

One of the things we believe is that our faith is a journey. As children, we learn the basics of the faith in faith formation and from our parents, but as we age, ideally, we also use it to grow as people and to help others do the same. As we hear in our first reading today, we are to be holy as God is holy, but we are also called to open our eyes to our neighbor, both the ones we get along with and the ones we struggle with, to evangelize the faith to them and be a sign to them. And we link our own faith and journey into holiness with others, what we learn is that the love of God isn't something to just benefit ourselves, but to help others, which may entail the most unlikely of people.

In the 1950s, Bud Collyer was a popular game show host. In July of 1955, he wrote an article about how with a bit of patience, as he and others tried to grow in their own faith, they ended up bringing an atheist into the Christian faith.

In the 1930s, when Bud was in college, he was a part of a group of Christian students who would study the Bible and pray. Almost unnoticed, one evening a stranger slipped in and took a seat in the rear of the room.

Toward the end of the meeting, he stood up, asking to be recognized. Once he spoke, nothing was the same with the group ever again.

Until that moment they had been a rather comfortable little church group, not unlike hundreds of others. Their particular group met every Sunday evening during the school year in a basement classroom of the Broadway Presbyterian Church in New York.

Since they were near Columbia University, they often had students drop in who were not part of the regular group; so on that rainy night when the stranger stood up, asking to be recognized, no one paid any particular attention.

“My name is Alfred Wall,” the stranger began. “I come from Texas, and I’m a freshman at Columbia, like most of you. May I take part in your discussion...”

The stranger paused for so long that several of the students gave him friendly nods. Then, abruptly, he dropped his little bombshell.

“...because I don’t believe in your ideas. I’m an atheist.”

From that instant, of course, Alfred Wall had the group’s complete attention. Everyone turned to examine him. Al was about the same age as the rest of the students—in his late teens. Bud went quick into sizing him up armed with this knew knowledge of Al’s lack of faith. He was not a handsome boy. He was lanky; his nose was too large; he had a square jaw that went well with his rather blunt personality. Now that he’d jolted everyone into attention, he didn’t seem ready to say anything more. And then they all spoke.

“Of course you can join in ... Certainly ... Everyone does ... Our ideas can stand challenge.”

“Thank you,” Al said, bowing slightly from the waist. Immediately he fired his opening shot. “Your belief in the story of Christ. To me, this is like believing in some fairy tale. How can you prove it’s true?”

They looked at each other. “Well ... the Bible. Of course, the Bible is our main source...”

“But the Bible was set down by men. Men are full of error. So why not your Bible?”

Several of the group spoke up, but their answers were vague. They amounted to saying, “The Bible is truth.”

“Now really!” Al said. “What do you mean by that?”

That evening their answers satisfied neither Alfred Wall nor others in the group. Lacking facts, they argued. In closing the meeting, someone suggested that if they were going to defend their beliefs against Mr. Alfred Wall, they’d have to sharpen their own thinking.

During the next few weeks, however, while their approach to Al Wall was one of friendly acceptance, it became increasingly clear that they would, indeed, have to sharpen their thinking. Al’s penetrating questions were making them look like fools.

Word soon spread over the Columbia campus. Much to their chagrin, new people came to watch the fun—but they stayed to take part in the arguments. By the end of Al's first semester, they had doubled their attendance, and in the middle of the second semester, they had to move to larger rooms.

And all the time, Al kept up his relentless heckling. But they were gradually coming up with some better answers, too. The next time Al brought the Bible under attack, it was plain that several of the members had given the matter some thought.

"I think there is a yardstick for truth that you can use for the Bible, Al," one of the members said. "Its increasing influence."

Another member picked it up. "Falsehood dies; truth lives. In thousands of years, the influence of the Bible hasn't lessened; it's grown."

"Still, even after these thousands of years, the majority of people in the world do not accept Christianity" said Al, and backed up his argument with fact and figures.

By the end of Al's freshman year, Bud and the rest knew definitely that they would have to improve their tactics. They would have to do more than simply sharpen their thinking. One night, just before vacation, several of the group decided that over the summer vacation they would re-read and study the entire Bible, get out textbooks on religion, and see if they couldn't come up with some better answers for Alfred Wall. Their minister, too, was pleased by this plan.

