

For many siblings, the relationship can be one of both love and driving one another crazy, for most parents know when you have more than one child sometimes it can be a bit like living with the Hatfield and McCoys.

However for two brothers named Jason and Tommy, this wasn't the case. Jason was 14 and Tommy was 10. Jason though wasn't just Tommy's older brother; he was his best friend in the whole world. While most older brothers wanted nothing to do with their younger brothers, Jason would always try to invite Tommy to participate in his activities. Tommy loved his big brother. They were true pals.

Besides his brother Jason, Tommy didn't have many friends. Tommy often wondered what he would do without his older brother. He had been born with a cardiopulmonary disease. This had stunted Tommy's growth and robbed him of his youthful energy. It wasn't that he didn't want to play baseball, tag and all the games that boys his age played, it's just that he got tired real quick when he did. Knowing this, the other boys never wanted Tommy to be on their team. They would fight over whose team Tommy would have to be on, and he was often labeled as a wimp or a sissy by the healthier boys.

But things were different around his older brother Jason. Sometimes Tommy and Jason would play their own game of baseball. Jason was a good athlete and everyone wanted Jason on their team. However, Jason would only consent to play if they would also let Tommy be on his team. If the other boys said no, then Jason and Tommy would both leave and do something together.

School had just ended one year and summer vacation began. Curt, Nathan and Ron, friends of Jason, wanted to go on an overnighter in the mountains. Naturally they wanted Jason to come along too.

“Let’s go ask him if he can go tomorrow,” Ron spoke up.

Curt was quick to respond. “What if he wants Tommy to tag along? It will slow us all down, and we don’t want to spend the whole time hiking to the campsite.”

Nathan was the first to speak to Jason at his house.

“Hey, Jason, the three of us are going on an overnighter up Adam’s Canyon. Are you with us?”

“Sure I am!” Jason was excited. “I’ll have Tommy’s pack and my own ready to go tonight,” he said.

The three boys looked at each other, wondering who would tell Jason that Tommy wasn’t welcome to come. Finally, Curt spoke up. “Hey, ah, Jason...this hike is just for the four of us. Tommy would slow us all down Nothing against Tommy, but why don’t you leave him home this time?”

Jason saw Tommy through the corner of his eye. Tommy was standing by his bedroom door, listening intently to the whole conversation. He was bravely trying to hold back the tears of rejection.

Jason stood up and said, “I’m sorry guys, but if Tommy isn’t welcome, then I’m not going either. You guys have fun.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” said Ron. “It’s okay with me if Tommy comes. We can leave a little bit earlier to give us more time.”

The guys agreed on a departing time for the next morning and left.

Six o'clock came early the next morning. Tommy was ready by 5:30 a.m.

This was to be his first real hike.

Within the first quarter mile, it was obvious that Tommy's progress would be slow. He wanted so much to please Jason by walking fast, but the faster he walked, the sooner he would have to rest. The other boys were anxious to get to the campsite, and often found themselves leaving Jason and Tommy behind.

"Here, Tommy, my pack is light. Let me carry yours too," Jason said with concern for his brother.

Embarrassed, Tommy gave Jason his heavy burden.

"I'm sorry," said Tommy. "I'm doing the best I can."

"I know Tommy" Jason said as he rustled Tommy's hair.

After two miles, Tommy was struggling with fatigue. he was sweating profusely and fighting for air. His chest felt tight too. "I'll go a long way before I stop to rest this time," thought Tommy.

The other boys were out of sight now.

After five more minutes of walking, Tommy fell to his knees. "I gotta stop,"whimpered Tommy, with tears of frustration cutting clear streams through the dust on his face.

"Thats okay," said Jason. Take all the time you need."

Jason was obviously worried as he saw Tommy struggling for breath.

Just then Tommy cried for his brother, saying his chest hurt. He slumped over on the ground in pain. Jason slipped the packs off his back and rolled Tommy over. Tommy's tense body relaxed suddenly as he looked up into Jason's eyes that had tears now too.

“I love you an awful lot Jason,” his younger brother said, as his struggle was coming to an end. His little body had given up. The tears came freely from Jason’s eyes as he tightly hugged his brother.

“I’ll miss you Tommy” Jason softly whispered.

Forty-five minutes later the tears were still trickling from Jason’s eyes when the other boys returned.

Ron thought Jason and Tommy got lost, but a chill ran down the boys’ backs when they realized what was going on. Jason was supporting Tommy’s silent head in his lap, caressing the tear-stained face of his little brother.

Ron asked tenderly if he had died. Jason said yes as a tear fell quietly from his eyes to Tommy’s face. “He was doing his very best for me.” Two more minutes passed in silence. “I’ll carry him down now,” Jason said as he gently lifted the lifeless body in the cradle of his arms.

