

Looking around it's not hard to see a lot of division in the world and anger as well. It seems people are so polarized, but what also has been shocking too is how brazen some people are in sharing their dislike for others or even hate on social media, or in other cases right to their face.

It might be tempting to look back and say weren't things better way back when, but as one of my seminary teachers said, there never was a golden age, and that is because of what we call the impacts of original sin. We can look back and see how Christians have treated one another, look at wars over religion, look at how people were treated who were new to a neighborhood or a country, and there are countless examples of the ugliness humans are capable of. But what if a person took seriously the words of Jesus in this Gospel to be welcoming and loving to others; giving someone just a cup of water; to be a person of hospitality receiving others like the woman who receives Elisha in the first reading from second kings. Might this make a difference for others who learn from the actions from a person about how to truly love God and one another?

In the 1930s, after the death of her husband, a middle-aged woman named Marguerite left Germany to make a new life in America, away from Hitler and the Third Reich. Marguerite's younger brother, Wilhelm, stayed behind with his Jewish wife and family to protect their assets, unaware of the horrors to come.

In her adopted country, Marguerite lived on a small pension and supplemented her income by raising a variety of roses, which she sold to local florists and hospitals. She sent some of the earnings from her roses to help support her brother in Germany. And, as the war advanced, she also sent money to help Jews escape from Germany.

Marguerite's neighbors viewed her as a quiet, unassuming woman who spent most days in her garden or greenhouse. Not much was known about her, nor did the community try to befriend the foreign-born woman. But when the United States entered the war against Germany, Marguerite became suspect. While her neighbors and shopkeepers had never been friendly or particularly kind, they were now openly hostile. There were mutters and whispers about her being a Nazi, always just loud enough for her to hear.

Without fanfare, Marguerite continued to send money to Jewish families and to her brother in Germany. Then, one day, she received a letter from her sister-in-law with devastating news. Her beloved Wilhelm was dying of cancer. He was praying for a miracle: to be able to come to the United States where he could receive better medical care. At first Marguerite was panic-stricken; she didn't have the extra money. But soon, she was overjoyed when a hospital requested an unusually large order of roses. This was the extra income she needed to make the miracle happen.

For weeks, she tended her roses, nurturing and fertilizing them with tender care. Each rose meant another dollar to help bring Wilhelm to America.

In August, Marguerite entered a local contest for the most beautiful roses grown. If she won, the prize money of \$25 would ease her financial burden when Wilhelm and his family arrived.

On the day of the festival, she rose early to cut the flowers before they were wilted by the sun. As she stepped into the garden, she nearly fell to her knees with shock. All one hundred rosebushes, lovingly planted and nurtured over the last seven years, lay in shambles before her. Every plant was slashed and chopped to the ground. They all but bled before her eyes. She could barely take it in: her beloved flowers, and her livelihood, gone, possibly forever. And the worst of it was that Wilhelm would not be able to come to America.

Marguerite was devastated, but more determined than ever to show up at the festival. She would not give the hooligans the satisfaction of her absence. She would still enter the contest, even if they had left but a petal. She walked down the garden path to see if she could salvage anything from the debris.

Clinging to life by the back fence, obviously missed by the vandals, was one single red rose. It was an "American Beauty." She took the rose into the house, cut the stem on an angle and placed it in the icebox to keep it fresh until the contest. Then, shaking with distress, she cleaned up the ruined rose garden as best she could. When she could do no more, she put on her best hat and took a trolley to the contest, holding the lone rose in her hand.

When Marguerite's turn came to show her entry, she held up her single "American Beauty." In her halting English, she proudly described its origin, how she had bred it, and the special fertilizer she had used to enhance the color of its petals. But, when the winners were announced, she wasn't surprised at the absence of her name. Why would they give the prize to a rose from the garden of the enemy? She went home that evening trying to think of some other way she could earn money.

The next day, Marguerite attended church, as was her custom, to pray for strength and guidance. When she arrived home and opened the door, the scent of flowers filled the air. Someone had placed a large vase filled with summer flowers on the entryway table. As she walked toward the kitchen, she saw that every room in her home had more bouquets of flowers in Mason jars and pitchers. It was heavenly.

As she approached the kitchen, she saw a fresh coffeecake in the middle of the table. Under the cake plate was an envelope addressed to "Marguerite." She opened it to find \$300 in single bills and a card that said simply, "Many thanks from your friends in town."

Stunned and happy, Marguerite realized that this was the miracle Wilhelm had been praying for. Now she could bring him to America.

The miracle did come to pass. With the \$200, Marguerite bought steamship tickets. Within a few months, Wilhelm and his family arrived. Marguerite and his wife cared for him tenderly, and he received excellent medical attention that added years to his life.

For years Marguerite tried to discover who her benefactors were, but without success. Many years later, a local woman was going through the personal effects of her late grandfather, who had been a cantor in the local synagogue. She found his journal - and in it, an entry of particular interest. The journal stated that while attending the rose festival, the cantor had overheard two men in the audience brag about ripping up "the Nazis" rosebushes. He knew who they meant. Marguerite had never sought recognition for her charity, but many Jews in the community knew that her roses helped Jewish families escape the nightmare of the holocaust.

