

For the Christian, one of the things we must always remember is that the faith is a journey. On our own, inevitably we will get lost. Sometimes life beats us up; sometimes like Peter when he's trying to walk on water the storm around us causes us to sink. Other times we just kind of lose our way, because we don't think about the faith as we should, and it causes us to make bad decisions, or just kind of drift. But when we take a hard look at where we want to go, and look at how Jesus is leading us and how we can respond to His call to follow Him, namely by living a life of loving God and neighbor with our whole heart, mind and soul, what can happen is a transformation, both for ourselves, and people who we help bring along that road to God's Kingdom.

Years ago, Jaye Lewis, who grew up to become a Catholic writer, was in the second grade with a student named Nancy. Jay was the "smart" student, and Nancy was the "dumb" one or so she thought. Jaye says she made life a living hell for that poor girl, and she just took it. Gentle and shy, Nancy was about 1 years old, and it had taken her years to reach second grade. She had difficulty reading and writing. All the kids made fun of her, especially Jaye. Nancy would just stand here, avoiding Jaye's eyes, tears

rolling down her cheeks. Cruel and clever, Nancy manipulated the crowd so that the taunts of the audience would increase Nancy's misery and shame.

They called her "stupid" "ugly" "smelly" "dirty." Nancy never fought back, which was a riot to her tormentors.

Then one day, everything changed. Jaye went to a Bible class and Nancy was sitting by herself in the back of the room. The Bible story was about the trial of Jesus, who had been sent to King Herod. The story went on and Father McKeever, who taught the class, became quite animated, in his wonderful Irish fashion.

He told the students how the Son of God was spat on, beaten and kicked. Father McKeever made the kids wince as he described the crown of thorns being pushed and pounded into the flesh and bone of our Lord's skull. She could feel the nails piercing His wrists and feet. Then he repeated the mocking words that had been hurled at the "Holy Innocent," referring to Nancy.

The father paused for a moment, his eyes filled with tears, and he looked at Nancy in the back of the room, all alone, her head bowed. A look of intense sorrow passed over his features; and then his eyes were on Jaye. Steel blue points pierced his. She felt as if she were the only one in the room, and this decent kind man of God was speaking only to her.

“How would it feel to be all alone and innocent, I wonder” he asked, softly, in his rich Irish brogue. “How would it feel to be hauled in front of your enemies, dirty and unloved, with no one to protect you? Tears sprung into Jaye’s eyes, because at 7 years of age, she loved Jesus only a little more than she loved Fr. McKeever.

She understood the message immediately. She was overwhelmed. She looked back at Nancy in her tattered clothes, covered with dirt that she had helped to smear on her face. Jaye felt shame.

It seemed as though everyone else missed the point that pierced her heart that day. Jaye suddenly saw herself in Herod’s courtyard, mocking and striking Jesus. In her mind’s eye, she saw Jesus lift His stunned head and look at her. Her 7-year old heart broke. She sat there stunned for a

moment, and then she gathered her things. She stood up and walked to the back of the room. She pulled a chair up next to Nancy and sat down. With hands shaking and the most incredible sorrow in her heart, she reached over and took Nancy's hand. She looked at her, her eyes round and her mouth in the shape of an "O."

"Nancy," Jaye began, her voice breaking. "I want you to be my friend...my best friend."

Nancy looked at Jaye for a long time. The room was silent. Jaye noticed that her eyes were an incredible shade of blue, framed with lovely, dark lashes. She smiled, her lips framing perfect white teeth. Jaye hadn't noticed before how pretty Nancy was.

After that day, Jaye tripped over herself to become Nancy's friend and protector. She spent the rest of that year with skinned knees, bruises and a few bloody noses. They moved away at the end of the following summer. She never saw Nancy or Father McKeever after that but they have lived in Jaye's heart ever since.

She says Nancy taught her forgiveness, and Father McKeever taught her redemption.

In a sense, all of us are both like Nancy and Jaye. And both individuals go to show you the power of the love of God who is not distant, but in control.

This weekend we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, a feast instituted at the start of the 20th century which had the rise of totalitarian dictatorships. The Church's response was to re-iterate that Christ is the King for us all.

In the first reading from Ezekiel, he has witnessed devastation. Israel was to be the chosen people, a light to the nations. Yet it has been destroyed and crushed, the Temple burned, the people exiled. And while he recognizes that foreign powers are to a certain extent responsible, he also calls out the many bad leaders of Israel who have forgotten the people and being faithful to God. He says they did not strengthen the weak or bind up the injured, or bring back the stray and seek the lost but rather ruled harshly and brutally.

So what is God's answer to this? Ezekiel tells us Look, I myself will search for my sheep and examine them; I will lead them out from among the peoples and gather them from the land. The people have been treated so badly, God's response will be to come. It's a great Gospel to lead us into the approaching season of Advent and Christmas, when we will again hear the words the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. God loves us so much He is not just sending another prophet, but is coming Himself. The King who will set us free.

