

Sometimes when we look at the world with all its problems, it's understandable why we can get frustrated or ask ourselves "what can I do?" in the sight of all this. But truthfully, if we look at ourselves, what we can find is that through the graces God gives us, each of us has the power to really make a difference and help point the way to others towards finding God and helping others to know what true love looks like.

For years, Natalia Lusinski worked in California in the entertainment industry. She says that living and working in LA was causing her to lose perspective. She didn't care who was on a magazine cover, or who wore a designer dress to the latest awards show. She was the type of person who would return a \$400 purse given to her by her boss and find a \$10 one-of-a-kind bag at a flea market instead. And so being un-superficial in a very superficial kind of place, she decided she wanted to do something more fulfilling as the Holy Spirit tugged at her heart. But, she wondered, what might this be?

Well a few days after this thought, her Catholic church announced that a local juvenile prison needed volunteers. Convinced it was a sign from God, Natalia signed up.

She started going to the prison camp every Saturday morning. The group would have Mass with the boys, given by one of the priests from the church, followed by an hour of socializing. The boys ranged in age from 14 to 17; most grew up without their fathers, and almost all were gang members (identified by their many tattoos that they liked to show off to Natalia). She believed they could turn their lives around, but all they needed was a little faith and a little encouragement.

The people who ran the program told Natalia and the others to talk to the same boys every week, to establish a rapport with them, something they weren't used to from their parents. Natalia eventually learned that most of the boys were not religious; some did not even believe in God, but they attended the Mass and social hour afterward since they were starved for outside human contact.

When Natalia first entered the prison camp, she stood in awe of the boys. She says they were all so cute and young and innocent-looking; any one of them could have been her younger brother. The boys she says couldn't have possibly robbed or killed someone she thought, though that was some

of the crimes they were in for. Luckily, Natalia did not know which boy had committed which crime, or else she says she might have run back to her car. One of the volunteer rules was to never ask what crime they committed, and if they wanted to tell her they would (as most did as she found out).

One youth, Fernando, immediately befriended her. Fernie, as he preferred to be called, was 16 and had joined the same gang that his two brothers belonged to. One was not in jail for life, and the other had left town to escape the gang. Fernie had been arrested for having a firearm. He had huge dimples; even when he wasn't smiling it looked like he was. And Natalia thought she was supposed to believe that this kid may have killed someone?

At first, the boys did not open up much at all. The most they divulged would be about their limited 3-minute showers, the food they were sick of eating, and not being allowed to have coffee. But soon they talked about everything....their families, their girlfriends, their babies' mothers, the kinds of crimes they'd committed. But, often, they'd want to know more about

Natalia, such as if she believed in God, got into trouble ever, had a boyfriend or a baby.

Natalia would engage the boys. She asked Fernie what he wanted to do once he got out of the camp. "Eat my mom's spaghetti" he said. "And tell my girlfriend I love her. Being in here really makes you realize you miss people, you appreciate them." Natalia thought it was pretty poignant for a 16-year old.

She then asked if he was going to go back to gang life. He said he didn't want to, but it was tough. As he put it, "You can't just get out...they'll kill you." He explained that you have to basically flee town to get out. one of his brothers did and now had a family and kids in Utah; his other brother was in prison for life for manslaughter. Fernie was at an impasse.

"It's like my other family" he said. "A lot of good comes from being in the gang."

"What kind of good?" Natalia asked him.

“We’re there for each other. We party and have fun; it’s not all about violence. It’s about protecting the neighborhood from bad guys and robbers. Plus we help the homeless” he said. When Natalia asked how, he said they drink beer and give the empty bottles to the homeless who cash them in, and then come and buy drugs from him and the gang.

At the end of the hour, Natalia would always hold hands with the group and pray. Week after week, Fernie didn’t want to pray for anything. One Saturday, she told him there must be someone to pray for, like families or friends. He insisted there wasn’t. So she prayed the same prayer she did every week: for the boys, that they’d have the strength to stay off the streets and out of the camps once they got out. She prayed they’d beat the statistics. “I know you can turn your lives around” she said.

She thought Fernie believed her until a couple of Saturdays later. He would be out in a week or two and confided in her that “I don’t want to go back to gang life, but I will.”

And here, Natalia thought she’d made progress with him. Frustrated, she said, “There are other, non-gang ways of life for you. God can help you if

only you have some faith.” Desperate, she added, “Besides, God says to ‘Love your enemy.’”

When Fernie asked why because they would hurt or kill him instead of him doing it to them, she wasn’t sure what to say. She looked up to the sky and hoped Fernie wouldn’t see her cry.

Natalia felt helpless, wondering if anything she told him and the boys even sank in. She felt disheartened, questioning if she was making the least bit of difference in their lives. She decided her days of volunteering there were over - this was just too hard. After all, what was the point.

The next day at Mass, the priest told a story about a boy at the ocean at low tide, when all the starfish are stranded in the sand, about to die. The boy tossed as many as he could back into the water. A man came up and asked him what the point was, why it mattered, when there are millions of starfish along the miles of the ocean and he couldn’t possibly save them all. The boy picked up another starfish and tossed it back into the water and said, “It matters to that one.”

