

Lenny, who was 13 year old hadn't written a word on the exam page in front of him; he looked at a blank page for 2 hours. A merciful instructor collected his test, or lack thereof along with the rest. Surely he'd have to go home and take a menial job failing the entrance exam for his new school. But as it turned out, there was room in the lower post class, the class for stupid boys as it was casually called. But that lasted 3 months, before the assistant principal Henry Davidson told his mother in an anxious letter that the boy was not in any way troublesome, but his forgetfulness, his carelessness, his unpunctuality and irregularity in every way have been so serious, and that he'd like to ask you to meet with him at home and speak very gravely with him on this subject. Lenny's performance grew steadily worse as the term passed, and he was so regular in his irregularity that I really don't know what to do with him. The letter went on and on. He would be a bit rebellious. The talking to accomplished nothing. The boy remained at the bottom of his class year in and year out.

It was Lenny's father who came up with possible solution to his son's restless academic failure; maybe it would be best if Lenny entered the less demanding program in the school that would prepare students for the army. After all he'd never get into a university. So Lenny struggled through his

new inferior curriculum; his family got tutors to ensure his eventual success. And so he took a military school entrance exam, and he failed at 17 years of age. When at 18 he did the same, he failed. His parents were resigned to him being a clerk or a bean counter or working stiff. His father, Lord Randolph, did have connections as he was a conservative party politician. Years later Lenny looked back on his school days with understandable bitterness; a somber gray patch on the journey through life. "It is not pleasant to feel oneself so outclassed and left behind at the very beginning of the race." He'd say "I'm all for the public schools but I'd never want to go there again."

He took a third exam and on that third try he passed, in part because he gambled and won. He was to memorize 25 maps he picked one, and got that one that would show up on the exam. School is a good thing, but not the only thing that is a measure of what a boy will become. He was poor at math though so he couldn't join the artillery and engineers, and on a later exam he did not qualify for the infantry. He did however qualify for the calvary. At the age of 20 he'd graduate at the top of his class.

In his 20's, he'd go on to become a soldier but also a war correspondent. He'd go to Cuba, and to the Sudan writing for major publications. He'd be shot at, spend a month as a POW before escaping and writing a book about it. By 25 he was a veteran, an author, a famous war hero, and decided to run for election as a member of Parliament. And so began his political career.

Lenny was at the bottom of his class, but hard work and a bit of luck caused him to turn that around within a few years. But you don't know him today as Lenny; it was his middle name that people called him. His full name was Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill.

Most everyone knows the name of the great English Prime Minister. But what might not be known was the hard work was part of his life, along with the suffering to go along with it, from school to not knowing if England would fall to Hitler to a bitter defeat VE day that would only see him become Prime Minister again a few years later.

What his life goes to show you is there are two things that are a part of all of our lives that we so often try to avoid: namely doing the hard work that life requires, along with dealing with the suffering that comes at us.

In our first reading this week from Isaiah, we hear of the love there is between the maker of the vineyard and his vineyard, but it emphasizes the demand of love. The builder builds it on the fertile hillside, carefully selecting the land so the vines growing will be the best. He clears it of stones, which is hard work. He puts up a watchtower, to make sure it isn't pillaged. He adds a winepress in anticipation of the harvest. The point is that the builder, or the friend in the first reading Isaiah refers to, has really gone all out. The friend; the vineyard is the Israelites. We can think of all that God has done for the people being the vineyard; creation; the law; the prophets; the exodus from Egypt. The stage is set for their success. Much like for a young Lenny, born into the upper class. But all doesn't go well at first.

We are told the vineyard owner is frustrated, because he only finds the wild grapes. The people haven't responded. The grace has been given, but the grace requires a response. Saint Paul would call the Church the new Israel,

and we can look at what we are given for our journey too: the sacraments; the Mass; the Eucharist; the example of the saints; the bishop. God's given us the tools for growth, but the question is when He comes for the harvest, what is He going to find? The good grapes, or the wild ones? How do we cooperate with grace? We do not want to doubt the love of God; we have the hope of being in heaven, but hope isn't the same as expectation. If we truly want to go to heaven, we can't hope that the one map out of 25 we prepared for shows up on the exam like a young Churchill. It means we seek the way to spiritual excellence by removing the stones from the vineyard that is our soul, so God doesn't find wild grapes, but a harvest we've strived to grow. We remove them with the help of the one who created the vineyard, trusting in His mercy, but cooperating with it to become better people. So look for the stones whatever they may be; negativity; tearing others down; sins of habit; self-shaming, and remove them.

Of course removing those stones takes work, which involves suffering. in the life of Churchill, there was plenty of suffering; the unknowing of if he'd even make it in the army, and then the unknown of what would happen in World War II. When we pray for things, be it the end to the pandemic or a

healing in our lives or for a job to work out or our grown children to return to the faith, it's not often an instant result. Sometimes it feels like nothing happens. But this does not mean God is silent, just leaving us to suffer. Jesus, the cornerstone, is rejected because He's not recognized; ultimately He is killed for us, and suffers for us. But the Father raises Him up. But it's a process. From our suffering, we are raised too. And sometimes we can look at that suffering and see that the labor it took to cause the good grapes to grow changed us. God loves us too much to just wave a magic wand. He wants us to flourish, and this takes time. But it requires trusting in God. We do not know what God is doing when we look at all that is going on in the world right now. But as Pope Francis said back in March, God is not judging us, but rather inviting us to judge what is important to us. Perhaps a silver lining to the pandemic is people rediscovering how life can be a prelude to heaven, seeing the importance of God, family and community. As we continue to battle this along with the other sufferings in our lives, what better time then now to ask God to help us through the sufferings we endure and to heal us and set us free, but also to look to our Lord and see Him in the world, rather than be blind like the chief priests and elders of the people.

Lastly, patience. At any given moment, we can want to leave the vineyard. But remember the story of the fig tree and the owner? He sees it bears no fruit for a couple of years, and wants it cut down, but the gardener says just be patient and it may bear more fruit with work. Just as we need to be patient and sometimes endure suffering, it's important to remember as God is patient with us, so should we be with one another. Winston's teachers when he was a boy would have imagined who Winston Churchill would have become; but eventually he bore so much fruit. As we try to remove the stones of doubt or despair or impatience, we remember this takes time with us but also others. So never give up. Sometimes the light is hard to see through the darkness, but just as the tree can eventually bear fruit, the same is true for us and others. Sometimes we just need to look more deeply to find the potential within.

One of my favorite Churchill quotes is "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision." The Covid Virus, the unknown with a big election, the uncertainties in life, seeing bad decisions we and others make. All things we can react with fear too. But as Churchill also said, "success is not final, failure is not fatal: is it the courage to continue that counts." So let us continue through life by working in the vineyard with the tools the owner

has given us, knowing that while it may take time and toil, we can truly prepare for the owner when we meet Him one day a bountiful harvest of choice grapes.