

I don't know about you, but one of the things I've always had an ability to do was to remember the people over the years who may have been mean or nasty to me or a member of my family. Maybe it was some gossip; or perhaps they said something about me behind my back. I think we all have people like that, though some of us handle it better than others.

As such, when we have challenging words like in this week's Gospel, where Jesus says "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you," they really hit home, especially that part about "if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners to the same." I'm reminded that while it's OK to have frustration or feelings, that my job as not just a priest but as a Christian is to try to think like Jesus does and strive to show forgiveness and love, even when that can be hard to do. But when we follow the path that Jesus lays out for us, what we might find is that both we and others with whom we disagree or worse, consider evil or an enemy, might find peace and ultimately be better people.

About 20 years ago, Laura Hillenbrand wrote the book “Seabiscuit,” which became a bestseller and then a hit film. I saw the movie, and love the story. But as she was working on the book, she was doing some research and happened across the name Louie Zamperini, and read about references to an odyssey he had survived during World War II. That became a book too which subsequently became a film, “Unbroken.”

Doing promotion for *Seabiscuit*, she one day, found herself thinking about him, and was reminded that she promised herself she’d try to find him once the book was done.

She did a search online for Louie and discovered that he was alive, in his mid-eighties, living in California. Laura wrote him a letter. He sent a warm reply, so she called him.

Over the next hour, he told her the most amazing survival story she’d ever heard, a tale that included a plane crash, shark attacks, and capture and torture by the enemy. But what fascinated Laura even more than his story was the way Louie told it.

He was infectiously cheerful, speaking of his captors' cruelty without a trace of bitterness. Laura asked how he could speak so easily of such vicious men. His answer was simple: "I've forgiven them."

Laura was hooked. She wanted to know more. Her mind began turning on a question: How does a man forgive what is seemingly unforgivable? In search of the answer, she began a seven-year journey through his life, a journey that culminated in her book *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*.

The more deeply Laura understood what Louie had endured, the more wondrous his forgiveness seemed.

As a boy in California in the 1920s and early 1930s, Louie was an incorrigible delinquent. Then he discovered that he had an extraordinary talent for running. He became a world-famous track phenomenon, competing in the 1936 Berlin Olympics when he was still a teenager.

World War II began, and Louie set aside athletics and joined the Army Air Corps. He was stationed in Hawaii as a bombardier, fighting harrowing air battles against the Japanese.

On May 27, 1943, Louie and his crew took off to search for a missing bomber. Far out over the Pacific, engine failure sent their plane plunging into the ocean. Trapped by wires in the wreckage, Louie passed out.

When he came to, the wires were gone. He swam to the surface and climbed onto a raft, joining two other survivors. They'd sent no distress call, and no one knew where they were.

For weeks the men floated, followed by sharks, surviving on rainwater and the few fish and birds they could catch. On the twenty-seventh day, a plane appeared. Louie fired flares, and the plane turned toward them.

Unfortunately it turned out to be a Japanese bomber, and its crewmen fired machine guns at the castaways. Louie leaped overboard.

He had to kick and punch the circling sharks to keep them away until the firing stopped and he could climb back up onto the raft. Over and over the bomber returned to strafe the men, sending Louie back into the shark-infested water.

By the time the bomber flew off the raft was riddled with bullet holes and was starting to sink. Amazingly, none of the men had been hit, but the sharks tried to drag them away. Beating them off with oars, the men frantically patched the raft and pumped air into it. Finally the sharks left.

On they drifted, starving. One man died; Louie and the other crewman hung on. On the forty-sixth day, they saw a distant island. They rowed toward it. When they were only yards from shore, a Japanese boat intercepted them.

For the next two and a quarter years, Louie was a captive of the Japanese military. First he was held in a filthy cell, subjected to medical experiments, starved, beaten and interrogated.

Then he was shipped to prison camp in Japan, where he was forced to race against Japanese runners, winning even though he knew he'd be clubbed as punishment. He joined a daring POW underground, stealing food and circulating information to other captives.

It was in prison camp that Louie encountered a monstrous guard known as the Bird. Fixated on breaking the famous Olympian, the Bird beat Louie relentlessly and forced him to do slave labor.

Louie reached the end of his endurance. With his dignity destroyed and his will fading, he prayed for rescue.

When the atomic bombs ended the war, the Bird fled to escape war-crimes trials, and Louie was saved from almost certain death.

He went home a deeply haunted man. He had nightmares of being bludgeoned by the Bird. Trying to rebuild his life, he married a beautiful debutante named Cynthia, but even her love couldn't blot the Bird from his mind.

