

Out of the Shadows

Last week during our parish penance service on Monday evening, I gave a short reflection on the Gospel for this week which is the story of the woman at the well that Jesus meets when traveling through Samaria. I also spoke in the reflection about the film "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" which was inspired by the Tom Junod article in which he interviewed Fred Rogers in 1998 entitled "Can You Say...Hero?"

In the Gospel, Jesus meets a woman who is marginalized. She is living with a man who is not her husband, and has been married several times before. People ostracize her so that no one helps her with the water, and she has to get water in the hottest part of the day because people do not want her around. After all, she is a "sinner."

In the film, Lloyd Vogel is the main character, a jaded journalist too who, like the woman at the well, carries pain in his heart, in this case separated from his father who abandoned his mother and Lloyd when he was a child to run off, after which his mother died when Lloyd was still a boy, and his anger boils over when he sees his father at his sister's wedding. His father wants to patch things up, but Lloyd carries the pain and anger of many years in his heart.

In the film, Mr. Rogers, played by Tom Hanks, gets to know Lloyd and his story, and helps him to find the peace he longs for by coming to terms with his anger and feelings, and taking the steps to let go of it. And in the Gospel, the woman at the well has this beautiful conversation where she comes to terms with her bad decisions, but also rejoices in the fact that she is loved, which was the message Mr. Rogers shared with millions of children, getting to know many over the years as well on an individual basis and transforming lives. That's what love does.

All of us are impacted by sin; sometimes its our own sins, sometimes the sin of others, but all sin can can enslave us, and cut us off from God and one another. Sometimes like Lloyd we want to bury it and ignore it, but it has a way of coming up; in Lloyd's case it also impacted his relationship with his wife. It was only when he confronted it with love that he was able to find the peace he longed for, as was his father.

During our Lenten journey, we've been looking at how to become better people. And part of that entails shining the light on our shadows; thinking about our struggles and sins, and not pretending they aren't there, but bringing the out into the open.

Thinking about this week's Gospel, hopefully we are reminded that God loves us more than we can ever imagine. But with that ideally we look at how we can continually combat sin too.

The starting point is mercy; of God meeting us where we are at just as Mr. Rogers did with so many people. We must never fear coming to God with anything, and knowing that no matter what the sin we battle, He understands and always looks at us with the

same gaze he looked at the woman at the well, the good thief next to Him on the Cross, the gaze of love, mercy and compassion.

We then acknowledge what we've done. The woman and Jesus engage in conversation, and He points out to her that she is in fact living with a man outside of marriage and has been married several times before. There is no condemnation there, but there is an acknowledgment on her part of the situation. But note she does not have shame. Shame is so destructive in making us think there is something wrong with us. Rather, she continues the conversation, eventually coming to see that He is the Messiah. It's not fun thinking about our sins, but we can't hide them in the shadows but need to turn them over to God by naming them and asking for His help.

She then with great joy invites others to come to know God. "He told me everything I have done" cries out the woman to her neighbors, wanting them to know about God too. It's clear there's been a transformation here. Mercy helps us, but it also causes us to take the steps needed to change. In the film, Lloyd uses the love he's learned from Mr. Rogers and makes amends with his dying father as the two reconcile; in real life, the journalist Tom Junrod came to pray and find peace in his life too because of his encounter with Mr. Rogers. So take those steps to find long term peace. When we are aware of our sins and turn them over to God, we use that mercy to change for the better. We surely may sin again and the same sin may happen again, but our encounters with Jesus in prayer, in confession, in the Eucharist, and through other people like Mr. Rogers who come into our life put us on a new path.

One of my favorite paintings is Caravaggio's "The Calling of Saint Matthew" Saint Matthew is a tax collector in the shadows; the others are in the dark focused on their money, and the light shines from Jesus onto Levi and he has this shocked look on his face and is pointing to himself as if he is saying "who, me? Are you sure you have the right person?" Jesus has come for us all, and has no problem associating with the sinners He came to save. Like the woman at the well, like Levi, all we have to do is look up to this man who meets us to help us realize all that we have ever done, but also realize how much we are loved.

God bless,

Fr. Paul