

In the poem “The Hound of Heaven” written by Francis Thompson, the poem begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him...

And such is the case for so many people at various parts of their lives. A person, unknowingly, falls into a series of bad decisions and gets stuck, running away from God. But as the poem unfolds, the Hound is the love and grace of God, always seeking the person out. And what happens when grace and love catch up with person? Much like with Zacchaeus, the answer is a transformation.

In the case of the Ray Bowman and his son David, who today is a married man and father of three, Ray, through a conversation with his wife, came to recognize that he both had to open himself up to his own struggles, and

also needed to be as Jesus to Zacchaeus and seek out his son who was going through a very dark period in his life.

Ray writes: Someday he would hit bottom, come to himself, and come back home. Dad, he would say, "I'm sorry." And before he could say another word, I'd go to him, throw my arms around him and say, "David, I forgive you. Welcome back!" Then he would kill the fatted calf and the celebration would begin.

Ray must have replayed that scene scores of times through the agonizing years of David's drug addiction in the 1970s, and it never failed to give him hope. But it didn't happen quite that way.

Two weeks before his high school graduation David announced, "I'm dropping out of school and moving back to Oklahoma." Since his junior-high years, Ray's wife, Sally, and Ray had known David was drinking and using drugs. They had gone to counselor after counselor, but nothing seemed to help. They had endured the pain of watching him play varsity basketball while high. They had lived through the long nights when he

stayed out all night only to return drunk or stoned. He had stood in the carport doorway raging, “David, why are you doing this to us? Why are you doing this to yourself?” And he had seen him cling to the side of his orange Dodge van to keep from falling, unable even to comprehend his father’s questions. Ray says he doesn’t know how many times he had to take him inside and put him to bed, where he would sleep all day and all night, and sometimes all the next day. Still, his announcement shocked the family one day.

Sally and Ray went to their counselor. “You have no choice but to let him go,” he said.

And so, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, Ray let him go. In the years that followed, he tried to live out the role of the loving father. Sally and Ray never let themselves be embarrassed that their son was a drug user. They did their best to let him know that even though they didn’t approve of what he was doing, they accepted him. Although David often lied even when the truth would have been to his advantage, they kept communication open.

He left in May, returning to Oklahoma City, where they had formerly lived and where he could be with his drug buddies. Sally and Ray agreed they would not intervene until he asked for help. From time to time he phoned, and when he did, their hopes shot up. But all he ever called for was to ask for money, and they always said no. They told him he needed to get a job and support himself.

He found work all right, but went through one job after another. He sold his van and spent the money. Unable to pay rent, David broke into their former home, which they were still trying to sell, and lived there with no furniture, no water, no electricity. To buy drugs, he sold his blood. Several times he passed out from hunger. Like the prodigal, their son was living with the swine.

Finally in November David called and said, "I'm sick. Can you come get me?" Ray dropped his work, and with Sally flew to Oklahoma City. The scene of what was about to happen had never been more vivid. "Dad, I've been wrong," his son would say. "Will you forgive me?" The day they had been waiting for had finally arrived!

The David they found was an emaciated shadow of the son they had known, weak from giving too much blood, and starving. That first day he ate five meals. But it didn't take long for both Sally and Ray to realize that however desperate David may have been, he wasn't sorry, and the day wasn't going to end the way they had expected.

Disappointed yet hopeful, they took David to Idaho and sobered him up enough for him to finish high school. They were making progress. Next David returned to Oklahoma to attend a Christian college. Though drugs had often kept him from playing his best, he was still a strong-enough basketball player to win a full athletic scholarship. More progress. Back in Oklahoma, though, David fell in with his old buddies again and lost his scholarship because of drug use.

Through these years, Sally and Ray often became discouraged. Where did we go wrong they wondered. The question was never far from their minds. David had grown up in the same loving home as his older brother and sister, who were outstanding students at a Christian college. Why had he chosen an opposite path? They had raised him in a church where he was surrounded by people who cared for him. Why did he prefer his drug

buddies? They had always made time for family—skiing in Colorado, bowling, driving the four-wheel drive up the mountainside just for fun. Sally and Ray had gone to every one of David’s basketball games, no matter how far away, no matter how bad the weather. What had they done to cause David to choose this lifestyle rather than the one they had tried to teach him? When their first two children were giving us so much joy, why did David have to bring them so much pain? It was when these questions refused to go away that the picture of the prodigal son’s return would keep them going. Yes, Ray kept telling himself, he will come home.

Where did we go wrong? The question was never far from their minds.

David moved on to Kansas City, where he lived with his sister and her husband. They kept communicating, but David’s actions gave them little basis for hope. One day Sally and Ray were talking in their big country kitchen—Ray sitting at the table, Sally working at the counter. They had not been discussing David, but suddenly Ray was struck by such a forceful thought that it was as though a third person had walked into the room and joined the conversation: You need to go to David and ask his forgiveness because you have resentment against him. For a moment Ray was

speechless. He had always pictured David coming to me, humbling himself, asking his forgiveness.

Ray told Sally. She was surprised, but she agreed, "Yes, that's something you need to do."

No, he thought, this can't be right. He'd seldom lost his temper with David. And though he had carried some anger around inside, Ray thought he had let go of it. He thought it was all in the past. "Am I really angry and resentful?" He asked.

