

Image to us can mean a lot. We want people to think that all is well. But truth be told, all of us have secrets. And, a secret is a powerful thing. It can protect or it can destroy.

For a number of years, Wanda Hockenberry strived to hide a secret in her marriage, and that was that her husband Dan was struggling with alcohol. For a long time she hid what she thought was a terrible secret, and it nearly cost her husband, Dan, and her everything.

Living in a small town, all thought her marriage was perfect. But she was soon faced with a shock and she thought all would soon know in town what happened on a crisp autumn evening in 1997. Wanda was racing around the house in a good mood, catching up on a few chores while their two younger kids, Christy and Matthew, did their homework at the kitchen table. She grabbed the receiver. It was her cousin.

“Wanda? Do you know what’s going on?”

She dropped the stack of towels she’d just folded. “No,” she said. “What?” Please, God, she thought, don’t let it be what I think it is.

“Dan just got pulled over by the cops,” he said. “Right in front of the mini-mart. He was pretty unsteady. One of the girls there said she saw him get handcuffed. Then they hauled him off in the police car.”

She hung up and paced the kitchen floor. Panic pulsed through her. Then anger. Real anger. Dan told her he was going to a sale after work; but he’d lied before about going out drinking. The phone rang again and her heart jumped. This time it was the state police. Yes, they’d picked Dan up for a DUI and they’d taken him to the hospital for a blood test. She could come get him.

She wasn’t sure what came over her. Maybe it was the pressure of years of trying to hide Dan’s drinking, even from the kids. Now, in one furious burst, she told them what had happened, and regretted it instantly. Now what would they think? What would people think? Now everyone would know. She threw on a jacket and grabbed her keys, her stunned children’s eyes fixed on her as she charged out the door. Deep inside, she always wondered if it would come to this.

Dan and Wanda grew up on neighboring farms and fell in love as teens. But Wanda knew that despite his solid upbringing, he had a bit of a wild streak. He’d occasionally drink as a teen; Wanda wrote it off as youthful indiscretion. By the time their courtship began in earnest, she was certain that, for Dan, drinking was a passing thing. They dated for more than a year and got married in that same church they’d gone to all their lives.

Supporting a growing family put a lot of pressure on Dan. He started to hit the bar with a few buddies on Friday nights. He’d recently launched his own construction business,

and Wanda knew the stress and working so many long hours was getting to him. And it hurt that he'd start his weekend at a bar than with his wife.

"It's not like I drink every day," he would tell her. No one would ever peg him for a drunk. He wasn't falling down, slurring his speech. He could go for days on sheer willpower, without touching the stuff, toughing it out on his own. In all other ways, Dan was a devoted, loving husband and a great dad. But as soon as the stress kicked in, he was back on a barstool. And she would go back to making excuses for him.

Wanda laid down the law. No alcohol was ever to enter the house, and the kids would never know of any of this. For her part, she went to work on God. Every day she prayed for a miracle. But she couldn't act on her own. That would mean talking about it, and that wasn't going to happen. She felt like she could only trust God with her family's secret. Sometimes, in her desperation, Wanda wanted to talk to someone. Anyone who might understand. But she couldn't.

In the early 80s, he crashed their truck into a tree, drunk. He didn't get caught, but it was time for an ultimatum. His drinking had progressed beyond just Friday nights. "I want you to know one thing," she yelled. "I will put up with this until our kids are grown, and then I'm done." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I won't live my whole life like this."

"I'll stop," he said, averting his eyes. "I'm strong." She didn't believe him anymore, not after all the broken promises. There was Dan her best friend, whom she'd loved and believed in since they were teenagers. Yes, there was Dan the remorseful husband determined to reform. But then there was Dan the drinker, who Wanda feared might never change, no matter what she did. So she decided to just hunker down and make sure no one ever found out.

Dan's drunk-driving arrest changed all that. Now everyone would know. There was no point in going on with this charade.

Dan was standing outside the emergency room when she pulled into the hospital parking lot. Shoulders slumped. Chin pressed to his chest. He looked so tired. Her angry heart started to soften, even though she didn't want it to. Not this time. "I'm sorry, Wanda," he said. "I'm going to quit drinking. I don't expect you to believe that, but this time I know I need help. I'm not strong enough. I can't do this alone." Alone. That single word almost knocked her down. Alone. That's just how she felt. Terribly alone. Something clicked.

The next few weeks were tough. The kids sensed the stress, but not rather than hide it, they talked to them. "Your dad's been struggling with alcohol for a long time, and we've tried to keep that from you," she explained one night, after she'd dropped Dan off at his counseling session. "But nothing is more important to us than our family," she told them. Wanda wanted them to know that no matter what happened, their father and her had

made a commitment—to each other, and to them. Teenage kids can't always express their feelings openly to adults, but she believes they were relieved.