For the first time in their lives, that summer Bible reading became a matter of personal concern for them.

Bud remembered so clearly the first session of Al's sophomore year, when they were going to discuss the divinity of Christ. On that night there was an unusually large crowd. Toward the end of the discussion, Al stood up. He cleared his throat.

"There is something I would like to say," he began, and several of the group smiled politely with him. That phrase had become his signature. Then Al

gave a terse speech, ending with "... And how can you claim Christ is divine when nowhere in the Bible does he himself say, 'I am God.'?"

Al was barely seated when there was such a clamor for the floor that they had to appoint a moderator.

"Christ did tell His disciples that He was divine," said one of the members.

"When Simon Peter asked Jesus if he were the Son of God, Christ said, 'Blessed art thou, Simon: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in Heaven.'"

"Where else?" said Al.

More hands raised. "... Jesus said, 'I and the Father are one!' "

He also said, 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.' "

Other sources were quoted, showing the results of extensive study.

And then it was that one of the girls in the group who seldom entered the discussions spoke up.

“I think a lot of us are missing an important point,” she said. “Christ wanted His disciples to grow spiritually. He didn’t command them to believe. He wanted them to grow into their own conclusions about whether or not He was divine. Why don’t you try that, Al?”

Al leaned forward with a strangely serious, dead-pan expression.

“What was that?” he said.

The girl repeated her idea, and for the rest of the evening, Al seemed reflective. That night they argued until after midnight. Similar discussions followed on the next Sunday. And the next. All through Al’s sophomore year. But never once did he give ground. During his junior year he kept coming up with questions that punctured other balloons of ignorance or blind acceptance.

Then Al’s senior year was suddenly upon everyone.

Four years had passed. Bud didn't think it's any exaggeration to say that they were an entirely different group from what they had been when Al first came in. They'd found new personal strength and vitality in their religion, and were surer of their beliefs, especially regarding Christ's divinity.

But Al himself always seemed the same steadfast atheist. It was frustrating. They wondered if Al would ever break down and admit he had gotten at least something out of the discussions.

Then came the last meeting of Al's last year in school. And, as usual, Al rose to his feet.

"There's something I would like to say," he began and this time every one in the room did smile.

"I think a lot of you may have come here tonight hoping to hear that I'm ready to join the church or something. Well, after four years of debating, I've come to one very definite conclusion."

Al always had a keen sense for the dramatic. No actor ever had a more quiet, fascinated audience.

“Your arguments just haven’t convinced me.”

Al sat down.

At first they were at a loss for words. There were a few disappointed, half-whispered comments:

“Well, that’s all right, Al ... We all come to our own conclusions.”

Then Al stood up again with a mischievous smile on his face and began to speak. I noticed that he closed his eyes and folded his arms in a gesture he used when he had planned a speech.

“Please, pay attention to just what I said,” Al started. “Because I want to emphasize a point. I had always approached religion as if it were an argument to be won or lost. But do you remember that meeting when one of you said that Christ wanted his disciples to grow into their own conclusions about his divinity? I decided to try that myself.

“I decided to recreate the experience of the disciples. By reading and by prayer, I tried living as closely to Christ as I could. I walked with him, as it were, for three years. I put myself under his disciplines. And I discovered an amazing thing. I think I had always been afraid that having a religious life meant changing myself into some different person. It’s not like that at all.

“When he was on earth, Christ did not try to force James to be like John, or Peter like Philip. He didn’t lead his disciples by regimentation; but by stimulation. It’s the same today. So that’s why I say that your arguments haven’t convinced me. The divinity of Christ is not a theological argument. The divinity of Christ is an experience.”

Al walked up to the front of the room and sat down at the edge of the table. “And I would like to say,” he almost whispered, “that because I have known that experience, I want to join the church.”

That's all there is to the story. Al left the group as suddenly as he had come, and after awhile Bud lost track of him entirely. But he says he was never the same for having known him. Others felt just as he did.

