

Recently, Marine Vietnam Veteran Don Embry completed a banjo in the wood shop at his home; one of a number he's made in recent years. He found the perfect parts, including a pearl inlay of the US Marine Corps Logo that he had put on it, alongside the eagle, globe and anchor of the Marine emblem, which he layered onto the head of the banjo, and a few smaller pieces representing Marine ranks that he used to decorate the neck. This banjo was a tribute to the Marines. A symbol of Don's intention to embrace his time in the service. He planned to play it at an upcoming Veterans Day picnic.

Though quite nervous, that day, soon Don was surrounded. The banjo opened up conversations, honest talk about war. His conflicted feelings about Vietnam turned out to be not so uncommon. War leaves no one unscarred, he says; we are broken by war but made whole by grace.

One woman took a photo of it to send to her husband who was in Afghanistan. After the picnic, he climbed into his truck and headed home. The banjo lay on the seat beside him. It was the truth teller he had hoped it would be. And at last, so was he.

But how that banjo came to be was as a result of a man who responded to a life that somewhere along the way, had gotten off track.

Don grew up outside Washington, D.C., not far from where he now lives in Virginia. It wasn't a happy childhood. His dad was a quiet man, a hard worker. But when he drank, he became mean.

Don was terrified of ending up like him. As soon as he was old enough, he joined the Marines during the Vietnam War.

His tour lasted 13 months. He came home haunted by what he'd seen over there. Haunted too by a question: Why did I make it back when so many of my friends didn't?

He didn't know what to think. He had served his country. But he'd also witnessed horrific suffering. Death and destruction. He put his Marine uniform away. He would try to forget all about Vietnam and just move on with life. Unfortunately as he did this though, he began to, much like the younger brother in our Gospel, go further and further away into emptiness.

He worked odd jobs after the war—gas station attendant, electric company technician. He'd gotten married just before the war, and had two daughters. He wanted a quiet, normal life.

Then his wife got in a car accident; the man he'd become after Vietnam was no good at caregiving. They eventually divorced. Don left his family and barely stayed in touch with his daughters.

He found work as an auto mechanic in Annandale, Virginia. One day at lunch, the shop foreman pulled a fiddle from a case and another worker got out a guitar.

"Do you play anything?" the foreman asked him.

"No," he said. Don loved music but had never learned an instrument.

"We could use a banjo," said the foreman.

The two of them struck up a tune, and something happened inside of Don. The anguish he'd carried from Vietnam eased. The music was like a salve.

He watched and listened, hypnotized by their finger work. Everything went away except the music.

And so Don bought a cheap banjo and taught himself to play. To his delight, music seemed to come naturally. Soon he was playing with the guys at the shop and any chance he got at home.

Their little group got some gigs at bars. They would play, then stay to drink. Music and booze—what a combination! It blotted out his war memories and his guilt, how he'd treated his family, feelings that boiled right up when the music stopped.

He looked forward to those gigs. In between, Don drank alone at home. Somehow, he says, he become just like his dad.

For years, his life zigzagged between drunkenness and fitful attempts to start over. He drifted away from the auto shop and the band and stowed his banjo in a closet. He worked construction, remarried, bought some land in Maryland and built a house.

His second wife, Sandi, urged him to join the VFW. She thought talking with other veterans might help. He went to a couple meetings, but hearing other guys talk just brought up the painful memories he'd tried to bury. He came home wanting to get drunk.

Sandi was patient and loving, but she grew dismayed when Don relapsed after a rehab program. They separated, and Don cursed himself for having ruined another marriage.

He lost his job during the 2008 recession. He drank even more and developed liver disease.

"You have to stop drinking, Don," his doctor said. "You have Stage III cirrhosis. You're going to die."

But, Don drank anyway.

One day, he stumbled out of his stupor long enough to discover a notice of imminent foreclosure in the mail. He was practically broke and had stopped making house payments.

Desperate, he called his older daughter, Dawn. She was grown now, working in real estate. She wasn't happy to hear from him—they barely talked. But she agreed to help him out of daughterly duty.

“We'll sell your house before it forecloses and use the money to buy something smaller,” she said. Don felt ashamed.

They went together to look at one of those smaller houses. Dawn his daughter walked inside, but Don stopped on the porch.

“You go on in without me,” he said. “I need a minute.”

Don was so sick, just getting out of the car had exhausted him. He stood there feeling utterly defeated. No money. Twice divorced. Estranged from his kids. About to lose the house he'd built himself. Dawn his daughter had been buying him food. Even now, all he could think about was his next drink.

