

It really does not seem like it has been that long since the spring of 1986.

Now that I am 43, I can say looking back the video games were better, the movies were better, and the music was definitely better. But also in looking back to that time in my life, what I remember most was Sister Charlene and preparing for my first communion.

Sister Charlene was a no-nonsense Benedictine nun who could have a tough exterior, but inside was full of love for her students. She took the time to help us learn things, in particular our faith, even making each of us a medal with a crochet necklace on it in red, blue and green for the Sacred Heart, our Blessed Mother and for Saint Benedict.

As spring approached that year, we were preparing for our First Communion. She explained how there was something unique about the bread and wine after the priest said prayers over the altar, and that we would receive Jesus in a special way as He gave us this gift as a sign of His love and wanting to always be with us.

And so in May of 1986, I made my First Communion, the first of many such encounters with Jesus since.

But one thing I've learned over the years and am continuing to learn is how it's one thing to prepare for the moment we receive Communion. But we also have to think about the significance of what it is we are doing; namely we are saying "yes, Lord, I love you" and "yes, Lord, I want to be with you." It gets at to what we hear in our Gospel reading - Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and that so long as we are connected to Jesus, we can bear fruit. But a branch also requires pruning for it to grow. And if we are to bear fruit, we have to come to know Jesus more deeply, but also live it out. As we hear in the second reading, "let us love...in deed and truth" and believe in Jesus, but "love one another just as he commanded us."

One night a gentleman by the name of Bob Perks learned this when he had a flat tire.

Bob, a traveling motivational speaker and author, was wearing a suit and had been traveling for nearly five hours. Nightfall was approaching, and he was on a country road in the middle of nowhere.

He knew there was only one thing to do, call the local automobile association. The only problem was this being the early days of cell phones, his phone that he got for security and protection for moments like this was out of range. He looked down to see the dreaded “no service” on the screen.

He sat for a few minutes moaning and complaining. Then he began to empty his trunk so he could get at the tire and tools needed to get the job done. He carried a large, plastic container filled with what he called “just in case” stuff. When he’s training or speaking, he loves to have props with him. He hates leaving anything home so he brings everything, as he puts it “just in case.”

Cars buzzed by him. A few beeped sarcastically. It was as if the horns were saying “Ha, ha!”

Darkness began to settle in, and it became more difficult to see. The one saving grace was the flat was on the passengers side, away from the

traffic, but this only made it more impossible to benefit from the headlights of passing cars.

Suddenly, a car pulled off the road behind him. In the blinding light, he saw a male figure approaching him.

“Hey, do you need any help?”

Bob looked up and said, “Well, it certainly isn’t easy doing this with a white dress shirt and suit on” in a bit of a sarcastic tone.

Then, the man stepped into the light. Bob was literally frightened. This young guy was dressed in black. Nearly everything imaginable was pierced and tattooed. His hair was cropped and poorly cut, and he wore leather bracelets with spikes on each wrist.

“How about I give you a hand?” he said.

“Well, I don’t know..I think I can...” Bob muttered.

“Come on,” said the burly looking strangers. “It will only take me a few minutes.”

The man took right over. While Bob watched him, he happened to look back at his car and noticed, for the first time, someone sitting in the passenger seat. This concerned Bob. Suddenly, his mind began to race. He thought of carjackings and robberies and these thoughts flashed through his mind. He really just wanted to get this over and survive the whole ordeal.

Then, without warning, it began to pour. The night sky had hidden the approaching clouds. It hit like a waterfall and made it impossible to finish changing the tire.

Bob then said “look, my friend, just stop what you’re doing. I appreciate all your help. You better get going. I’ll finish after the rain stops.”

The stranger though said “Let me help you put your stuff back in the trunk. It will get ruined,” he insisted. “Then get in my car. We’ll wait with you.”

“No, really, I’ll take care of everything,” Bob said.

“You can’t get in your car with the jack up like that. It will fall. Come on. Get in!” The stranger grabbed Bob’s arm and pulled him toward the car.

Lighting cracked and thunder boomed; Bob sat in the back seat saying “Oh, God, protect me.”

Wet and tired, he settled in. Suddenly a kindly, frail voice came from the front seat.

“Are you all right?” a petite old woman asked as she turned around to face Bob.

“Yes, I am,” Bob replied, greatly relieved at seeing the old woman there. He assumed she was the mans mother.

“My name is Beatrice, and this is my neighbor, Joey,” she said. “He insisted on stopping when he saw you struggling with the tire.”

“I am grateful for his help,” Bob responded.

“Me, too,” said Beatrice. “Joey takes me to visit my husband. We had to place him in a nursing home, and it’s about 30 miles away from my residents. So, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Joey and I have a date.” With a childish grin she looked at Joey.

Joey’s whimsical remark was “We’re the remake of the Odd Couple” that gave them both a laugh.

Bob said, “Joe, that’s incredible what you do for her. I would have never have guessed, well, you know..” as he stumbled with the words.

“I know. People who look like me don’t do nice things,” Joey replied.

Bob was silent. He felt really uncomfortable. He had never been one to judge people by the way they dress, and he felt foolish.

“Joey is a great kid. I’m not the only one he helps - he’s also a volunteer at our church. He also works with the kids in the learning center at the low-income housing unit in our town,” Beatrice added.

“I’m a tutor,” Joey said modestly as he stared at Bob’s car.

Bob reflected for a few moments on what Joey said. He was right. What he wore on the outside was a reflection of the world as he saw it. What he wore on the inside was the spirit of giving, caring and loving the world from his point of view.

