

There is no getting around the fact that life can be quite hard. Sometimes situations seem hopeless and struggles insurmountable. Sometimes it can be hard to believe in ourselves, or to see beyond the present moment. But when we look through things with the eyes of God, and remember that He never abandons us but helps the mustard seeds of faith planted in our souls to grow, truly amazing things can happen.

In the 1940s and 50s Mary Jo Copeland, who today is known across the country for her work with the poor, was herself someone whom, like the people she would help, was in a dark abyss. She would shake in her bed, night after night, and cover her ears and pray for help, hoping her father wouldn't kill her mother as he harmed her. Sometimes she'd hide in the attic and wonder when her father would turn on her. He'd eventually come to call her names; stupid and crazy; tell her she was no good. He'd scream and rant, sometimes hit and say she would never amount to anything and never be loved by anyone. She worried he was right. Her mother tried to stay calm and keep the household together, even playing bingo to earn money for food. Mary Jo tried to not be a bother and did her best to stay out of the way. She would find solace in turning to God.

Once a week, she'd ride her rusty bike to Bachman's garden store nine blocks away and ask for leftover flowers to set before the statue of the Virgin Mary at Annunciation Catholic Church. The flower ladies were kind and would happily give them to her, and even then as a child she would go to that church and pray, believing God was watching over her.

She would pray ever since she learned the Lord's prayer from the nuns in grade school. In her words, "Prayer got me through a lot in my life. It was prayer that helped me feel connected to something greater. I felt like I was having a conversation with God, that someone was listening to me."

This helped her through that dark period. Her brother was mentally ill; she also believes her father, Woodrow Holtby, was mentally ill too. A wholesale rep for a clothing company, he'd hold himself together at work but often get up in the middle of the night and rant and rave. She was not cared for properly as a child and struggled in school because of it. She also endured bullying from other kids who'd make fun of her because her clothes smelled and she often went unbathed. As is the case in so many families of abuse, the family kept it quiet. Even an aunt refused to believe the stories and turned a blind eye to what was going on.

Yet through all of this, her faith remained. At 18 a monk helped her get out of the home. Not too long after that she met Dick Copeland, the man she'd marry. He bought her a Coke, asked her to dance. Sadly the pain continued when his family rejected her; Mary Jo says they were prosperous and prominent and thought likely she wasn't good enough to marry him. But that didn't stop Dick from following his heart. And in this, Mary Jo again saw God at work. "God knew how much I needed someone, how much I wanted a family," she says. He would bless her with a solid marriage and 12 children.

She'd graduate from high school and work as a nurse's aid until they were married. As the kids came along, it wasn't easy; the work was back-breaking, the responsibilities high. Thirteen loads of laundry a ton of meals and ironing the uniforms and helping with homework and raising the kids, never letting them go to bed at night without a hug and "I love you." In the mid-70s after a tough pregnancy she had a bout with depression and a really dessert-like experience of over a decade; but she kept her faith; and her family supported her through that. And Mary Jo continued to be there for her kids despite this mental anguish; her kids speak of mom playing

games, praying with them, and a lot of laughter in that. Her kids Mark and Theresa remarked remembering mom having a version of Stations of the Cross she'd say with them and personalize them; such as when Jesus falls saying "Lord, sometimes we fall too, sometimes we make mistakes, help us to go on." And go on she did.

When the youngest went off to school, she had a 4 hour window with no kids at home. You'd think now she might put her feet up and rest for a bit. But God wanted her to do something new. And so she ventured out - the first time really she did so after that decade plus of her bout with depression. Theresa her daughter recalls her mom saying "Kids, I'm going out to share the love we have in our family with children who don't have love."

And so in 1981, remembering that years prior she had said "I'd always told God I'd do something good someday, I'd make him proud," she took off her housecoat, hung a silver crucifix around her neck and went out to share her love through charity work. She began by volunteering every morning at Catholic Charities' downtown Minneapolis program for the poor. Shy and wounded from the abuse as a child, she was initially worried if the other

volunteers accept her. But she dove right in. She'd work hard, even bending rules at times such as helping someone after hours. In fact they asked her to leave for bending the rules too much after 3 years; as she puts it Jesus was a rule breaker too. But this didn't stop Mary Jo.

She continued to pray, wondering what God wanted her to do next. She would go to church early; even later in life getting a key to a church to go at 5 a.m. to listen to God and do the Stations of the Cross.

And so after she had won an award for her work at Catholic Charities before getting fired - a \$2,000 prize - she got a lease on a run-down building in a shadowy district of downtown Minneapolis. Dick co-signed with some trepidation; as he said "I signed the lease. I was on the hook for \$36,000 in rent," shuddering at that moment. He recalls asking his wife "what's the sentence if I don't pay?" and Mary Jo said "Don't worry honey it'll be okay, I'll get some coffeepots and open the doors and see what I can do."

