

At the beginning of the French fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast,” a wealthy and handsome, but selfish, prince treats an elderly beggar who comes to his door with cruelty, and because of it, is cursed to live as a beast for the rest of his days unless he experiences true love in return. Nearly giving up, when Belle, a young woman from the town stumbles upon his castle while trying to find her father, she comes to befriend him and eventually love him, thus ending his curse and transforming him back into a prince, albeit a much wiser one, who has learned about the power of love and mercy.

In real life, such is the power of compassion. Sometimes we can become blind to the needs of others both in the larger world and under our own roofs. But compassion is what moves Jesus to perform the miracle of the loaves and fishes, even though we are told at the start of the Gospel He just wants to get away to a deserted place for a few moments. But seeing the people have a need, Matthew tells us he has “pity” on them, and so He takes the time to be with them and feed them, both spiritually and physically.

In our lives, we have the power to do the same. But we just need to open up our eyes to the needs around us, and truly embrace compassion as a

way of life - which means feeling with others, entering into their circumstances, and being one with them in their pains, their hurts, their joys, their excitements and difficulties, in truly being with them and helping them which requires time and effort.

Fr. Gary Smith is a Jesuit priest who lives in Portland. And years ago when at a hungry point in his life where he was searching, he felt God was calling him to live out his life as one of compassion, but it took some time to figure out.

He is now in his 80s, but that hasn't slowed him down.

On an early summer afternoon a couple of years ago, the lanky priest was mostly quiet as he walked briskly along Northwest Davis Street in downtown Portland. He was en route to an appointment and wanted to squeeze in a visit with someone first.

The man in question was CJ Huzak, 43. A reporter following along profiling Fr. Gary noted CJ sat on a bed of cardboard and tattered sleeping bags.

There's a patch of white in his beard, and an oversized jacket hung loose on his small frame. Beside him was an empty pack of cigarettes.

"Father!" Huzak jumped up and the men embraced.

The two friends share a birthday, and for the past four years Father Smith has insisted they go out to lunch and celebrate. The priest wanted to be sure to firm up this year's plans.

A convert to Catholicism, Father Smith has spent nearly a half-century seeking out souls such as Huzak. He's ministered to the abandoned and the suffering in seedy Portland hotel rooms, on the streets and inside prisons. He's served within impoverished neighborhoods of Oakland, California, and amid refugee villages in Africa.

"The poor have broken me open and helped me to understand my heart," he says. "The more people teach you to be yourself, the more you become open to love. And love — the song of hope for all humans — rests in God."

He says: “In a sense, I was seized by some deep longings that led me to the faith,”

He describes the day at age 19 when he found himself alone in a back pew of a Catholic church. As he watched people walk up and receive Communion, “I was so taken by it,” he recalls. “I was thinking to myself, ‘I need to be fed. I’m so damn hungry I can’t see straight.’”

By his late teens, the young Gary — smart, good-looking and a jock — had partied hard and “been around the block with women,” he says. “I was 20 going on 40 because I’d lived so much life. But I was pretty oblivious to the important things.”

He’d grown up in California’s Central Valley, a region known for its bountiful farmland and sweltering, dusty summers. His father died when he was young and his mother struggled with addiction, though “she was a wonderful woman,” he says.

It was in college, “amid a life of disorder,” that Gary was introduced to Catholicism by a friend.

“There was a deep movement of feeling and the search for order in me,” he says of his attraction to the faith.

Father Smith often draws from favorite authors to convey poignant or nuanced ideas. Attempting to articulate his conversion, he points to a passage from “My Bright Abyss,” an essay by Christian Wiman.

“It seemed as if the tiniest seed of belief had finally flowered in me,” writes Wiman, “or, more accurately, as if I had happened upon some rare flower deep in the desert and knew ... that it had been blooming impossibly year after parched year in me, surviving all the seasons of my unbelief.”

When Gary told his mother he was going to be a priest, she looked at her son, took a long drag on her Camel, and said, “What’s the deal with that?”

Father Smith smiles at the memory.

“For me it was, yes, I’m Catholic and embracing that, but one component was instinctively that I wanted to share that love I’d found with the world,”

he says. Dorothy Day talks about feeling longed for by God. “I had that too, that sense that God really desired me.”

After converting to Catholicism at age 20, Gary had transferred from a state college to Santa Clara University, a Jesuit institution, “to get some theology.”

Drawn to the Jesuits’ intellectual rigor, work in education, and outreach to the poor and marginalized, Gary entered the order in 1959. He was ordained in 1971.