He sought solace in running, but an ankle injury, incurred in POW camp and exacerbated by the Bird's beatings, hampered him. Just as he was reaching Olympic form again, his ankle failed. His athletic career was finished.

Devastated, he started drinking. He had flashbacks: The raft or the prison camp would appear around him, and he'd relive terrifying memories. He simmered with rage, provoking fistfights with strangers and confrontations with Cynthia.

He couldn't shake the sense of shame that had been beaten into him by the Bird.

Louie thought God was toying with him. When he heard preachers on the radio, he turned it off. He forbade Cynthia to go to church. He drank more and more heavily. In time, Louie's rage hardened into a twisted ambition: He would return to Japan, hunt down the Bird and strangle him.

It was the only way he could restore his dignity. He became obsessed, trying to raise money for the trip, but his financial ventures kept failing.

One night in 1948, Louie dreamed he was locked in a death battle with the Bird. A scream startled him awake. He was straddling his pregnant wife, hands clenched around her neck. His daughter was born a few months later.

One day, Cynthia found him shaking the baby, trying to stop her from crying. She snatched the baby away, then packed her bags and walked out.

In the fall of 1949, Cynthia made a last effort to save her husband. She asked Louie to come to a tent meeting in Los Angeles, where a young minister named Billy Graham was preaching.

For two nights, Louie sat in that tent, feeling guilty and angry as Graham spoke of sin and its consequences, and God bringing miracles to the stricken.

On the second night, Graham asked people to step forward to declare their faith. Louie stood up and stormed toward the exit. But at the aisle, he stopped short.

Suddenly he was in a flashback, adrift on the raft. It hadn't rained in days, and he was dying of thirst. In anguish, he whispered a prayer: If you will save me, I will serve you forever. Over the raft, rain began falling. Standing in Graham's tent, lost in his flashback, Louie felt the rain on his face.

At that moment Louie began to see his whole ordeal differently. When he'd been trapped in the wreckage of his plane, somehow he'd been freed. When the Japanese bomber had shot the raft full of holes, somehow none of the men had been hit.

When the Bird had driven him to the breaking point, and he'd prayed for help, somehow he'd found the strength to keep breathing. And that day on the raft, he had prayed for rain, and rain had come.

Louie's conviction that he was forsaken was gone, replaced by a belief that divine love had been all around him, even at his darkest moments. That

night in Graham's tent, the bitterness and pain that had haunted him vanished.

A year later, Louie went to Japan. He was a joyful man, his marriage restored, his nightmares and flashbacks gone, his alcoholism overcome. He went to a Tokyo prison where war criminals were serving their sentences.

He hoped to find the Bird, to know for sure if the peace he'd found was resilient. But the Bird wasn't there. Louie was told that the guard had killed himself.

Louie was struck with emotion. He was surprised by what he felt. It was not hatred. Not relief. It was compassion. Louie had found forgiveness.

Louie Zamperini's life is a journey of outrageous fortune, ferocious will and astonishing redemption. For Laura, she says what gives his story lasting resonance is the light it sheds on the cost of victimization and the mystery of forgiveness.

What the Bird took from Louie was his dignity; what he left behind was a pervasive sense of helplessness and worthlessness.

As she researched Louie's life, interviewing his fellow POWs and studying their memoirs and diaries, she discovered that this loss of dignity was nearly ubiquitous, leaving the men feeling defenseless and frightened in a world that had become menacing.

The postwar nightmares, flashbacks, alcoholism and anxiety that were endemic among them spoke of souls in desperate fear. Watching these men struggle to overcome their trauma, she came to believe that a loss of self-worth is central to the experience of being victimized, and may be what makes its pain particularly devastating.

Anger is a justifiable and understandable reaction to being wronged, and as the soul's first effort to reassert its worth and power, it may initially be healing. But in time, anger, she points, out becomes corrosive.

In her words: To live in bitterness is to be chained to the person who wounded you, your emotions and actions arising not independently, but in

reaction to your abuser. Louie became so obsessed with vengeance that his life was consumed by the quest for it.

In bitterness, he was as much a captive as he'd been when barbed wire had surrounded him.

This is why forgiveness, she says, is so liberating. But how is it found? For Louie, it lay in resurrecting his dignity, seeing himself not as the wretched creature that the Bird had striven to make of him, but as the object of God's infinite love.

His self-respect and sense of power reborn, he finally had the strength to let go of his hatred.