Twenty years after when he wrote about his reflection, he said it all seems just a little too pat. One question began to puzzle him. He wonders, could it be that Al was a unique, unconventional kind of evangelist? Could it be that his challenge was just a way of forcing the group to know their own religion? Could it be that Al Wall was never really an atheist at all?

Only God knows the answer to that. But in all of our lives, there are people who challenge us, and people whom God wants us to challenge. The thing of it is as birds of a feather flock together, and sometimes like with Bud, we can get used to coasting - being with people who share our beliefs and mindsets. And sometimes along come people like Al who challenge us to grow, both in holiness, but also in our ability to remember that our holiness is something to be shared.

In the first reading this week, we hear "be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." Our reading only has four verses, however in the whole of chapter

19, God gives many directives, ending 12 times with: “I am the Lord.” That means: “Listen up. I’m speaking.” God’s directives cover many of the Ten Commandments about respect for parents and for the sabbath, care for the poor and aliens. God commands that we not not steal, lie and that employers treat employees fairly. God condemns hatred, bitterness, and revenge. We are told to “love your neighbor as yourself.” There’s a lot of stuff there. But sometimes we might not think about our faith as much as we should; Buds group shared a lot in common, but it took AI coming into bring them to the next level. So we, too, hopefully think about how do we grow in our faith and make sure it doesn’t become stagnant. How do we grow? It could be we need to work on anger and wrath and letting things go; or sins of habit. Maybe we could learn more about our faith too recognizing that through Tradition and the Holy Spirit, our Church’s knowledge of the faith is ever-increasing. The upcoming Lenten season is a great time to spend more time in prayer and meditation, times to come to confession, to get introspective and look at what we want to change for the better and look for ways to grow in our understanding of the faith. Holiness is a process.

But lastly, holiness is meant to be shared. What I found inspiring with Bud's story is that it illustrates how that is done - through the process of being welcoming to the stranger, and engaging the stranger. Jesus ends today's reading with: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." We do this by evangelizing to others and engaging them, like Bud's group.

Jesus asks us to give freely of time, treasure, and effort, especially to the needy. He says Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Loving means wanting good for them. You don't have to like them or trust them. Let's face it, this is tough, because we all run into another wall if you will, not AI Wall from the story, but people with whom it can be a challenge to talk about the faith. Sometimes these people are enemies. For us, that may be the person who got your child into drugs or bullied them; the spouse who left you, or the coworker who lied to have you fired. Then there aren't the enemies per se but the people who are just the AI's in our life - who are different from us religiously or politically. So how do we share our holiness with these people? If it's an enemy, we can strive to let go of grudges and resentment, ask for God's help in doing so, pray for the person or the situation, and strive to see to the heart first. But with others, our neighbors who are different from us, I think Bud's group found the perfect playbook. Meeting them where they are at, being patient and

understanding, listening rather than telling or judging, finding the common ground but ultimately also sharing what you believe by knowing it better yourself and challenging the other person to grow. When we do these things, it's amazing what can be done with the mustard seeds we plant in others through the power of the Holy Spirit. But other times it's not an enemy, but maybe a child who doesn't want to go to Mass as they get older; a person we know who stopped coming to Mass to go to the evangelical free church who isn't catechized; a person who got angry at the Church for some reason, or family who believe in God but call themselves spiritual but not religious or don't see the importance of weekly Mass. These are the people who can be like Al; seemingly stubborn at first, but the people we need to strive to reach. So like Bud, let's make sure we never throw in the towel on bringing more sheep to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Being a Christian isn't easy. And sometimes when we hear the Sermon on the Mount it can seem an impossible challenge. But when we look to the crucifix, we see how our Lord forgive those who weren't even asking for forgiveness; how he overcame hate once and for all; and of how He gave everything for you and me. His grace shines on the bad and good. May our eyes be opened to both in our souls as we strive to grow in grace, and may

we strive to see the good in one another and increase it through how we reach to them as a fisher of men. God chooses to dwell in us which we remember as we come forward for Holy Communion; lets use not just the 40 days of Lent, but every day of our lives to grow in holiness to truly be transformed into what we receive.