

One of the things that we sometimes forget is the power that is inside each of us to change this world for the better. It's easy to get caught up in the negativity or frustrations; it's easy to get caught up into our own words doing what we want to do for ourselves; and it's easy sometimes to think what can I do about it when we see things that are seemingly out of our control. But what if, like Mary, who goes in haste to her cousin because she knows what her mission is, we, too, listened to God. What we might find is that we have this incredible power to bring joy and help others know of God's presence.

Recently on social media, I came across a story shared by a friend who stated he had no idea who the original person was who told of it, but of the impact it had on him. The story is told from the perspective of a one-time Wendy's manager. In his words:

In 1979, I was managing a Wendy's in Port Richey, Florida. Unlike today, staffing was never a real problem, but I was searching for a someone to work three hours a day only at lunch. I went thru all my applications and most were all looking for full time or at least 20 hours per week. I found one however, buried at the bottom of a four-inch stack that was only looking for

lunch part-time. His name was Nicky. Hadn't met him but thought I would give him a call and see if he could stop by for an interview. When I called, he wasn't in but his mom said she would make sure he would be there.

At the accorded time, Nicky walked in. It was one of those moments when my heart went in my throat. Nicky had Downs Syndrome. His physical appearance was a giveaway and his speech only reinforced the obvious. I was young and sheltered. Had never interacted on a professional level with a developmentally disabled person. I had no clue what to do, so I went ahead and interviewed him.

He was a wonderful young man. Great outlook.

Task focused. Excited to be alive. For only reasons God knew at that time, I hired him. 3 hours a day, 3 days a week to run a grill. I let the staff know what to expect. Predictably, the crew made sure I got the message, "no one wants to work with a "r" word."

To this day I find that word offensive. We had a crew meeting, cleared the air, and prepared for his arrival. Nicky showed up for work right on time.

He was so excited to be working. He stood at the time clock literally shaking with anticipation. He clocked in and started his training. Couldn't multi task, but was a machine on the grill. Now for the fascinating part.....

Back in that day, there were no computer screens to work from. Every order was called by the cashier. It required a great deal of concentration on the part of all production staff to get the order right.

While Nicky was training during his first shift, the sandwich maker next to him asked the grillman/trainer what was on the next sandwich. Nicky replied,"single, no pickle no onion." A few minutes later it happened again. It was then that we discovered Nicky had a hidden and valuable skill.

He memorized everything he heard! Photographic hearing! WHAT A SKILL SET. It took 3 days and every sandwich maker requested to work with Nicky. He immediately was accepted by the entire crew. After his shift he would join the rest of his crew family, drinking Coke like it was water! It was then that they discovered another Rainman-esque trait. Nicky was a walking/talking perpetual calendar! With a perpetual calendar as a

reference, they would sit for hours asking him what day of the week was December 22, 1847. He never missed.

This uncanny trait mesmerized the crew.

His mom would come in at 2 to pick him up.

More times than not, the crew would be back there with him hamming it up. As I went to get him from the back, his mom said something I will never forget. "Let him stay there as long as he wants. He has never been accepted anywhere like he has been here." I excused myself and dried my eyes, humbled and broken-hearted at the lesson I just learned.

Nicky had a profound impact on that store. His presence changed a lot of people. Today I believe with every fiber of my body that Nicky's hiring was no accident. God's Timing and Will is Perfect.

This Christmas, I hope we all understand what we are celebrating. We are all like Nicky. We each have our shortcomings. We each have our strong points. But we are all of value. God made us that way and God doesn't

make mistakes. Nicky certainly wasn't a mistake. He was a valuable gift that I am forever grateful for. We are celebrating the birth of the ONE that leveled the playing field for all of us. God doesn't care if you are rich or poor, republican or democrat or black or white. He doesn't care if your chromosome structure is perfect. He doesn't care what level of education you have attained.

He cares about your heart. He wants us all to love and appreciate the gift HE gave us on Christmas, His son, the Savior, our salvation. His Son that was born to die for our sins. To pay our debt. To provide us a path for eternity. So this Christmas, let's check our hearts. There is a little bit of Nicky in all of us and I suspect there is a Nicky somewhere in your life that is looking for the chance to be embraced. Thank God for that. Thank God for His perfect gift, Christ Jesus.

In that Wendy's, people encountered God. Nicky, finally being accepted by others, and the crew members he worked with who encountered God through him.