As they exited Mass, little starfish were given to everyone. Natalia put it in her wallet, to remind herself that she was helping the boys after all. Even if just a little kernel of what she said seeped into their brains, she was grateful. So how she wondered could she not go back and keep trying?

Just like her \$10 flea market purse, she soon realized these boys were all one-of-a-kind. They were each starfish, waiting to be tossed back into the water. And she needed to be there to help as many as she could...or at least one...back in.

A couple of months passed and Fernie phoned to say he moved to Utah to live with his “good” brother and to turn his life around. He enrolled in high school and found work as a dishwasher. He said he was happy even to be just washing dishes. Fernie thanked Natalia for having faith and believing in him. When Natalia hung up the phone, she had tears in her eyes again.

Just like the last time, Fernie couldn't see them. She went to sleep, anticipating seeing her other starfish the next day.

No, it's not possible for us to fix all of the worlds problems. But for you and me, retreating from the world isn't an option.

In our first reading, we meet Amos, who, unsurprisingly if you know a thing or two about prophets in the Bible, is drawing the ire of a leader. In this case the king wants to take the easy way out and have the people worship in Bethel; at the time it was important for people to go to Jerusalem where the Temple was to worship. When called to task on this, a priest there tells him to get lost. Amos has that interesting line that wait a minute, I didn't set out seeking this job, but God called me. In his words, "I was no prophet nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord took me from following a flock, and said to me, go prophesy to my people Israel."

Though written many years ago, probably about the 8th century BC, Amos words are timely for us, because we are him. At the baptismal font, we received grace but also a commission - to become a prophet. On our confirmation we were given the Holy Spirit to help us in this task.

Perhaps we might say wait a minute I'm no Fulton Sheen, I'm no John Paul II, who's going to listen to me. And the answer is we are sent to our families, our circle of friends, the people we work with or have dinner with,

or to people in our community like Natalia was because no, we won't get rid of all the problems, but we can certainly make a difference for some starfish who have been tossed out of the water.

So how do we do this? Well, consider the following.

For one, pray. Natalia was a woman of prayer; she knew God was calling her to something deeper. She took up her mission and then prayed with the kids in that detention center. She prayed as she was trying to figure out what to do. Prayer means active listening. It means turning to God to know what to do. It means being open to the voice of God that might make you a bit like Amos; the voice that says hey, it's time to talk to your spouse or kid or parent about this; it's time to volunteer; it's time to do this differently in your life. It might not be easy, but God is with you.

Second, we learn what it is we believe in. Getting confirmed wasn't hopefully the end of faith formation. We always have to be ready to talk about the faith as a prophet. Natalia knew parts of her faith; it's why she could also talk about parts of her faith in the detention center. You never know where you're going to encounter someone who has a question, or

where we'll have to speak to our faith. The other day while picking up some doughnuts in Red Wing (it might shock you that I'm a doughnut person as my thin frame doesn't scream that) for instance I passed by a church that had opened in a former retail area. A community church with signs from the pastor who asked how can we know an absolute truth, and how could there be a hell why would God put people there, and how can any religion be right. I believe the church's dogma is centered around John Lennon's "Imagine." I did not meet the pastor, but it would have been an interesting discussion. A lot of people think like that. A lot of people have been fed lies about God, about the Catholic Church, about salvation, about how to live. So don't just pray for someone, pray with someone, Invite them to Mass, Discuss about what we believe in and why. Help facilitate that relationship with Christ and His Church.

Third, as you do this, prepare for challenges. Natalia's job wasn't easy; she wanted to fix Fernie and the other kids, but it did not happen right away. She had to keep at it. Sometimes when we evangelize as a prophet, people will hate us. Who want's to hear something like you are making a bad decision; you're not being the parent you should be; your drinking too much; I'm worried about how you treat your spouse; your making an

immoral decision about how you are living your life. Other times you even talk morals with respect to issues of the day and people get angry. But as I said last week, we can't be anonymous if we want to help someone. We have to be willing to be hated at times if it means helping someone on the right path.

Fourth, remember we are not alone. Jesus sends out apostles two by two. Seek out people like Natalia did with her in that detention center. People whom you can pray with, give you counsel, and give you support.

And last, patience. It can be so frustrating when it seems our efforts aren't working; the person or people we are prophesying to don't seem to get it. But we must never forget what we do makes a difference. Just as Natalia got that phone call unexpectedly months later learning that Fernie hadn't gone back to the gang, I think we're in for a bit of a shock as to who's in heaven because we too didn't give up.

As we all know, the world can be a hard, frustrating place. But in my time as a priest, what I see so often are people who decide to take a starfish and throw him back into the ocean. Here at Saint Joe's, we have catechists

who sometimes deal with youth who are stubborn or don't want to be at faith formation; we have prison ministers who deal with people in situations where they are angry or don't see God; we have people who go to Haiti to work with the poorest of the poor. The list goes on and on. And yet people want to give time and time again, not just here but throughout our Church. So rather than lament how things are, let us remember through our baptism, we too our prophets - to our families, to our world. Let's never forget prophecy isn't just the job of a bishop or Christian apologist with a big following online, but is something we are all called to do. So like Amos, like Natalia, and like so many, may we go and make a difference for whether you are a dresser of sycamores, a plumber, a computer technician, or a retiree, you and I are called. Let's not be afraid to follow that calling, and win souls for Christ.