Nothing was said for 20 minutes down the mountain trail. Finally, Curt tapped Jason on his shoulder. "I'll spell you and carry Tommy for a while. You must be getting tired now"

"No," Jason said as he kept walking. "He aint heavy...he's my brother."

No matter how it happens, suffering and death is so very cruel. As a priest, I've had a number of challenging moments with death; a 16 year old who died of cancer; a 15 year old who took his life distraught over not passing a driver's exam; sudden deaths like that of Tommy that happened far too young.

Why is there such suffering? How is it fair for a boy like Tommy to die so young, or for so many people to suffer? Christians have pondered this question since the beginning. What we do know is we do not worship some kind of sadistic God who says "I need to a sacrifice, today that boy Tommy will do." Rather, we worship a God who enters into the depths of our suffering. As we hear in the first reading "he was pierced for our faults, crushed for our sins." The suffering Christ is with us. All of our suffering, our pain, our fear of dying; these are carried by Christ as he suffers and dies

for us on the cross. It's worth thinking about when we gaze upon that cross. This past year, with the suffering our world has endured, has led some to have a crisis. In a panic over Covid, some have tried to control it at any cost; but Covid like other diseases will still spread. This is not to say we should not take efforts to combat it, but what we've also seen is how others with faith, have accepted that Covid is one of many things in the world that could bring their life to an end. And so they choose to live; in some cases risking their own health to help others. I contrast the sheer panic I've seen from some in media stories to the attitudes of health care workers I've met, or people in hospice care who've had a resilient faith. I've seen determination but also incredible peace; I can't tell you how my faith has been built up from many sick calls I've had over the years as a priest. And this is because what a person of faith realizes is that the cross is the tree of life through which Christ brings us healing and new life. We can only overcome our fear of death and find healing though if we are united to Christ on the cross. That cross reminds us that God is not distant, but in the trenches with us. He knows physical pain; he knows the heartbreak of losing people close to Him, and of people He loved turning their backs on him. Jesus invites us to unite our sufferings to him so He can carry our

sufferings on His cross. “Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried.”

We also remember how at the cross Jesus gave Mary and the beloved disciple into each other’s care to show us that in the kingdom Jesus was establishing, all people are now bound together in kingship and are family. Jason put it bluntly he was carrying Tommy because he was his brother; we too must see all people as our brothers and sisters. Hopefully the Cross also opens up our eyes to the reality of the fact that we are one human family. Mary at the Cross shows us that she is indeed Jesus’ disciple, standing there not just as Jesus’ mother, but in the place of everyone who believes and tries to do Jesus will. When Jesus says “behold” it means to “look.” Mary and the beloved disciple see in a new way. These two people, previously related only to Jesus, are now related to one another, and are the Church. Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, John also becomes Jesus’ brother. The foot of the cross shows us a family; they stand in the mud and dirt with our Lord, and this family takes one another into their homes and their lives. All are accepted into this family.

Sometimes like Jason’s friends or the kids who excluded Tommy from the games, we too can exclude people from the foot of the cross. As we gaze

upon it, maybe we can think about who we sometimes exclude and do something about it. The Cross and the Eucharist open our eyes to help one another and of this unity, just as Jason holding his brother opened the eyes of Jason's friends to this reality too. Through our actions of love, we can truly do so much to make God's love known.

No author is given for the story of Jason and Tommy. But in a sense, I think what Good Friday reminds us of is that we are all of the characters in the story at various times. Like Tommy, we try to keep up with the marathon that is life, but so much causes us to fall behind; painful life situations; the impact of other's decisions and sins; our own mistakes; the reality of death and loss. On our own, we could never make it to the campsite that is the kingdom of heaven. Like Tommy we can be overwhelmed. But in this comes our Lord, who like Jason, does not eliminate the reality of death or sin which we still experience, but is there to encourage us, to hold us, and to liberate us from pain and death. Much like a child who awakens from a bad dream in the middle of the night and is held by their parent, so too is this the case for us with God. Life though is of course no dream, though sometimes it can seem like a nightmare. But in this, there is peace. There is the light facing the darkness. There is still the reality of death, but the

hope and knowledge of the resurrection with our Lord who comes to get us. As we gaze upon the Cross and take a moment of prayer this year, and as we receive Communion, let's never forget how far God is willing to go for us. But let our hearts and minds be open to the reality that we too are given a choice. To leave others behind as Jason's friends wanted to do at first, or to be like Jason and seek out those in the world who are in darkness and need hope. Jesus accepts the death is the fulfillment of his mission; He gives up the Spirit and returns to the Father the gift of life that God had given Him. But His work never ends. We go out into the world to seek out the Tommys who are before us every day; those beaten up by life, by racism, sexism, poverty, violence, family and health struggles and so many other evils.

Life is so hard. Sin does to our souls what a disease did to Tommy's body, but today reminds us God does something about it - He arrives to meet us where we are at and lead us home. On our part let us reach out to Him, and together as one human family help one another to do the same.