When the rain stopped, Bob and Joey changed the tire. Bob tried to offer him money, but he refused.

As they shook hands, Bob began to apologize for his stupidity.

Joey said: “I experience that same reaction all the time. I actually thought about changing the way I look, but then I saw this as an opportunity to make a point. So I’ll leave you with the same question that I ask everyone who takes the time to know me. If Jesus returned tomorrow and walked among us again, would you recognize him by what he wore or by what he did?”

With that, Joey walked back to his car. As they drove off, Beatrice was smiling and waving as she began to laugh again. Bob says he could almost hear her saying “You got another one, Joey. You got another one.”

What Joey understood was that faith requires a response. As Jesus says in the Gospel: *“Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.”*

What this Gospel does is remind us again of what can never be said enough: Jesus is our redeemer and our Savior. Jesus is the friend of sinners. If you think of life like a long journey, inevitably like Bob we will have moments where we have a flat tire. It can be a really bad day at school or work; it can be a bad decision we make that our conscience tells us is wrong; or sometimes things happen that are not our fault. In all these moments, Jesus is with us. It’s what we are reminded of every time we come to receive Communion. It’s what we are reminded of when we go to confession. Jesus is with us every step of the way. He takes away our sins. He suffers with us. And He loves us more than we can ever imagine. This

is why when we see the younger people of our parish making their First Communion this weekend, and then join with them at the altar of the Lord to receive Jesus, we can be reminded of how radical God's love is, because He sees right to the heart. On our part, we have to do what we can to stay connected to Jesus. It means First Communion isn't just a Kodak moment as we used to say, but is one moment of many where we grow closer to our Lord through coming to Mass, through prayer, and having that daily ongoing relationship with the God who is love. We also "prune the branches" by making a regular examination of conscience, asking ourselves how can I be a better parent, spouse, or member of my family? What did I do today that was good and where could I have made a better choice? Jesus is always helping us to become better.

Here's the thing though. If Jesus is the friend of sinners, and if Jesus gives Himself to you and me, how do we do like Joey does, namely take the belief we have, and evangelize? As our Easter Season winds down we'll be reflecting more on how we are sent. And there's a few things that all of us can do as we evangelize, taking a page from Joey.

For one, we are with the sinner. All of us are sinners and in need of God's mercy. How do we reach out to those who are lost or who could make better choices? Think of our parents; growing up maybe we do things like fight with a sibling, take something without asking, or cheat on homework or a test. The wise parent is patient and loving, letting us know we made a mistake, and sometimes we have a consequence, but the experience is hopefully one we learn from. But as we grow, sometimes rather than being with the sinner, we can judge and gossip. Think of the people who honked at Bob and drove by him. We sometimes do that to our brothers and sisters in Christ on the road of life. By seeking out those who are lost, by forgiving those who have wronged us, and being a true friend of the sinner like Jesus, we can help people in so many ways.

For another, we evangelize. As Joey did to Bob, asking him, if Jesus returned tomorrow would you recognize Him by what He wore or by what He did? It was a teaching moment. We can't be afraid to talk about our faith. We should ask ourselves, do people know about Jesus more because of me? Joey helped at his church and helped the less fortunate.

Evangelization takes many forms. It means not being afraid of "cancel culture" when we speak of what the Church teaches and why. It means

having conversations with people about the faith. It entails action, like Joey did for Bob in helping him and working with low income people. Our actions can be doing something nice for our family, giving the gift of our time, helping the less fortunate, or doing things around the house like chores with a good attitude. And it means gently challenging others too. We are always trying to make one another better; a loving parent may look at their child's homework and say "I think you can do even better." Well, sometimes we can look at one another and we see a family member or friend who could do something better. Maybe a child suggests to their parents or an older parent says to their adult child we haven't been to Mass on Sunday for a while, how about we start to go? Or we see someone making a bad lifestyle choice and quietly talk to them about it. We can so often be silent when we see bad things going on in the world because bad things aren't pleasant to think about. But in this Gospel, Jesus gives this speech not too long before He takes up His cross to die. It's what's known as the "Farewell Discourse." There is no ignoring the reality of the Cross, which confronts the reality of sin. Jesus has triumphed over sin, but He commissions us to go and help others to triumph over sin too.

When we make our first communion, we typically dress up a bit and it's appropriate. But just as when I put on vestments to offer Mass, while they look nice on the outside, as I'm saying Mass every time I say private prayers asking the Lord to wash away my sins, and asking the Lord to help me never be parted from Him. The vestments are nice, but it's my soul that I need to always make sure is in right order, and because I try to stay connected to Jesus, I know He will help me do that, even though I sin again and again, because Jesus is the friend of the sinner, and my friend too, but even more than that, my redeemer. So as our young people receive Communion for the first time and we join with them, may we be reminded again of how much God loves us, but also be reminded that Jesus wants us to bear fruit and live His life within us. When we get broke down on the road of life, let's not fear asking for help from our Lord and one another, and when we see others hurting through sin and hardship, may we not be afraid to show our love for them in word and action. Now, 35 after my First Communion, I'm still reminded every time I hold Jesus in my hand and hold Him up for all to behold at Mass as His unworthy servant how amazing our God is. But I also know that Jesus comes in many forms, in the Eucharist, but also in the hearts and souls of you and me. And so as He seeks us out,

may we also seek one another out, helping one another to bear fruit as together we journey on the road of life to the Kingdom of Heaven.