With that, Sharing and Caring Hands was born. The poor instantly lined up around the block, and services quickly grew. Dick recalls from those early

days it became clear that the poor needed a place to bathe, needed clothing and treatment and money. And Mary Jo would step up to meet these needs, always adapting. One frigid winter morning she went out and dropped \$800 on gloves.

Donations started to come in, but there were always setbacks. When Target Center was decided to be built, Minneapolis condemned her building. Mary Jo then offered \$250,000 she didn't have to buy a building a few blocks away. She promised she'd get the money by closing and she did.

Mark, her son, was amazed at how the charity changed his mother; she found gifts she didn't even realize were there. She went to speak at a church to donate money once, and it was the first speech she gave - ever - in front of people. She practiced in front of the kids and he remembers mom talking about her life and what God called her to do and included the point that God loves us, God wants us to make the world a better place. He told her "mom you're going to be another Mother Teresa."

The place she bought doubled in 1990; a \$500,000 expansion. Again, it was all private donations; she feared any public money as this would possibly mean government control. Then in 1992, more changes. Due to changes in government policy, the need for transitional housing was great. Mary was putting those in need into hotels and motels at great expense. This was when Mary's Place was born; dedicated in 1995 and expanded in 2000 and 2015. It has 100 apartments that can accommodate over 500 needy people. At first the city council didn't want to give her the permits. Mary Jo called her friends in the media for support and lawyered up and then she got the permits. The land cost \$1,050,000 and the building and furnishings cost \$6,500,000. The project was built entirely with private money. The facility was finished in 1995 with 56 apartments. It is named Mary's Place in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The expansions in 2000 and 2015 were \$6 million each; Mary's Place provides a safe place for children, a place she probably could have used all those years ago as a child herself.

Sharing and Caring Hands also added a day shelter that increased capital expenditures by \$4.5 million in the late 90s. Then there was remodeling for another \$500,000.

In all of these, Mary Jo was the main fundraiser and the recruiter of volunteers.

But in all of this, Mary Jo forms bonds with the people. She looks them in the eye. She washes their feet. She prays with them. Said one man, Brian Philbrick who came to her in 1985 looking he says “like a horror movie cross between Jesus and an ape man,” he was 25 but seemed far older aged by childhood abuse and years of defending himself on the streets and rails. Mary Jo opened the door and invited him in; he initially pulled back but Mary Jo was undeterred bringing him a cup of coffee and cookies, and patted his hair and asked God to bless him. He started coming back and they would talk; as he said, she changed him, showed him a different way. Before when someone said something he didn’t like he’d slap them or end up in jail or hop a freight to get out of town fast, but Mary Jo was patient with him, prayed with him, and after a while he started believing what she said. He would become a volunteer at Sharing and Caring Hands until his death at 41; Mary Jo said he likely just “wore out” after a very hard life.

Most recently, she was profiled in the Washington Post last fall as Covid brought more challenges. She was one of the few charities that didn't shut down. As she said to a reporter last fall: "I'm not saying I don't have my own anxieties. I'm 78, and this virus has already set me back in a lot of ways. I've lost more this year than ever, but what good have negativity and fear ever done for people? Nothing. Zero. You can waste your whole life as one endless complaint. Okay, yes, this country has big problems. But who do you think is going to solve them? It's up to us. I believe in perpetual motion. Do something. Do something! If you see something that needs to be changed, try changing it. If you see somebody who needs help, help them. People act like that's saintly, but shouldn't it be basic? Why isn't it basic?" She was open every day since the virus began. Poor don't magically disappear during a quarantine. There's still need for food, clothing, dental help, housing assistance. As Mary Jo puts it, "We were the only place left serving meals downtown. We had five or six hundred people lining up to eat, and what am I going to do? Stay at home because I'm afraid I might get sick? Send people away if they aren't wearing a mask? Come on. These people barely had the luxury to worry about a virus. They were jobless. They were homeless. They had nothing to eat, and they weren't getting their food stamps because the county had shut down. I

promised them: "I will not close." We served something like 8,000 meals that first week, and it's gone on from there." Even now, some days 200 people sometimes are all waiting to talk to her when she shows up to work in a line; each one an emergency. And Mary Jo talks to them; she walks through the rooms and doesn't sit in her office. She gets to know the faces, their stories, their pain. In them, she sees herself; she remembers the abuse; her mother bleeding from the abuse while cooking her husband's eggs as a child the next day; the depression, the addiction. But with her husband's help, she says she came to understand: "get outside of yourself. Make the world better because you're in it." She didn't even have a drivers license when she left the house at 38 to start volunteering, ever even driven downtown. But, responding to what God called her to do, her organization has helped thousands of people find hope.