He’d go on to earn three master’s degrees, two in theology and one in psychology. But he gained clarity about his calling while still a student in Toronto, ministering to impoverished people and prisoners with drug and alcohol addictions. “That period helped me know I was meant to work with the poor,” he says.

As a young priest, Father Smith spent time with Jesuit community organizers in Oakland, California, where he helped shut down drug operations, address corruption in City Hall and fight to get vacant houses

torn down. Many of the decrepit buildings were overrun by rats. He recalls how one woman was hospitalized for inhaling too much Raid.

In the early 1980s Father Smith was director of a drop-in center for the homeless in Tacoma, Washington. He arrived in Portland in 1992 to minister to residents of low-income hotels and in jails with mentally ill people.

“Paradoxically, the darkness of such places is light for the church,” he writes in his 2002 book, “Radical Compassion.”

It is there that the church is challenged “to claim what is best in itself: the ability to love compassionately, to serve unselfishly, to profess and speak what is truthful.”

In 2000, after about eight years in Portland, Father Smith felt the need to stretch in a different direction.

“It’s like in marriage or as a parent, where you are looking for where you need to grow,” he says. He applied to the Jesuit Refugee Service and within two weeks was assigned to northern Uganda.

“In Africa, my English didn’t work, my magnetic personality didn’t work, my good looks didn’t work,” he says with a grin. Two elders once told him: “The three little girls behind you, they feel sorry for you because your skin is so white, and your eyes are blue. ‘He looks hideous,’ they say, ‘and his hair — he’s like a chicken.’

“Humbling stuff,” Father Smith says and laughs.

He also experienced real suffering, enduring eight bouts of malaria, and witnessed violence and death. All was punctuated with joy and life. “It was a time of much growth and reflection,” he says. “I’m still amazed that I’ve seen so much of humanity.”

He served in camps with up to 30,000 Sudanese refugees displaced by South Sudan’s ongoing civil war and spent time in South Africa and Kenya.

He was forced to evacuate South Sudan because of escalating violence. But even here, he saw the power of love.

Prior to the evacuation, “I watched a 10-year-old girl rock and sing to her 3-month-old nephew,” he writes in a journal entry at the time. “She sang to that little guy for one-hour straight in a half-dozen languages. Here was the beauty of humanity, the stuff of the heart, being shared, given to one little baby.” Off in the distance was the sound of Kalashnikov automatic rifles. “Where is good in this world and where is evil and, in the end, who will win?” writes the priest. “I put my money on the heart of this little girl.”

Back in the United States, Father Smith now lives with the Jesuit community in Southeast Portland. Often rising at 4:30 a.m. to pray, he remains active in ministry and is at work on his fourth book, “on the inner life of the church,” he says.

Several days a week he lives and serves at Portland’s Blanchet House, which feeds hundreds of homeless people daily, and ministers at St. André Bessette Parish, a hub of outreach to the city’s poor. He also makes weekly

visits through the Maybelle Center for Community, a nonprofit working to combat social isolation among low-income residents in downtown Portland.

Of his work there, Frank Corrado, an elderly man says that if it weren't for Fr. Gary, he would have no other socialization. Because of him, he says, his week isn't like a fog, but is brightened because of what Fr. Gary does. He first met Father Smith in the 1980s. "Back then I was addicted to anything and everything," says Corrado, who spent years in and out of jail.

He looks over at the priest. "He tells me the hard things even when I don't want to hear them. If I could pick my father, Father Gary would be the one."

The way Father Smith lives "is marked by discernment," observes Jesuit Father Scott Santarosa, provincial of the Jesuit West province. "He has an appreciation for the complexities of life and doesn't see it in black and white but in terms of shades of gray. As he deals with individuals, he's hearing their experience through the lens of discernment and not oversimplifying their life."

Leslie Bentley is a Portland Catholic and friend of the priest who dishes up food alongside him every Tuesday at St. André Bessette.

“That he’s out in the streets serving people, holding them, loving them, and being an example of God’s love in his 80s — who does that?” ask Bentley.

“He’s what mercy and compassion look like.”

Father Smith, who recovered from pancreatic cancer a decade ago, says he’s “a bit creakier” as he ages. Yet he remains eager to grow. “I’m grateful to whatever God sends my way,” he says. “I read somewhere that our history beats in us like a second heart. I look on my life and say, ‘How do I thank you, God? ’My prayer is really one of gratitude.

“I’ve just been giving this my best shot,” he adds. “The faith is still as beautiful and unbelievable to me now as when I first took Communion all those years ago.”

Like Father Gary, all of us are hungry, and like him we also can feed people if we choose to.

