

Sometimes in our lives it can be hard to find the truth about ourselves. The reasons for this abound. For some they suffer emotional abuse from parents; others on the other extreme never hear the word “no” and so never come to realize that they have to mature and grow as a person. Others might suffer from a bad self image for one reason or another. Or others might cover up the parts of themselves they don’t like, trying to conceal them from everyone including themselves. And others might be too busy to hit the pause button to hear the voice of God calling them to a vocation or to try something new.

The truth is we are loved by God so much; it’s what we are building up to at Christmas, when we’ll again hear the story of God dwelling on earth as one of us, seeing our potential and reminding how deeply He loves. And this God wants a relationship with each of us, but also wants to help us become who we are called to become. It just takes hearing Him, and responding to what He calls us to do.

In a story she entitles “Imperfection,” Sue Gaiither writes of how throughout much of her life, she felt the need to hide in her life something she perceived as a flaw, and this was a deformity of her ear.

Both as she says “the runt of the litter,” the last of four children, at birth her left ear was deformed. It had no shape or opening, just a thick mass.

As a small child, she had several operations, but the only thing they could do was give that blob a bit of shape to resemble an ear. It would be impossible to hear from that side, even with medical science.

Growing up for Sue was a challenge. As she puts it, when you have a deformity, you instinctively hide things you feel ashamed of. She hid her ear. Fortunately she says, she was a girl and her hair covered it.

She had no thoughts about it as a young child, but as she matured, life dished out the old-school need for acceptance, love, and approval. When you are flawed, she says, and according to her definition at the time, she was, those traits become high priority.

She sincerely believed she was supposed to erect change in herself, for God. Then she'd receive revelations of her deep inner struggles of the soul. But as those revelations came, they only created deeper disgust. She felt

powerless in her own efforts to really change. So the question came: Why should God love me? She was disgusting she told herself.

So she decided to go to a professional hairdresser and have a haircut and a perm. Through referrals, she finally picked the male stylist to perform this deed. He obviously saw her special need she says and she explained how she needed her hair to be cut.

“Oh please be careful not to cut it too short, since the perm will make it shorter,” Sue stressed.

He cut her hair and after the perm it went up like a venetian blind. She ran out of the salon in complete desperation.

Sobbing, Sue walked to her apartment. Thoughts swirled in her head that her life was over; she was going to hibernate for six months until her hair grew. She wished at that point she had never been born.

In front of the mirror, struggling to stretch her hair down to cover her ears, with intense frustration, she threw the brush and yelled into the mirror, “you are so ugly, I hate you, I hate you Sue.!”

She put her head on the vanity and wept bitterly.

And then, she heard someone whisper her name. “Sue.”

She recognized His voice.

“Sue, look in the mirror. Look in the mirror and say, “I love you Sue.” It was scary to her. She heard this directive, yet was a smidge uncertain it was God speaking. She was afraid not to obey though, just in case it really was Him.

Reluctantly, she brought her head up and looked in the mirror, sheepishly saying, “I love you Sue, I love you Sue.”

With all honesty, she says at that moment she sensed all of heaven joining the chorus of those words.

She found herself weeping again, not in desperation, but in discovering a glimpse of God's intimate love. He spoke His words to her heart, and filled them with power.

God though had another lesson of His incredible intimate love for her. Years later, He answered her prayers and sent Gary into her life. During their courtship, she shared her life and it's struggles with him, including her birth defect. It was one thing however for her to share openly with others, but another to truly let them touch the very root of her emotional pain.

As their love grew, they talked of marriage. God impressed upon her heart to show Gary her ear. After all, she says, shouldn't he know what he was getting before he committed?

They went to church one Sunday morning and afterward had lunch at her home. But the time did not seem right. Or perhaps she was too fearful. Nonetheless, that evening they planned to meet back at his house.

They sat on his sofa and began sharing again. Sue says she knew it was time for her to show Gary her ear. She simply asked him if she could close her eyes, then he could push back her hair and see her deformity.

She was nervous. In a moment, she writes she would either be received or rejected - true love would be made known.