What a beautiful thing hope is. But, as I said, sometimes it can be hard to see at any given moment in life. Jesus says in the Gospel:

"To what shall we compare the kingdom of God,  
or what parable can we use for it?

It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground,

is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.

But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.”

It’s hard not to read that and think of, in some sense, the life of Mary Jo Copeland. But for all of us, when we go through hard times, when we try to make sense of why things don’t seem to work out despite our best efforts, or when things can seem so bad in the world. What is important to remember is that just as a seed’s growth can sometimes not be seen, the seed still grows. And in that growth, for us, like Mary Jo, we must remember God is at work but we are also at work with Him in the vineyard. The challenge for us is to trust and to act.

Our first reading from Ezekiel gives the people hope. Evil seems to have triumphed; Babylon has defeated Judah. But Ezekiel speaks of God plucking a tender shoot from a lofty cedar. He assures the people that David’s royal house will survive. The exiles will be brought back to their homeland. The tender shoot will grow into a lofty tree towering over the others in the forest.

This will happen. But it will take time. And sometimes as humans our reaction might be “great, but when. We could use it now.” We are used to instant gratification. But things take time; such as healing in our souls, our families, and our world. It takes time for pain to be overcome; it takes time to overcome our addictions and our battles with sin. But this does not at all mean we are alone. As Paul says in our second reading, “we walk by faith, not by sight.” Mary Jo couldn’t at times see the incredible things that were ahead in her life when she was in that horrible environment as a child, or when she had dark days battling depression. But who she could see was God. It’s why she went every week with flowers to leave before our Blessed Mother’s statue at her church. It’s why she’d pray every day on her own and with her family. She knew God was with her. As we are reminded every time we look at the cross and receive Communion, God does not leave us orphans but enters into humanity and loves us more than we can ever imagine.

With that, what we also remember is God puts each of us here for a reason. In each of our souls, through the grace of God, there are mustard seeds planted. It’s up to us to use God’s grace to help them grow. We do

this by growing in holiness, again recognizing it takes time and there are inevitable setbacks. But we also ask ourselves the question what God, are you calling me to do? This is what caused Mary Jo and Dick to find one another. It's what caused her to leave the house and love even more. And it's what caused her to build up Sharing and Caring Hands and expand it over the years. Mary Jo never looks at what she can't do; she realizes that with God, all things are possible. So what about us? This Gospel isn't about some kind of quietism or thinking God does it all. Rather, building the kingdom is a cooperative venture. As Jesus says in Matthew 9:38, "So ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for the harvest." What is God calling you to do right now for your family, for your country, for the Church? As a seasoned veteran priest told me when I was still in seminary those who complain the most often do the least. But as Mary Jo said - do something. It's up to you. It's not to say we can't vent or gripe, but if all we do is complain about things in the world or our community or under our own roof, what good is accomplished? Mary Jo wasn't rich. She had suffered much in life. She finally had a few hours of peace after she welcomed 12 children. But she realized need was still out there and so made that choice to be the coworker in the vineyard and an agent of change. So rather than

thinking things will never change or there's nothing we can do, how about asking ourselves how we can get involved and truly make a difference?

And lastly, we should ask ourselves are we people of hope in this world?

Like Ezekiel, do we remind people that they are created in God's image?

Do we realize we have the ability to build up or tear down? I think most

people aren't abusive like Mary Jo's father was. But we as humans can be

so quick to tear down; through gossip; through destroying people on social

media; through dinner table conversation that can become toxic. Other

times we can be apathetic, or impatient with others we are hoping will

change. But think of Mary Jo. Here's a woman who has been misled at

times by people she's tried to help; seen others fall back into addiction and

old habits and seen people try to manipulate her or lie to her. But she never

stops loving. And rather than hide in her office all day, she's talking to the

people. She looks in their eyes. And as with Brian, who was initially

standing before her this angry, untrusting man who had been beaten up by

life, she sees beyond the surface. She is acutely aware there is a seed in

the person before her and she is going to do her part to help it grow. Maybe

we can try the same thing by being more tolerant and patient; by trying to

see others through the eyes of our Lord, and trying to build others up rather than tear them down.

As Stephen King wrote in “The Shawshank Redemption,” when Andy writes Red, who once told him hope was a dangerous thing as he saw nothing but the walls and the pain of prison, Andy, liberated as a man even before he escaped the prison, writes him and says “hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” Jesus in this Gospel gives us hope. To hope for spiritual progress when we don’t feel it. To hope for conversion in someone we love when we don’t see it. And to hope that the good seeds we have sown will blossom. Hope is amazing; and because one remarkable local woman, who had many points in her life to despair, chose instead to hope, she, working with her Lord and Savior, has changed the world. As we prepare now to receive Him, may we strive to join Him in doing the same.