However, our King wants us to follow Him. And that means we respond to His call. We have the separating of the sheep and goats, and there is surprise by those on the right at the judgment, for when did we see you hungry, thirsty, as a stranger or in prison they ask? We are told that whatever we do for the least of these brothers of mine, you do for me, but also that what you did not do for these least ones, you did not do for me. It's eye opening, but true - talk is cheap. Faith requires a response. This feast shows us God's response, and invites us to do the same.

Starting with God's response, the incarnation, the life of Jesus, His death and resurrection and sending to us of the Holy Spirit, we have to remember

first and foremost how much we are loved. Like the Israelites who were exiled, like Nancy who was exiled from her class through the bullying and abuse she endured, as humans, we can go through so much pain.

Sometimes it's the sins of others like Nancy. Sometimes it's the mental anguish of going through difficult life circumstances, such as so many have gone through with the pandemic, job or financial struggles, the loss of loved ones. What we have to remember though is that God does not abandon us. He loves us. Jesus goes to the bottom of sin and in His resurrection raises us too. So we take comfort in that no matter what we go through, we are not abandoned.

This includes in our sins too. Jaye as a 7 year old made some bad decisions; she did too as an adult because she is a human like us all. But as she says in her story, she found redemption. Fr. McKeever did not shame her; he challenged her and helped her to find that redemption. And in that, she became Jesus to Nancy. The Risen Christ says to His apostles, go and preach to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy spirit. Jesus raises up shepherds after His own heart who continue His work. That is you and me. And the Gospel gives us the

blueprint for what that shepherding looks like - reaching out to people, just as Jaye did to Nancy in that classroom all those years ago.

When we think about trying to grow in grace, a great thing to do is to think about how we are doing in this command of our Lord to reach out to others. Jesus gives us so many opportunities. And we need to look inside. Are we a bully? Do we tear others down on social media or gossip about others? How about the hungry? There are the poor, yes, and we help them with food. But what of people hungry for time and attention? So many suffer because of isolation and loneliness. Even if you aren't comfortable visiting due to the pandemic, do you make a phone call and have a real conversation with them, or send them a letter and try to help them. Do you give people the gift of time and attention? How about the thirsty? Some people are thirsty for love, kindness and friendship. How do we treat others, from our circle of friends to our classmates or coworkers and neighbors. How about those seeking shelter? Maybe God puts into our path someone like Nancy - a person who needs to be sheltered from attacks and gossip. When others are tearing down, do we take a stand and say this isn't right or do we remain silent? How about those in prison? We have a vibrant prison ministry here, but maybe there is someone like Nancy imprisoned by

isolation or cruelty? Perhaps we know someone imprisoned by an abusive relationship, or substance abuse, alcoholism or mental illness. Maybe they are imprisoned by an addiction to pornography or gambling. Maybe they hide things and just can't ask for help. We need to seek them out and help set them free, for this is the job God gives us. And again, maybe we are that person - and if so we should not feel shame or hide it, but reach out and let our King set us free.

The world can be quite dark at times as we all deal with so much pain, the kind that we can control and the kind that we can't. Thirteen years ago, on the day after Thanksgiving, I went to an anointing in a home. It was for a young woman, Leslie, who was 16. She was dying of cancer in the prime of her life. I went into the family's home, and she weekly came up the stairs and sat next to her mother. We prayed together, and I prayed for her that night hoping that she could somehow pull through, for the cancer was largely gone, however she had internal bleeding. She died that weekend. The funeral at Holy Name for her filled the church. And while it was a struggle for me then and now, for how do you answer how someone dies so young, what was clear was that cancer took her body but not her soul. And what was also clear from all those people, was that she had done so

much to help them, to bring joy to their lives, and bring them closer to God. And she lives on not only with God, but her on earth as the power of her love, the love that she gave to others reflecting the love of Father, Son and Spirit, continues to grow and grow. This weekend marks ten years since our parish lost another person far too young, Kaleigh Faeh. I was not here when she passed; but I've visited her grave many times at the cemetery, and I do know Joe and Cheryl her parents. (Gabrielle and Grace, sisters). And I'd say I probably know Kaleigh too through them, because while I did not know her, in getting to know them, in seeing the huge turnouts at the golf tournament for charity held in her honor, it's clear that just like Leslie, Kaleigh helped bring people to heaven because she knew full well what God asked of her as a Christian. She and so many lived in this world, but lived for the next by making it a better place. Such is the power of love; such is the power of our King we worship. May His love dispel our sorrow, our grief, our pain, and our shame, and liberate us, and also live through us as we help change this world for the better setting one another free.