In the story of the visitation we hear this week in the Gospel, we hear how Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth who is expectant with John the Baptist. It's a beautiful story of two women who are caught up in the will of God; they each play a role in salvation history, and bring joy to one another and to the world. Like Nicky, these are people of action. The Gospel takes place right after the annunciation. God becoming Incarnate in Jesus now dwells in her, the ark of the covenant. It's why Elizabeth asks "how is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" and why John the Baptist leaps for joy in the womb, echoing the dancing of David before the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament.

In this beautiful story, we see the power of God working through people and the power of transformation.

With respect to Mary, she goes to her cousin. As God lives in her literally she brings God to her. So how about you and me? Who does God need to be brought to? We all know people who may be down and out, or hurting, or dealing with anger or addiction issues or mental health struggles or just lonely or perhaps have become too busy to see God in their lives. Or maybe there is brokenness in our family we can help heal. What a great

thing to seek people out who need to see God and, through our presence in their lives, help to foster that relationship. With our words of peace, with our listening, we can do so much.

With respect to Elizabeth, she accepts Mary as she is - an unmarried pregnant young woman, who would be criticized by the world's standards. But when Elizabeth was open to the presence of God, she could accept Mary as she truly was, the messenger of God. When the other workers at Wendy's saw Nicky's true gifts, they too were transformed with joy. So we also ask ourselves, who is maybe bringing God to us? Who do we need to stop judging? As we come to Christmas who do we need to accept as God's messenger that may be there to help us too. Few people would say "I'm lonely," "I'm anxiety ridden" or "I'm dealing with this addiction" to others, but there are people there to help us with the message of peace. May we seek them out.

Lastly, let us think about the role we play. It's so important. Nicky on one level was working 3 hours a day for low pay. But he did his job with joy, and he not only did it well, he transformed that restaurant and the people around him. God works with us, and wants to use us. So may we have the

wisdom of Nicky, and realize that through us so many good things can happen when we don't get caught up in ego or wanting to be seen as important or a mover and shaker, but simply say "okay God, what do you want me to do?" If you stop and think about it, how many people do we impact in our lives. How many people do you meet over the course of your time at work that you speak to? How many other parents at your kids sporting events? How many simple family moments take place under your roof like a dinner conversation or a heart to heart or playing a board or card game as a family where you share conversation? How many actions of love do you do for others like helping some aging relatives with the shopping or shoveling or simply being present when a loved one is in the hospital or being at a funeral? We might lose sight of it, but God put us here for a reason. Christ now lives in you and me, and through so many simple things, we bring Jesus to this world.

In a speech he gave to the 3rd Army (edited a bit because well, it's General Patton who was a wordsmith but not for the pulpit) Patton once spoke of the bravest man he ever saw. It was delivered on the eve of D-Day, June 5th, 1944. In his words: "An army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, and fights as a team. This individual hero stuff is BS....Every single man in the army

plays a vital role. So don't ever let up. Don't ever think that your job is unimportant. What if every truck driver decided that he didn't like the whine of the shells and turned yellow and jumped headlong into a ditch? That coward could say to himself, 'Heck, they won't miss me, just one man in thousands.' What if every man said that? Where in the (heck) would we be then? No, thank God, Americans don't say that. Every man does his job. Every man is important....One of the bravest men I saw in the African campaign was on a telegraph pole in the midst of furious fire while we were moving toward Tunis. I stopped and asked him what the hell he was doing up there. He answered, 'Fixing the wire, sir.' 'Isn't it a little unhealthy up there right now?' I asked. 'Yes sir, but this wire has got to be fixed.' I asked, 'Don't those planes strafing the road bother you?' And he answered, 'No sir, but you sure as hell do.' Now, there was a real soldier. A real man. A man who devoted all he had to his duty, no matter how great the odds, no matter how seemingly insignificant his duty appeared at the time.

And you should have seen the trucks on the road to Gabès

Those drivers were magnificent. All day and all night they crawled along those son-of-a-bitch roads, never stopping, never deviating from their

course with shells bursting all around them. Many of the men drove over 40 consecutive hours. We got through on good old American guts. These were not combat men. But they were soldiers with a job to do. They were part of a team. Without them the fight would have been lost.”

You and I are part of the team. The problem is sometimes the wires are down. We can't hear God's message to us. We forget just how valuable we are. God put us here for a reason - so listen to Him, never forget how much you mean to Him and to this world, and never forget what an impact you have on helping others to get that message too.