

All of us are given the gift of a conscience from God, where we can encounter His voice and discern how to do the right thing. But we also all need a bit of help on our journey; as Jesus explains in our Gospel, it's important to find wise people to help us do the right thing, people who can challenge us, who can see clearly where to go, and people who also have grown themselves over their lifetime.

Some 170 years ago, as our nation was involved in the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln was trying to sort out what to do with respect to black Americans as the war turned towards the Union Side. What resulted was emancipation and rights, though of course there would be a long struggle for them to be secured in the years that followed. But Lincoln might not have made the moves he did at all were it not for a congressman and friend of his named Thaddeus Stevens, who pushed him to do the right thing.

The Civil War had been a horrifying conflict in our country, and it was dragging on and on. Finally, Union victories began to mount, and in 1864, when Atlanta fell in September of that year along with there being some divisions in the Democratic Party, Lincoln easily won re-election.

Lincoln though also had a deeper vision about the abolition of slavery, but he waxed and waned on it at first; he was against slavery, but was more cautious in his approach to abolition. When the Civil War erupted in 1861, Abraham Lincoln insisted that it was a war to restore the Union, not a war to end slavery. Thaddeus Stevens disagreed, urging Lincoln to turn the war into a "radical revolution" that would end slavery and crush the power of the Southern aristocracy: "Free every slave, slay every traitor, burn every rebel mansion if these things be necessary to preserve this temple of freedom."

In November 1861, Stevens introduced a bill to outlaw slavery in America. It didn't pass. But he kept chipping away at the peculiar institution, pushing a bill to free slaves in the District of Columbia, a bill to free slaves owned by Confederate soldiers, a bill to enlist 150,000 black soldiers in the Union Army. The District of Columbia bill passed; the others failed. But Stevens— along with abolitionist senators Charles Sumner and Henry Wilson—kept pressuring Lincoln to issue an emancipation proclamation.

"Stevens, Sumner and Wilson simply haunt me with their importunities for a Proclamation of Emancipation," Lincoln grumbled in 1862. "Wherever I go and whatever way I turn, they are on my tail." Of course, Lincoln issued that proclamation.

He supported going further, and had already issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but wasn't quite sure how to move forward in abolishing slavery forever. He had concerns that some would argue in courts that this applied to wartime only, and that persons of color could somehow still be seen as property after the war. His closest advisors told him to take it slow, and not to push this as the cost of defeat could be quite harmful to his career. Lincoln though would have none of this - he knew what needed to be done, and so set about doing the right thing to forever change America. And this is where he had help on his journey, from someone who had been telling him to do this for a while.

A man who had wanted him to do this even earlier was the great congressman Thaddeus Stevens. A lawyer, he had opposed slavery his whole life, and would defend fugitive slaves for free.

He served in the House and headed the powerful Ways and Means Committee, which controlled funding for the war. Though both members of the same party, Stevens and Lincoln would often butt heads, but on this issue, they came to an agreement. Stevens used all his political will to help push the amendment through, and Lincoln also got heavily involved by lobbying support for it's passage from other congressmen. It passed finally by the slimmest of margins, and would sweep through state legislatures and become law.

President Lincoln was of course assassinated shortly after his second term began, and with this, it would have been quite easy to forget about his vision for reconstruction, and for the rights of black Americans. One of his beliefs was that they should have full political equality, but that was something that he and Stevens had to compromise on to get support from some on the fence for the 13th amendment. Stevens though saw how this could not continue to be ignored, and so, Stevens, took up this fight. As such, after the 13th amendment was passed, Stevens would lead the charge for the 14th amendment, which prohibited states from abridging equality before the law. It also applied the Bill of Rights to the States equally, which was important because back then, in the South before the war began, states passed laws limiting freedom of the press and speech and even censored US Mail in the name of States Rights.

At this point, Stevens was 75 years of age and had less than 2 years left to live. He was also in constant pain from a variety of ailments, but that was not going to slow him down. He built bridges with moderates and helped to secure it's passage. On top of this, as he had done all his life in fighting for the less fortunate, he fought for numerous other proposals to help former slaves and persons of color that did not end up passing, but that helped lay the groundwork for what would come years down the line. When his own party that year then refused to endorse national suffrage for all people, he spoke out calling them cowards, and in his final months he laid the groundwork for the passage of the 15th amendment, which gave all people the right to vote.

