

Not too long ago, I received an email from a person I thought I'd never hear from again.

The email came out of the blue, and a coworker who became a friend in the late 90s reached out to me to see how I was doing. We had a bit of a falling out nearly 20 years ago, but he wrote me to let me know how he was doing, that he wasn't in fact dying, but had also got in touch with some of the other old office gang, and felt bad we hadn't spoken in so long and was hoping to catch up.

I look forward to grabbing dinner and reconnecting with him, but his email reminded me of a point in my life where I was, you could say, a bit of a searcher. I was in college at the time, and if you ever heard Bishop Cozzen's confirmation homily, like him at that point in my life, I didn't really know where I was going. Now mind you I didn't do anything too crazy. But I joked in my email to him that if I could go back and hit the reset button on my life from say, 19 to about 24 I'd like to do that and do some things differently. I think of the words of Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with

all childish ways.” It’s not to say that I’m grown up by any means. It’s just to say I don’t think I’m any longer Peter Pan, as with some prayer, discernment, I’ve come to realize what God was calling me to do in life, but also that I was given a job to do.

In a story that could be written by most anyone who grew up focused on the things of the world, Sandra Wood, a freelance writer and photographer, writes about the time she came to find God and what His mission was for her.

She writes of an experience with a small, dark eyed girl in the Dominican Republic who was God’s messenger to her.

Her story begins when she was un-churched, in her 40s, living in the suburbs. For most of her life at that point, she had bowed to the god of goals as she put it, who demanded higher levels of achievement for her own glory. She bought into the intellectual formula for happiness: earn good grades, so that you can attend a good college, so that you will land a good job with a large company, so that you can earn a good salary, life an

affluent life, marry a successful man and live happily ever after. At no time did she consider the cost of that path or entertain the possibility of failure.

Single and childless, she achieved career success, but she did not find peace. She had affluence, but no gratitude. She traveled the world, restless. Her pride she says drove people away. Her self-centeredness led to loneliness. Her remorse drew her to her knees. She dropped to the floor of her shower and wept. In the steam on the glass door, she wrote "God help me."

Months after her "baptism" in the shower, she went to a local church and waited in the last row for the worship service to begin. A steady stream of unfamiliar people passed by, so she grabbed a bulletin and started to read. She hoped that she would remain unnoticed, but that was not to be. As she put it, God sat next to her and invisibly tapped her shoulder. She saw an invitation for a two-week mission trip to the Dominican Republic. She experienced a sudden desire to go to a place she had never visited, to serve people she had never met. Several months later, she was on the way to a divine encounter.

Everything about her first short-term mission was unfamiliar. She didn't know the people's culture or needs. She didn't know what to say or do. Most importantly, she didn't know God or His intentions. She had stopped attending church when she was 9 years old. She read the words of the Bible as if they were poetry from dead saints - beautiful, but not relevant. Intense heat assailed her body and wilted her confidence as they traveled in a bus across the Caribbean island. She watched the view change from crowded city streets to deserted highways to a dirt road. Families lived in shelters made out of dried sugarcane stalks and banana leaves. Their guide pointed to children playing in muddy water.

"More children die every year from drinking bad water than will die from any other cause," he said. "Fresh water is a precious commodity."

She hugged her filtered water bottle like a security blanket.

They bunked with a Christian relief organization and gathered in the morning for a project overview.

“We’re going to the village of Los Robles to help build an elementary school,” the leader explained. “We provide one meal per day for every child who attends our school, and we give free meals to as many others as we can. We’ll bring some gifts to give the children. We can’t eliminate poverty, but we can show them love.”

“One more thing: Don’t give anything away if you don’t have enough for the crowd. Yo could start a riot, and people could get hurt.” He paused before adding, “Pay attention. God will meet you somewhere as you work.”

Curious children ran through their project with more confidence every day. Young girls carried baby siblings with the poise of an adult. Dirt covered their naked bodies, but couldn’t hide their natural beauty and gentle spirit. Sandra was surprised to hear their constant laughter and see their joy.

On her third day in the village, a young girl approached and smiled. Her braided hair was fastened with rainbow-colored ribbons. A too-large dress hung unevenly to the tops of bare feet. She pointed to the bottle of water tied to her waist. Her dark eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“Agua?” she asked.

Sandra looked at her, and then at dozens of other children playing nearby. She remembered the instructions not to share anything with one child that she could not share with all. She remembered the warning about fresh water and feared for herself. She yielded to the loud voice in her head, not the soft whisper in her heart.

“No agua,” Sandra responded and kept working.

Her dark eyes lost the sparkle, but she did not give up. She stepped closer and asked again.

Sandy. Agua, por favor?”

“No,” Sandra answered and turned away.

She started to cry. She was powerless to help all the people, but why had she declined the opportunity to help just one?

“Why am I here if I can’t even provide a drink of clean water?” Sandra shouted at God. In kindness, she says God remained silent.

In the morning, their pastor taught from the gospel of John. She heard the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Her story sounded like the events of her prior afternoon.

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman, “Will you give me a drink?”

Not yet aware of who was standing before her, the woman did not offer the stranger any water. She offered Him questions. He spoke about eternal life through faith. He already knew her checkered past, but still promised her the hope of God’s forgiveness. The woman believed the stranger and went back to her village infused with joy.