That day, the cantor set about calling on members of his synagogue, explaining about the vandalism and the financial loss Marguerite had suffered. The men and women in the synagogue gave with their hearts and pocketbooks to the "rose lady." Several women who shared Marguerite's love of gardening gathered flowers from their own gardens to honor her for all she had done for their people. Rather than have her feel an obligation, they took an oath to remain anonymous until death. They all kept the promise.

With patient love and care, Marguerite's roses bloomed again. And Marguerite bloomed as well. She made many friends in town in the years following the war, never knowing that many of them were her secret benefactors. And she continued to send money to Germany to help Jewish families until her death in 1955.

Yes, evil is a powerful force. It inspires other people to scapegoat, to join in; it inspires some to be coward and keep silent. But when one has a focus on loving God and neighbor like Marguerite, good has an incredible power to transform that is far greater.

In the Gospel this week, Jesus stresses how important it is to love God above all else, and of how we live this out through word and action. We do not know the exact words Jesus used as no one was there with a tape recorder but the Gospel writers wanted to convey how important this is, family is the perfect comparison because it was the backbone of Jewish culture. Ascribing a quotation to a historical person, even though no one recorded it at the time, was accepted and common. But despite the difficulty in Jesus words of loving Him even more than family, there's truth there. God can't be one of many things, or be loved when it's convenient; we have to love God even when it's challenging.

For Marguerite, her love of God and neighbor personified itself through charitable actions. She refused to turn a blind eye to the plight of the Jews even though she wasn't Jewish herself. She also refused to hate. For you and me, when we put God number one, it can be costly. Some are ostracized by family for their faith; many who have converted to Christianity have been disowned by family; the same is true for Catholic converts from other Christian faiths, and even Catholics who followed God's call to the

vocation of marriage or holy orders, or stood up to family and friends to call them out for actions contrary to the faith. But if you are a Christian, it means you are a changed person - "you must think of yourselves as dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" are the words we hear in the second reading. As I said last week, there are moral absolutes, and we have to accept being hated for the Gospel, as living for God in Christ is not easy.

Second, the question arises "who is my neighbor?" When Elisha comes to Shunem, it's not as if he's a local or a family friend. Yet the woman shows him hospitality. Jesus sends the disciples out; and Saint Paul, whose feast day shared with Peter is tomorrow, is sent to the Gentiles. It can be very easy to just be with the people who share our viewpoint, or to cut people off from God's mercy. There is justified anger at actions, which I certainly feel when I see so many things going on in the world. But if we love Christ above all else, we will begin to see people as God sees them, and try to reach out to all people with the love of God through word and action. It's what led Marguerite to reach out to people halfway across the world, and the Jewish people

Third, we have to remember people are spiritually hungry and have a need. In the course of his travels, Elisha visits a place called Shunem in northern Israel. The prophet is welcomed into the home of an influential woman. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that her influence is more spiritual than social or financial. She has apparently been looking for a truly holy man of God for some time. In the person of Elisha, she has finally discovered someone who will truly nourish her spiritual hunger. For this reason she arranges with her husband to provide a place for Elisha. There's a lot of pain in the world, and a lot of people are lost. Marguerite helped meet people's needs, and while we can do that through charitable actions, we can also do it through evangelization. There's so much ignorance in the world about right and wrong as we see in so much violence in recent weeks. People like you and me need to not be afraid to speak up for what we know to be true, and to engage people throughout our lives to set them on the right path.

Lastly, through it all we have to remember the importance of patience, and that just because we do not instantly see results it does not mean good things are happening. For Marguerite, she didn't instantly see the results of the good she was doing, but that didn't stop her from helping others in need. And while she faced evil in her life, those actions of love she did helped so many and in time, she was rewarded too as others learned from the good she did and became better people too. Many missionaries, after a life time, agree that they have made very few 'converts'. That does not mean, however, that their presence has meant nothing. On the contrary, even without invoking the truth that God's ways will always be more mysterious than we can comprehend, there will often be evidence which indicates, convincingly enough, that Christ has been received, in all sorts of ways. People do not always --- or even often --- become Christians, but they receive Christ in receiving those who come in his name: they welcome what they bring, they co-operate in their work. So when it seems in our lives that no good deed goes unpunished, or that our efforts to change hearts and minds

aren't bearing fruit, may we like Marguerite persevere knowing that we make a difference.

No matter what time one lives in, you can always look at the things going on in the world and be tempted to give up or retreat in on yourself thinking whats the point in talking about the faith or doing actions of charity. But as the boy who tossed the starfish back into the sea said to the man why are you doing this because there are so many starfish that are washed up on the beach what difference does it make said, it makes a difference to that fish. Our actions of love make a big difference, which is why we should never give up on living out the faith in word and in deed. Marguerite didn't stop the holocaust; and many judged her for her accent as a potential enemy. But her actions truly changed lives for the better, as ours can too. So like her, may we never forget that loving God above all else in life truly takes work. But when we gaze upon the crucifix, we see how much God is in love with us. May we live our lives striving to return that love through our words and actions, making our faith a way of life.