Like all of us though, Stevens wasn't always as focused as he should have been. He learned from a mistake he made as a young lawyer. In 1821, he was hired by a Maryland slaveowner who wanted to regain possession of a runaway slave who was living with her two children in the free state of Pennsylvania. The slave, Charity Butler, claimed she'd resided in Pennsylvania for more than six months—long enough to be declared free under state law. But Stevens proved that Butler hadn't lived in the state for six consecutive months, and he won the case. Later, when he pondered how his courtroom cleverness caused three human beings to lose their freedom, he was appalled, and he became a dedicated abolitionist. His house in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that he shared with Lydia Smith, a 33 year old mulatto widow, would become a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Ever one to want to form consciences of people by making them think about the injustice of racism, Stevens has a unique inscription on his grave. Shortly before he died on August 11, he learned that the grave he'd purchased was located in a whites-only cemetery. Incensed, he bought another plot, this one in an obscure graveyard in Lancaster with no racial restrictions. Then he wrote an inscription designed to carve his creed into his headstone:

I repose in this quiet and secluded spot,  
Not from any natural preference for solitude  
But, finding other Cemeteries limited as to Race by Charter Rules,  
I have chosen this that I might illustrate in my death  
The Principles which I advocated through a long life:  
EQUALITY OF MAN BEFORE HIS CREATOR.

Who knows what might have been were it not for Representative Stevens pushing Lincoln to go further, and to see what needed to be done. And all of us in our lives, we need people just like him to guide us; to challenge us and to help us grow spiritually. As kids, our parents ideally do this. But as we get older, we always must be on guard we never think we are "grown up"; there is no saint who is canonized before death.

Well, one thing is that when we talk about our faith, we want someone who is grounded in the same Christian principals we have. Jesus says the blind cannot lead the blind. Jesus is the light of the world. And this is why having good, Christian friends matters. It's not that we can't have many different friends, and many times those people of other faiths can be helpful, but on spiritual matters, it's so important to have someone who shares our faith and who will challenge us. For when someone has a faith in Christ, they might be able to challenge us a bit about why we aren't going to Mass, or if there's a bit of hypocrisy in terms of what we say we believe and perhaps how we treat others in our family, our spouse, or if some of our actions aren't reflecting that faith.

Second, as Jesus says no disciple is superior to the teacher, but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher, we look for people who are recognize that they aren't perfect. As a young man, Stevens made some mistakes, but he learned from them, and this helped him. Helping is a two way street as well; a friendship that is good will involve two people making one another better. Don't look for a spiritual guide who has all the answers and fancies themselves to be perfect or a know-it-all. Rather, look for people who have learned from their mistakes.

Third, do they acknowledge that this conversion and growth process, like our own, is ongoing? Jesus says we shouldn't notice the splinter in our brothers eye without seeing the wooden beam in our own. Some people are so focused on others they never look in the mirror. A good parent will not just correct when necessary, but also ask themselves am I too lenient or harsh, do I need to let go, am I living my life through my child or imposing something on them, how am I doing? So will a good friend, and a good teacher ask themselves questions. We all need to be introspective. In real life at college, Stevens once killed a cow that was making a mess at the college he went to

(there were no fences there back then and he had had it with the stench). Another student was wrongfully accused; he stood up, apologized to the farmer, who then gave him a gift, repaid him, and learned from that incident. Those who heal like Stevens are also healed themselves; Stevens was born into poverty, was taunted a lot as a child, but then grew up and became wealthy and used his money to help people in need and stand up for the less fortunate. When a person goes through their own struggles with sin, temptation and pain, they can often become a remarkable agent of grace.

And lastly, Jesus says that a good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit, for every tree is known by its own fruit. Stevens walked the walk, literally being buried next to people who were of different races which was seen as radical at the time because he wanted his actions to speak loudly. So if we are turning to someone for spiritual counsel and guidance, how are they doing in terms of living out their faith? Do they go to Mass? Do they pray? Do they exhibit positive behaviors that reflect their faith by being someone who is patient, courageous and loving? As the saying goes talk is cheap - actions need to back it up.

In my life, I've been quite blessed with many people who have done so much for me to help me learn the faith; my mom and dad and grandparents; some great professors of theology like Fr. Jerome Dittberner; and some wonderful confessors and spiritual directors. But what ties them together is they were people themselves who grew in the faith, and who not only shared my faith but lived it out. Many times in life there are many people who tell us what we want to hear. But you don't want someone who always clicks the "like" button on Facebook just to be nice. You want someone who will help you become the person you want to become, someone you often do the same thing for. Someone as Bishop Robert Barron puts it who is a starving person who found bread and who tells you where to find it. God in His wisdom gives us these great people in our lives to help us do so much and to unlock our potential - so let us seek them out so we can truly become the people God knows we can become and learn how to see clearly how to travel the road to sainthood.