She felt her hair gently pushed back, then she felt his lips kiss her ear with loving tenderness.

When she opened her eyes, Gary was on his knees. Little did she know he had been planning a marriage proposal for days. With tears in his eyes and an emotional voice, he extended her the most beautiful invitation to be his wife.

Then Gary gave her a lovely pair of ivory-carved earrings he'd bought years before in China, when he asked God then to show him what to buy for his future wife.

Sue says she finally learned that God had always wanted her to push back her hair to reveal her imperfections, her flaws, her weaknesses - and that he only wanted to kiss them.

So it is with us. All of us are both flawed, and at the same time have so many gifts and great qualities. And for us to discover these things, we need to have some quiet time with God, and listen to the prophets that He sends us.

In our Gospel this week, we encounter John the Baptist, who preaches repentance and baptizes in the desert as the voice who cries out in the desert predicted by Isaiah.

John was in the desert and people would seek him out to sort of start a fresh life. It's in the desert where one might be alone; and it's why in our Christian tradition there is a role for silence, for meditation, or finding God in nature, and in the voices of modern day John the Baptists who come to us. This is important to do, because each of us has an interior world - a world with memories, impressions, feelings, attitudes, dispositions. Freud might call it the part of our subconscious that is like the massive iceberg

below the surface. It's so important for us to find this part of ourselves, and to seek out both the good and the not so good.

For Sue, that came one day when she looked in the mirror and spent time in silence in her apartment finally hearing the voice of God that she was loved; for Gary when he discerned that he should propose to Sue. Sue though needed to find peace and clear out the junk if you will that was the bad self image she had developed over the years to find true peace.

As the forerunner of the Lord, John the Baptist reminds us how important it is for us to prepare the way for the Lord too in our souls. John would place his finger on a person's weak spot and keep it there until they noticed. God gives us a conscience in part to do just that. And so a good thing to do in Advent is to make time for mini-retreats if you will. Consider finding time to turn off the phone, the computer, the TV - find some silence. Listen to the voice of God that says the same thing to you as He does to Sue - "I love you." And think about what needs to be perhaps cleared out and how you can become a better person. Perhaps it's bitterness or resentment; perhaps it's the excuses about why you can't see someone or forgive; perhaps it's giving into the same old temptations online or other things you

battle in private. Sometimes when we look in that mirror, we might not like the reflection of our soul and on our own we've covered it up with other things to hide it, but God is saying "I love you" so let yourself be healed by that love.

With that too, do not overlook your incredible good qualities. Sometimes we focus on the flaws. But prayer and time for encountering God helps us to hear what He may be calling us to do next. Perhaps we may find gifts we hadn't noticed before or short-changed ourselves with. Maybe we get down on ourselves too much and don't realize the many good qualities we have, and prayer can help us to see them.

And lastly, let us listen to the John the Baptists God sends our way too to help us. For Sue, that was Gary who affirmed not just his love for her, but how much she was loved by God. There are prophets who will come our way to challenge us out of love to make a change in our lives when they see something that maybe we don't that is diminishing us from becoming the person we want to become. And they may come along too and say you really need to consider this; from a new job, to proposing marriage; to being a good fit for a parish committee or a choir or something else. Sometimes

we just need a bit of help to see the gifts and talents we have, or what God has called us to do.

As I've shared, part of the reason I love nature photography so much is it brings me closer to God. Seeing the sunset over the Sierra Nevadas; the dawn create pink clouds over the Canadian rockies in front of a clear blue lake; or an eagle swoop to get a fish, silent encounters with God help bring me peace and insight. From a longer trip away, to walking with Emmett or just sitting in the empty Church, I've found in my "desert" experiences I've gotten so much clarity in my life about what I need to and where I need to go and what needs to change. So what is God calling you to do or clear out in your soul? What gifts do you have that you haven't yet discovered? What do you conceal hoping others might not see it? Use this sacred season to rediscover the importance of hearing God's voice in the deserts of your lives and in the prophets He sends you, preparing the way for the Lord by making room for Him in your soul by letting yourselves be loved and learning how to respond to that love by using the gifts that God has given you.