

For many of us, from an early age we learn about our faith and things like the Mass, or certain prayers like the Our Father and Hail Mary, but how often do you really think about your faith, how you live it out, and why you have faith and what that means?

Years ago, while she was at college, the ABC reporter Diane Sawyer found herself sitting alone in her room at college trying to write on the subject, "Why I Believe in God."

After hours of walking in circles—both mentally and physically— she decided to try out her ideas on some of the other students in the dorm. A lively argument began. She sensed in those girls the same confusion which she has felt so often in life. And the same need for answers.

Perhaps it's different in the adult world, she thought. But it seemed to her in high school—and now in college too—that when young people set out to find God with their reason, they reach a dead-end every time. For her, she says, truth is like a parakeet let out of its cage. She chases it around her room, across the campus, into the chapel itself, but it flies farther away all the time.

And then when she's stopped racing after it, perhaps when she's not even thinking about it, she says it will come gently and light on her shoulder.

She had one of these inexpressible nudges from something outside herself the day before the Junior Miss Pageant began in March 1963. She was driving into Louisville late that afternoon on some last minute errands.

Suddenly a rabbit was under the wheels of the car—before she could even begin to use the brakes. Diane knew she had hit the animal although there was no impact. She drove on.

Then, inexplicably, she was blinded by tears. An impulse that was not her own said, "Stop. Go back. Don't leave the rabbit on the road."

"That's silly," her rational self replied. "You just don't stop to pick up a rabbit. Besides, it wasn't my fault."

But the tears blinded her so that she hardly could see ahead. "I won't turn around," she repeated. Everything human in her said "drive on."

Yet that something stronger kept insisting. And finally she obeyed. She turned the car around and drove back to the spot where the rabbit had streaked from the underbrush. There it was, lying beside the pavement. It was dead. Gently Diane picked it up and laid it beneath a bush, well back from the road.

And with that act the tears stopped just as suddenly as they had started. What was the truth that had touched her so compellingly, she wondered? Was it a message about the oneness and importance of all God's creation? At a moment when her own plans and affairs loomed very large, hadn't a whisper come to her from the love that included rabbits—and even the two sparrows which were sold for a farthing?

After the exciting experience of winning the pageant in Mobile, there was a lot of travel. One Sunday in a large city, Diane and her chaperone slipped into a church near their hotel. The sanctuary was almost full—not quite. When it came time for the announcements, the pastor solemnly stood up and here is what he said as best as she can remember:

"I have witnessed the disunity resulting from recent attempts of Negroes to worship in a nearby church. In order to avoid what happened down the street, I called a special meeting of the board of directors. We have informed the ushers to tell any of these Negro agitators who come and try to attend our worship service, that we haven't room enough for our own members."

That was all. Just a simple announcement. Diane looked around at the people. Theirs was a routine reaction. Again, she knew that the emotion she felt was larger than her own.

Diane writes that she is no crusader. She thinks she understands some of the complexity of the problem of racism. But suddenly she knew that she could no longer take up this pew space that was so valuable.

The minister was reading some more announcements, but the words that crashed in her ears were different: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass...."

It was that other voice impelling her to action once again. With her astonished chaperone gathering gloves and pocketbook, she got up and walked from the church—wondering if she ever would be able to explain it to her, or to herself.

Back in the hotel room she tried to describe it. It was as though something more concerned and more dedicated than Diane had reached down and made a decision for her that she might not have reached by herself. For she often had wrestled in her own mind with this question of integration without reaching a very clear-cut conclusion.

A friend to whom she told this experience said he had no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit. He believes that the Spirit daily tries to reach each one of us with his perfect counsel. "The key," he said, "is our obedience. As long as we obey that subtle prompting, it will come ever clearer and more frequently. But if ever we begin to stop our ears, it will grow faint and then disappear."

That made sense to her, because nine or 10 months before there had come a moment when she was sure the Holy Spirit had revealed a new

truth to her. It was during a period in her life when she had pulled away from the religious training she'd received as a child.

Diane wrote most teenagers go through a time like this, and when adults ask why, the nearest she can come is the word embarrassment. Teenagers are terribly self-conscious. And Jesus represents a kind of simplicity and humility that is not at all attractive if you're primarily concerned with what people think of you.

Furthermore, she'd use the word vulnerability. There is something about Christ's life of sacrifice and service that made him totally vulnerable to people. Whether we admit it or not, Diane wrote (writing again in 1963) young people pull away from situations where we can be hurt. And so we pull away from identifying with Christ who was hurt.

She hadn't realized how far it had gone in her own case until one of the boys in high school said some things that bothered her. He, too, was reared in a Christian home, yet he had become a doubter.

"I could step on a Bible right now and not feel a thing," he said. Then he scoffed at church ritual and the idea of a divine Christ.

Diane tried to talk to him, but inside she was more upset than she showed. What bothered her was not as much his attitude as her own. For she'd realized suddenly as he talked that she could not counter his disbelief with a really strong faith of her own.

That night she could not sleep. A feeling of despair surrounded her. Why must I be so confused? It was nearly 4 a.m. before she dropped off to sleep.

The next night it was the same...a great feeling of depression...inability to sleep. She was tortured by questions about Christ. Was he a myth? Was he God? Did he really perform those miracles?

Her thoughts seemed to start off in one direction and end up back at the starting point. There the big question was always waiting: was Jesus who he said he was?