Laura talked to other former POWs who forgave their captors, and for each, forgiveness seemed to follow a return of dignity. Each man found it in his own way, guided by his history and his pain. Louie's story doesn't represent the only way out of bitterness. There is no one right path to peace.

Forgiveness, she says is a complex, elusive mystery, and one man's story can only begin to unravel its secrets. But she takes from Louie's life one beautiful, undeniable truth: Even when a man suffers the most soul-shattering of abuses, even when he seems hopelessly bound by resentment, forgiveness can still find him and set him free.

The things most of us go through pale in comparison to what Louie went through. And sometimes when a person speaks of anger or animosity towards someone, I invite them to meditate on a crucifix, to think of Christ's love, and His forgiveness for all of us. So how do we travel that road to get to that point that Louie, and our Lord did?

The starting point is thinking of God as love, and love as a free gift. There are no strings attached; we need not do anything to merit this love. But the love is given to all; it might seem hard to think that God loved the Bird and Louie equally, but this is true. God does not love us in exchange for us doing something for Him. We try to live out our faith by loving God and neighbor through actions, including forgiveness, but there is no asterisk next to God's love. Sometimes we can have a hard time getting around that fact, maybe struggling to forgive ourselves. In another story I've shared

before on forgiveness, there was a mom who wrote of drinking and battling alcohol, even drinking during her son's pregnancy. When he was born and then had developmental issues throughout her life, he was a constant reminder to her of what she had done, even though she overcame her alcoholism early on in his childhood. She wrote though she still hadn't forgiven herself when he was about 10 or 11 and one day, becoming more aware, asked her point blank "did you drink when you were pregnant" and getting emotional she said she had, her son simply smiled and said "I love you and I forgive you." In that moment she said she had this clarity; if David her son could forgive her, maybe she could forgive herself. I'd suggest her son was reflecting that love of God in that moment that we all need a reminder of: God's love is infinite.

When we begin to think of that, we can look at our lives and ask ourselves who haven't we forgiven. Maybe we say we have, but really haven't.

Perhaps something is in the past, and it still impacts us like it was impacting Louie early on in his marriage, and we aren't dealing with what needs to be dealt with. Abuse, emotional or physical or sexual, is traumatic. So is betrayal by people. Sometimes we cover something up rather than address it and all isn't OK. Sometimes it means bringing that to prayer, or

to a confidant or a counselor, and then beginning the process of forgiveness.

It's also worth noting that sometimes in the moment, when someone wrongs us, or tensions are high, that we can want to return violence with violence. Sometimes this manifests itself too with respect not to just another individual, but all members of a race or political group or people we just do not like. Someone gossips about us or burns us, let's get them on social media or behind their back. But what if we showed a different path and turned the other cheek? An excellent film, "Of God's and Men" which was released in 2010 (and a good one for the season of Lent tells the story of the Cistercian monks in a small Muslim village of Tibhhirine in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria. They coexist with the villagers and relations are fine, and one monk who is a doctor often provides free medical care. When civil war breaks out between Islamic fundamentalists and the corrupt government, the monks opt to stay, eventually killed by the Muslim extremists. Those martyred monks were beatified by Pope Francis. The chapel of Our Lady was rebuilt. But in the ceremony after the rebuilding, 150 imams were present, and one of them said, "What means most to us Muslims is that you Christians never blamed us for the deaths." Such is the

power of not responding to violence with violence which only begets violence. The way of love ultimately brought about a peaceful situation.

Other times the hard situation isn't in the moment but festers in our souls. Maybe we might also include asking God for help getting it going. Maybe starting with "Lord, help me to forgive" knowing that it takes time and work looking at the past.

As the process unfolds, what we'll find is what Louie and so many others found: freedom. A good friend who has been burned by a person or two I've mentioned to on more than one occasion "I don't know how you do it" as I've seen him around even people who in the past weren't the nicest to him. And what he reminds me is that when you don't forgive, like Laura points out, you let the other person have power over you. Nothing much good comes from it. And in fact, when that person encounters love, it might just cause them to change too.

There is no getting around the fact that we humans are complicated, and can do such nasty things to one another. But love has the power to transform. So does hate and anger. But little by little, when we strive to

forgive and to love, we just might be amazed at what happens both to ourselves and to others as we find the freedom and peace for which we long. Every Eucharist connects us to Jesus, who affirms that forgiveness is a sign of strength and not of weakness. The grace of this Eucharist enables us to live out that teaching. May we do that and may the love that Jesus gives us be something we in turn give to one another - both those who are easily lovable and those who are hard to love - and in the process, may we too find freedom and peace.