After that teaching, Sandra and the others on the trip brought big jugs of fresh water for hundreds of children in the village. Within minutes, their supply was depleted, and the children returned to their homes. Ten days later, Sandra returned to her own. She remained haunted by the look of disappointment in the little girl’s eyes.

Months later, she remembered that her employer offered a line of well pumps in a different part of the company. She approached a senior manager and asked if he would help her secure a donation for a tiny village. He agreed to assign help with the specification and installation process. When Sandra learned the name of the project manager, she was amazed: Jesus Rodriguez was assigned to help her. She exchanged regular e-mails with him.

Less than a year later, fresh water flowed to thousands of villagers in a third world country. At last, she had peace.

She closes by writing that she discovered the truth of God's merciful love in a third world country. His young messenger asked her for a drink of water, and exposed her hard heart. Undaunted, God demonstrated the distance He was willing to go to help a child believe in forgiveness. Sandra says she finally understood that she was the child God wanted to bless, so she could also become a messenger of grace.

This week's readings remind us that, like Sandra, each of us has an important role in building the kingdom of heaven by producing good fruit through how we lead our lives. And the way this happens is, like Sandra, hearing the voice of God, but letting that voice then bear fruit in our souls as we help others to do the same thing.

It begins with hearing the word of God. In the Gospel parable, the word of God is likened to the seed falling on different types of ground. Many of us like Sandra are exposed to the faith at different points in our life. For her she did learn about the faith as a child, but then as she grew, life got in the way. It was only when she did a little soul searching that she found her way to a church, but then she also heard what God was calling her to do. But then she had to have her faith deepened more when she went to the Dominican Republic, and had a learning experience with the little girl that helped her eyes and heart to be opened even more. Such is the journey of faith - it requires work. So many people are like Sandra. They get caught up in the busyness of the world and their lives, but never really think about the faith. But when we take the time to do just that, and to grow in it, what we find is that it helps us so much. The heavy rains and downpours come, and when we lack faith, the pains of life can overwhelm us. The starting

point is re-discovering the voice of God that says to us all, I love you and I am with you.

We then do what we need to do to till the ground. For Sandra, she went to the church, and began to think more deeply about her faith. In our lives, it's important to ask what might be preventing the word of God from taking root. For some it's our perpetual focus on things other than God. For others maybe it's sins of habit we struggle with. We need to take the steps to avoid the near occasion of sin by removing those things in our lives that cause us to sin. Still others maybe need an attitude adjustment and we've become apathetic, bitter, or angry about things in life or other people they need to forgive or let go of anger towards. There are many people who go to Mass regularly or even pray, and that's great, but their spiritual garden has a lot of weeds that need to be pulled. God gives us the tools with His word and Spirit, but He calls us to work in the vineyard too to help remove them so the seeds can ultimately grow.

Once we do that, hearing God's voice, and doing the ongoing work of working in the garden, like Sandra, we are sent out to bear fruit. Because Sandra opened her heart to spiritual growth, she grew as a person but also

helped provide water for hundreds of people in need. God works through us in so many ways. She gave water to the people through her presence, but was also quenched in her own spiritual thirst through this. The Divine Word took over her soul, and transformed her. So how does that happen in our lives? When we listen to God and act, God uses us to bring about so much good in this world. The mission He gives you and me might not be easy. But whether it's taking a mission trip one day like Sandra, getting more involved in volunteering, or pursuing the vocation of marriage or holy orders or becoming a parent, God's voice speaks to us all to act as He uses us as His instrument to bring about change for the better. So let God's word invade you as it invaded Sandra, for when it does so many good things happen.

I haven't yet gotten together with my old friend, though we're planning on it. It's been nearly 20 years. But in some emails we've exchanged, I can already sense he's a changed person. He's writing of things that weren't much on his mind years ago; talking about the joy of being in a long term relationship with someone who he deeply cares about; the joy of adopting a blind dog who's brought joy to their lives; and even talking about the possibility of adoption and raising a child Catholic. This change is

something I've seen in many others too. I have a close friend who decided to return to school to become a teacher. He worked in juvenile corrections and saw the bad decisions some kids made and decided to go back, earn less than he should for his vocation, and put in long hours to help put kids on the right track and has helped kids in profound ways. He's been a great teacher for a few years now. And then there's my sister, celebrating her 35th birthday this weekend, who has grown in her faith, works with kids and grown into a loving mom of a wonderful 6 year old. I've seen this too in people over the years I've met as a priest who have returned to the faith and changed for the better. All of us, at any given moment, might not like what we see in the mirror, or in the world we can think where are we going, what has happened, what's the point, where is God when all we see is the weeds in the garden. The answer is God is with us and always will be and can help us to clear those weeds out and till the soil. We have to grow as people though and open our eyes; some people do grow; others just drift from day to day; others live for themselves; others give up. Hopefully we get to work in the garden to let that seed grow. It means we have to be patient with ourselves and others. It means never giving up. For with God and a little bit of effort, fruit will emerge from those seeds and we'll be amazed at the growth in our souls and the souls of one another. I've

changed I think for the better from 20 years ago, but I'm still a work in the progress as we all are, and I know I've got a lot of work yet to do. Any farmer or gardener knows the work never ends. Becoming spiritually mature takes a lifetime and then some, but with God all things are possible - so go into the garden with the master and learn how to bear the fruit that will bring about so much good in you and in one another, letting His word achieve in you what it has been sent for. For together with Him, what an abundant harvest we can realize in our souls and the souls of one another.