"Yes," Sally said. "You have been for a long time."

It took a while for the thought to sink in. "Maybe I could call or write," he said.

But again it was as if a third person said, No, that's not right. It has to be in person. I'll provide the time.

A few months later Ray and Sally were visiting their daughter's family and David in Kansas City. Feeling the time was right, Ray asked David if they could go upstairs to his tiny bedroom to talk. David sat on the bed, the only place to sit, and Ray stood.

"David," he said, "the Lord has shown me that I need to ask for your forgiveness because of my bitterness and resentment about all the problems we've had." Then he waited.

"Well," he finally said, "it was partly my fault." That's all he said. But Ray understood what he was really saying; he understood, and the Lord understood.

He stood up and they hugged each other. "David," Ray said, "we're going to put the past behind us."

As they walked out of the room David said, "I feel better." So did Ray.

A few weeks later David called and told Sally, "I just thought you might like to know that I accepted Jesus into my life last night."

He said he'd been watching television with a girl he had been dating, a friend from college. He told her, 'You know, I really need to make some changes in my life. 'Then she asked, 'When are you going to? 'When he said he didn't know, she said, 'Why don't we pray together right now? ' He said okay and they prayed, and he asked God to forgive him and come into his life.

After that night David never used drugs again. He came back to Idaho, and about a year later he married a fine Christian woman. Today he participates enthusiastically in his church, holds a highly responsible job as dispatcher for a major trucking company, and is a wonderful father to his three children.

Ray says that David's story didn't follow my script. He never asked for his forgiveness in so many words, and there never was a fatted calf. But more important, Ray had to depart from the role he had imagined for himself.

Had he merely stood at the door, waiting for David to come to him and say, “Dad, I’m sorry,” he says he might still be waiting. But because God sent him to ask David’s forgiveness, their son has come home.

Sometimes we are like David; sometimes we are like Ray. But through whatever life brings us, God is always pursuing us, and invites us to pursue those who are lost. To be both the hound and the hare if you will.

In that beautiful first reading from Wisdom, we hear how God is so vast, but he is no distant God. Rather, he is merciful to all, He overlook’s men’s sins so they can repent, and loves all that exists. He has formed all for one reason, love. God wills the good of the other, which is what love is all about; He does not need the creature to go on being God, but rather creates because He is love. God does not love because of wonderful qualities a person has, but is defined as the lover of souls.

Here’s the point; God, the Hound of Heaven, will always be pursuing us. So when we fall into a sin no matter what it is, God’s love will always be there seeking us out. So if we ever think no one will understand, I have to hide

this, I can't think about this part of my life, trust that God isn't loving you with some precondition. He just wants to be with you.

And that is what we see with Jesus and Zacchaeus. Jesus looks up and sees him. And notice he does not shame him. Rather there is just that look, and Jesus says today I must stay in your home. Jesus makes the move, and speaks, just as Ray spoke to his son. And then there is the response. Jesus never forces himself on anyone; he arrives, but lets Zacchaeus make the move. As David apologized and then made the choice to change his life, so does Zacchaeus - promising to sell half his positions, and make restitution to those he has stolen from. This leads us to ask, are you willing to be like Zacchaeus and let God take over completely? Change is difficult; it's much easier sometimes to just ignore things we shouldn't be doing or justify them, or even to just stay stuck in a rut. But In the Gospel today, Zacchaeus not only physically welcomes Jesus into his home but also offers him every aspect of his life. This openness leads to change in business practice, home life, and public image. Jesus also calls us to deepen our discipleship by surrendering every aspect of our lives to him. For instance, think of your career: Jesus wants to bring fulfillment, mission,

and holiness into our work lives. Are you willing to welcome Jesus here, knowing that he could ask you to make little changes or big ones in order to follow him more closely? With respect to family life: Jesus wants to bring reconciliation, new life, and salvation to the entire household. This means that welcoming Jesus is most surely welcoming change. Are you willing to follow Jesus even if it means making new priorities, reconciling old hurts, or trying new paths? And then there's the public life: Jesus wants us to be his witnesses. Jesus was seen publicly walking home with Zacchaeus, and the whole crowd scoffed. Are we willing to follow Jesus even if some people won't understand? The point is when love takes over, there's this complete change in our lives like there was for Zacchaeus.

Lastly, like Jesus who looked for the lost like Zacchaeus and Ray who looked for his son, we must do the same. So much time can be wasted when we wait for others to act. It's true you can't force faith on someone or force reconciliation or forgiveness, but we also shouldn't give up, either. When we make the effort to pick up the phone or to visit someone, or even acknowledge that we may be partly to blame for something, it can do so

much. When we open the door an inch, grace can take over and take care of the rest.

All of us are a bit like Zacchaeus in the sense that in the heart of everyone, they are looking for something deeper in life. Zacchaeus has much wealth and power, but he's unfulfilled. He knows something better is out there, and that's why he takes the time to climb a tree and look. And when Jesus looks back at him, there is that beautiful look of love, and he's seized by the Lord so that he runs to him and recognizes that because he is loved, now is the time to respond to that love. What a great thing to think about as we prepare now to receive that love in Holy Communion. Like Zacchaeus, may we receive the love of God and let it take over every aspect of our souls.