Later she picked Dan up from counseling. He eased himself into the passenger seat and took her hand. "Wanda, this battle is bigger than me," he said. "I can't make any promises to you. I can't say that I'll never pick up a bottle again. I can only live one day at a time. But with God's help, I believe I can be whole again. We can be whole." And again something clicked. With God's help. Had she really asked him to do anything more than help her keep my husband's drinking a secret? Had she truly sought his help, surrendered her problem to him? She realized she was no more in control of Dan's drinking than God was. Keeping that secret had isolated her, even from God. No wonder she felt so alone. She thought back to the vows they had exchanged so many years ago. For better or for worse. In sickness and in health. Despite any ultimatums she'd made, she still believed in those vows. Restoring the trust in their marriage would take work. She would have to trust God more, and be more open about her husband's alcohol addiction and her own part in covering it up. Not that she had to tell the world about it. But if she were to heal, she needed to be as open as Dan was trying to be. Maybe sharing the secret could help someone else as much as it would help her. I started with her friend Debbie. What a relief it was to tell her the truth—to tell her everything, how frightened and isolated she'd felt because of Dan's drinking. How draining it was mentally, physically and spiritually to keep that secret.

"Wanda, I had no idea," she said. "But knowing that you and Dan went through some difficult times makes me admire your marriage all the more. It's obvious how much you two love each other."

That was one thing she knew for certain. She would always love Dan, and they worked through their problems because they knew they had something very special.

Dan hadn't touched a drink since his arrest. Their relationship matured and deepened with the passing years. They now two beautiful grandchildren. As she puts it, "God has been faithful to our family even when we weren't always faithful to him."

What about her secret? It isn't a secret anymore. She says she learned that a secret can only hold power over her when it's hidden. A secret revealed and brought into the light of God's love has a hold on her no longer. Besides, there are no secrets from God. He is always faithful. He always hears us. He is always ready to help us. All we have to do is ask.

Jesus illustrates this beautifully in his encounter with the woman at the well, a woman who, like Wanda, has a secret, and a woman who, also like Wanda, lives in a small town where most everyone knows her secret. But also a woman who, like Wanda, finds liberation and freedom by coming to God, and then goes to others.

The unnamed woman at the well lives in the shadows. We know this because she is out in the heat of the day, alone rather than with other women, to get water from the well.

And waiting there for her is Jesus. As Wanda puts it, "He's always faithful, he always hears us, he's always ready to help." God is always looking for us, and the starting point as she and Dan realized too is that it starts with God who is seeking us out. Our part isn't to do something to merit that; rather we just have to do the surrendering. To say "help me God." And to know that mercy is always there. That is the water of which he speaks, mercy. And that mercy never runs out, no matter where we are at in life. Remember those words it was not you who chose me, but I who chose you, and from our second reading "while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Good words to think about as we look at the Eucharist, and are reminded how deeply God is in love with us.

Here's the thing though - for God to be let in, we have to clear the obstacles out of the way. The woman goes to the well to get water, but she will eventually get thirsty again. That's true for regular water, but you can also think of this as the things we battle too. As Bruce Springsteen sang in "Glory Days," "I'm going back to the well and going to drink till I get my fill." He drinks in the song to forget about the present and relive the glory days gone by, but he's never going to find fulfillment in that of course, and neither will we. For some the well is alcohol; for others its power, or a struggle with a pornography addiction, or a need for praise or in Wanda's case a need for a good image. Currently, I think the well a lot of us may try to go to is control, as we all face the Corona Virus which is something we can control to a point by being safe, but isn't something we can get rid of by having all the toilet paper or hand sanitizer in the world which some think will make them safe. Whatever it is we battle, be it sins, or anxiety and fear, we need to work on clearing these out of the way with God's help by doing what Wanda and Dan did - confronting the reality, rather than running from it.

We then journey with God forging a path ahead. For Dan and Wanda, the counseling and opening up brought them to a better place. For the woman at the well, her conversation with Jesus brings her to a deeper place too; she goes from calling him sir to a prophet to Christ. Identifying the wells we go to, seeking out God's help like Dan did in not drinking after that night, we can keep asking God for the help while taking the steps to eliminate our struggles for good.

And lastly, the evangelization. It's been called one starving person telling another where to get bread. What a great thing when Wanda went to her friend for help and her friend gave her support, not judgment. He told me everything I have done she says to the others. We can bring people to Jesus too by meeting them where they are at, by praying with them and having them pray for us, by bringing them to Mass and journeying with them as we help one another.

On Wednesday at our school Mass, I talked with the kids about how at various points in my life, I've been afraid, mentioning trying to swim for the first time, to more recent times about 10 years ago fainting one morning and having a racing heart, then some heart palpitations, and ruminating about my health when I had abdominal pains. I was checked out a few times and it was determined I was fine, but the more I thought about these things and tried to control them going to the well if you will of WebMD and medical sights, thinking about them over and over again, the fears would just build on

themselves. I still get afraid sometimes of things, but like Wanda, I know I don't have to keep those hidden. I can talk about them with God, and with people I trust too, as I can with my own struggles with sin. Whether it's the fear of thinking about Corona Virus or the battle with our sins, trying to hide and control them on our own, or thinking they are not a problem when we know deep down they might be, a far better thing to do is to trust in God, for as a wise priest I knew was fond of saying, "it'll all work out." And it will, because God is there waiting for us to meet us wherever we are at; stressed out, anxious, addicted, or falling into the same sins we've gone to for years. And he gives us one another to help us on the journey too. May we open our eyes to that reality, the reality that we are loved more than we can ever imagine, and drink the water of God's love that satisfies our deepest thirst.