It begins with ourselves. Jesus goes to find a deserted place to pray as He is hurting; the context of the Gospel is He learned of the death of John the Baptist, so He is likely going off for some quiet time and to connect with the Father. In our lives too, there is so much hurt. And it's important to acknowledge that. A young Fr. Gary had lost his way a bit, and so he found himself at Mass, and had that deeply spiritual experience when He was fed with the Eucharist. So what are we hungry for? Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to go to confession, and also have a conversation with a priest about some of my hungers. In confession, I was reminded of God's mercy despite the fact that I am a sinner. And in conversation, I mentioned the challenges right now we all face with Covid. It's hard on us all. For me, seeing folks in masks rather than faces, giving Communion at the end of Mass as people leave rather than visit and share a doughnut, and even as we ready for the school year facing the reality of kids in masks, distancing between grades, and face shields you'd see an iron welder wear but not a teacher, and even turning on a baseball game and seeing no one there and fake crowd noise; I don't know about you, but these things beat me down, because this is not a new normal, but a hopeful temporary abnormal. It's been covid nonstop since March, and it's the pain of an invisible enemy and not knowing when it will end. How many family meals, how many hugs,

how many conversations face to face with someone, has this cost us all?

And then there is just the other things that life throws at us from our jobs or finances or other struggles. Many of us are running on empty. But you can't give what you don't have, and what we do have is Jesus. Jesus just wants to get away, but what does He do? He feeds the people out of love. So much so there is plenty left over. This is the love of God; the love of God that comes to us. And when I get down, what I do is I try to go to my quiet place to pray. I'll ask God one day when I meet Him to please help me sort out why 2020 happened. And I'm sure He'll open my eyes. But until that moment, I am reminded He is not abandoning us all. He allows evil to happen, but does not will it, and sometimes out of the bad emerges something incredibly good and even better. So what we need to do is what the future Fr. Gary did, namely to find God and let ourselves be fed. Gaze upon the Eucharist as I hold it up and say the prayer, and remind yourself how much Jesus loves you. And then, reconnect during the days and weeks of your lives. For me, a practitioner of social distancing long before it became a term, I find quiet places. An early walk with my dog; or a stroll in nature with my camera; or coming into the church when it's empty. We might not get a direct answer to why is this going on in our lives, but what you will find is a peace and a reassurance that you are loved.

Then, we get to work helping others. We trust in the love of God, but it does not mean waiting for a miracle. In Jesus, we have a solution to evil and suffering, but we do not the solution of miraculous intervention. Faith isn't about waiting for God to do things for us, but rather as Fr. David McLean, a Dominican priest who is a naval chaplain in the UK puts it, faith is about us doing what God wants. And what God wants us to do is what the apostles do - they bring the food to the people. In our families and amongst our friends, hunger can come in many forms. Some are hungry for the truth and don't even know it, so they fill their souls with the junk food of sensualism, materialism, or relativism doing whatever they want even if it leads them to bad places, and they need someone to invite them to Mass and help them find the way. Some are hungry for time, just wanting someone to talk to and spend time with them. Others are hungry for peace and are hurting because of anxiety or depression. But unlike physical hunger, where we'll go for a meal, often spiritual hunger goes unnoticed or a person feels they can't talk about certain things, especially among people we know.

And lastly, we go out to feed a hungry world. The other day when I visited a senior care center for an anointing for a person about to cross over, I made

it a point to thank the nurse who greeted me and helped me put on my space suit material for the anointing. I thanked her for going in there every day, helping these folks who are often in their room all day every day, bringing them so much more than a temperature check or some pills, but humanity and human contact. She did what the apostles did for the crowd. May we also open our eyes too and realize what a difference we can make in the world if we chose to. Fr. Gary didn't eliminate homelessness and suffering, but he did make a bit difference by being a person of compassion. When we see suffering in the world, let us also never forget what a difference we can make by engaging in it, whether that's a mission trip, volunteering at a homeless shelter, or giving to a charity. Each of us has the power to make a difference, because God's love needs to flow through us.

Much like the beast was transformed in the fairy tale, life has a way of doing that to people too. The real beast of the story was the handsome Gaston, a bully who the women admire on the outside but inside is an egotistical, arrogant man who would kill the beast. Sin transforms a person. A person who is not loved or neglected as a child may have a hard time loving as an adult, and live with incredible pain in their heart. A person who

made a series of bad decisions may just kind of drift from the faith and fall into bad things. Evil can build on itself and destroy a soul. But love is so much greater than that. For just as at the end of the story the beast is transformed and the real person emerges, brought about through love, in real life the same thing happens when we bring God's love to the hungry and poor in spirit. So let us be fed by God, and take what we are given to feed a hungry world.