She's wondered since why she did not turn to her parents for answers when she needed them so badly. Her parents she says are the kind of Christians who live their faith and had tried to teach her sister and Diane to live it too. Perhaps that was just the trouble. What faith she had had been given to her, with no effort on her part. Perhaps it was time to earn a faith of my own.

For five nights the torment lasted...sleeplessness...emptiness...straining to know...reaching out for something. On the fifth night it happened. She can't describe it in any other way than to say that a cloud about her seemed to lift, the answer of faith formed a pathway to light: He was! He is!

Diane got up and began to read the New Testament. She had read the entire Bible through twice before, but never like this. Once she'd read it as a lover of literature, once for its history. Now she read as a seeker. Words leapt at her from the page, thrilling and true. She read on and on, excited, with a feeling of great joy.

When Diane arose the next morning—to the same breakfast of eggs, the familiar school routine—the feeling of elation and belief was still there. But she had no idea as to how to share it or use it.

There have been other whispers from God, she says, not as loud nor as clear as that night's revelation, but enough to keep her remembering that he seeks us even more fervently than we seek him. Sometimes in her search for truth she says she feels as if she's climbing a ladder up the side of the Empire State Building. At the 100th floor there is great vision and wisdom for the climber. Right now she's up to the fifth floor and sometimes when she looks up and sees the distance to go, her heart sinks.

Then a bird lands on her shoulder and she remembers that it's really not like this at all. It's not a long climb that we must accomplish alone. The distance was overcome when Truth came down to our level. Now he stands outside each separate heart, and we must only be ready to fling wide the door when we hear his gentle knock.

So, do we hear the knock? Sometimes as life goes on because of all that fills our lives we don't. We become so busy with a million things; we

become preoccupied with so many things; or we focus on, at times, bad things that aren't good for us. Or we just kind of drift from day to day, never really pondering this thing called faith and belief.

Each year, we are given this sacred season with an opportunity to kind of hit the "pause" button and look at our lives, and remember where we are ultimately going. And to try again to hear the gentle knock of our loving God who just wants to be let into our souls. And His message to us is that we are loved, but that we also need to be changing. We can look for instance with shock at the Christians who worshipped in the church Diane went to and were oblivious to their own racism. Again, noticing the splinter in our brother's eye is something we humans are good at. But we also need to look in the mirror and say "OK, how am I doing, and how can I become better? as we strive to respond to God's love.

With that, as we begin our Lenten journey, I'd invite you to do a couple of things.

The first, is look at the sins in your life. Typically we have a penitential rite (omitted today because the ashes take the place of that) and we also go to

confession; not required per se during Lent but a common thing folks do (our service is Monday next week and we have weekly confessions too). Often its the same things we've mentioned over the years. We fall into these sins of habit. So how can we maybe get rid of them, and make the changes we want? How can we ID them, meaning we sometimes see some sins right away - but those people in the congregation certainly didn't see their own sin of racism that day. Perhaps we look a little more deeply and see that anger or gossip or lust or hatred or arrogance or controlling people or whatever it might be is there. Remember the conversation Jesus has with the woman at the well in John's Gospel; He encourages her and reminds her of His love, but He brings her on this journey so she can ID the sin in her life. It's not fun to think about, but all of us have our struggles - so let's together, with God's love, look at them and strive to confront them.

Second, we ask ourselves how can I become a better person? Sometimes in life there isn't something sinful necessarily, but we just could use some growth to emerge happier and healthier overall as people. Maybe you're dealing with something like anxiety; worried so much over Covid or the Ukraine or other things that are out of our control. Maybe you use the season to reduce your stress or anxiety level, or force yourself not to

accept that things are out of your control and try to become calmer as we return to more normalcy in the world. Maybe you could work on your health or diet. Maybe you've become so busy your don't pray as much as you used to, or don't have time for your family - or are so busy with family doing a million activities you don't spend as much time together as you'd like. Maybe you use the season to spend less time on the cell phone or with media and more time together talking to people you live with. Perhaps you procrastinate; as I said to the kids at our earlier Mass maybe during the season you try to turn off the video games a bit more or prioritize first getting homework done and then doing other things. Or think perhaps about your relationships with your loved ones. How do you treat your spouse, your kids, your parents? Do you help out with a good attitude? Do you love but respect? Parents, do you have that balance so you can be mom or dad and not always best friend while not micromanaging every aspect of your child's life? Kids, do you realize the sacrifices our parents make for us and try to help out around the house without being asked or say "thank you" for all your parents do? The point is that all of us can become better - but little by little a person can become expectant, constantly stressed out, or treat others in a less loving way. Lent is a great

time to fast permanently from things that maybe prevent us from being our best selves.

Sometimes Lent has this sort of negative vibe, but remember this is a grace filled, holy season. It's not about just getting ashes so we have something to talk about, or focusing on giving something up so we can talk about that at every opportunity; as we hear in our Gospel, fast privately, pray in secret where God sees you. Rather the question is who do I want to become?

Ashes symbolize what once was; we all turn to ashes, and so much of what we put our energy into does as well. Sometimes people cling to their possessions, or focus only on this world. But ashes are what becomes of all of us. And yet let us not forget: ashes do not end the story, but where we begin today is with the ashes; where we end is with the empty tomb.

Getting where we want to go though entails going through Good Friday.

Jesus suffered out of love for us all, and there is suffering as we get rid of the things in our lives, tangible and intangible, that clutter our souls from being the people God knows we can become. So let us enter into this holy season and find the true growth we are looking for, listening for the gentle knock of Jesus, and letting Him into our hearts and, working with him, become the people He knows we can become.