and we have to be thick-skinned if we are going to be engaged in the world and change it.

Lastly, we rejoice because God works through us. We never know the names of the 72, but we hear them say “Lord even the demons are subject to us because of your name.” It’s about God, not about them. Paul doesn’t

boast of his greatness; he boasts of the Cross of Jesus. Sometimes even in our best efforts, ego can get in the way. We start out wanting to help, but can become too controlling of a family member, or even an area of ministry in a church or school. We can lose sight of when it's time to let go or change our methods. If we aren't careful, we can lose sight of the bigger mission and forget it's not about us, it's about God and helping people find Him.

One of the things we've been seen these past few weeks is how universal Jesus is. The 12 apostles are sent to God's people, the tribes of Israel. Now this week the 72 disciples are sent because the message is becoming more inclusive and universal. Jesus' notion of who is included keeps stretching, and ours has to as well. The problem is just like in the tragic story of Cliff, we can become isolated from one another. And today, you add to this another dimension where people can also be so judgmental in how they view people based on politics or their religious orthodoxy or lack thereof. God though gives us a challenge to be sent. Which means persevering, being patient, being inclusive, and proclaiming the truths of our faith even when we are hated for it. There are many people in the world just like Cliff who are lonely and forgotten, but also so many more who are

blind to the presence of Jesus because no one tells them about Him. Like Jean, Cliff's teacher, and like Paul the apostle who was transformed by that encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus, as we come forth to receive Jesus may that transform us too and open our eyes to the reality that Jesus isn't just present under the appearance of bread, but is in the heart and soul of every man, woman and child who are all created in God's image, and spur is to be sent and proclaim who Jesus is to one another.