There was only one word to describe him, he says and that was “failure.”

“God,” he whispered, “please help me.”

*Why did I say that*, he wondered? For he wasn't a praying man. Yet at that moment, those words felt like his only lifeline, a crease of light in a door that was about to close forever.

He says he can't explain what happened next. It was like that moment when the guys played in the auto shop except on a whole different scale. All of the hatred and disgust he'd felt with himself just melted away. It was quite literally a physical sensation of release, a collapse of all his defenses. He felt vulnerable yet protected.

God didn't excuse what I'd done, Don points out. He says he let him know he loved me nonetheless, maybe even more for his brokenness, and forgave him. Unconditionally, so he could forgive himself. And he says he had no choice but to accept that love, that grace. It filled up all the painful places he used to try to drown with alcohol. He felt staggered by a sense of relief. He wept.

“Dad?” his daughter said. “Are you okay? Do you need a drink?” He was startled to hear himself say, “No.”

After that day on the porch, Don’s life unfolded in what he can only describe as a series of miracles. No longer poisoned by alcohol, his liver healed. He bought a small house in Virginia and found work in construction. For the first time since Vietnam, he allowed himself to ask why he had survived.

In other words, what should I do with this life God had given to me was the question.

The answer came in the form of a memory. His old banjo. He found it in the closet. He tuned it but hesitated before picking and strumming. Would he remember, he wondered? Don tried a few chords. He could still play!

But where? Not bars. He needed a different kind of place.

Just a few days later, he was on the phone with a friend when he mentioned a church gospel group that needed a banjo player.

“Well, I’m a banjo player who’s been praying for a gospel group,” he said.

He started playing at the church every Sunday. Standing in front of that congregation, making beautiful music for God, He felt as if he’d come home.

It wasn’t long before Don was making his own banjos. He wanted a life filled with music; and now on the right track, he uses his talent for God’s glory, giving away the love that he has been given.

Though it comes up no more often than other readings in our cycle, the story of the prodigal son is perhaps the most known story in the Bible. And all of us, like Don, go through life sometimes not understanding how much God loves us, or life just happens and we can drift away. And though we’ve heard it so many times, there are 3 things that are so important to remember that Don eventually figured out.

The first is that all we have is from God, and God is pure love. With God, there are no strings attached. Rather He gives us gifts; and at times we

misuse them. But when we use them for his glory, they can do so much to help ourselves and help others (more on that in a moment).

The second is that in life, sin disrupts this because we sometimes have a hard time realizing how much we are loved by God and how much we have been given. For Don, the pain of war left him scarred, and he wasn't sure how to deal with it. And so like the younger brother, he goes off. A better translation of where the younger brother goes would be a "big empty space" as opposed to a foreign land. This is where Don goes. He takes what he has and squanders it like that younger brother. He tries to cover up reality with escapism and alcohol, but eventually it begins to destroy everything that matters the most to him. Sin is so subtle. And in our lives, it's so important to be introspective; to not shame ourselves but to be honest, how did this happen? For some it's a silent addiction to this or that; or distancing themselves from God; or maybe becoming less loving and caring towards friends and family; or turning to things to make us forget about what we need to really look at. Like Don and the younger brother we sometimes can do things that ultimately destroy us in the end. The destruction of his liver was bad, but even more was the destruction of his soul.

The third is that God is always waiting for us, for He is pure love. Note how when he reaches rock bottom, what does the younger brother do? He realizes he can go back home and hopes to be at least a hired hand. But who is the Father? Someone who is waiting. He's looking, waiting for the son to return. And before he really gets any words out, the younger son is embraced by the father. Don had that moment when he asked for God's help. And much to his surprise, like the younger brother, in that moment God embraces him. Such is the power of God's mercy. We are sinners; we do some serious things. But we are so loved by God. Sometimes we have a hard time forgiving ourselves, or wonder will God understand; or we fall again having confessed something not too long ago. Through it all, God is always there to remind us how much we are loved. This is what the older brother has a bit of a hard time understanding. He sees the relationship as economic; I do this for you, you do this for me. But the father goes to meet him too, and says "all that I have is yours." Hopefully he believes that. Like the younger brother and all of us he's a sinner too; he's let anger creep into his heart. We need to think about him too because while he's doing some things well, I think there are a number of people in the world like him. People who view religion as a matter of doing their duty and nothing more;

or people who are quick to be critical of others, or self-righteous, looking down on people. It could be someone who sins and returns that they think they are better than, or even a mother with a fussy child who comes to Mass having the audacity to disturb their prayer. As I've said before, faith needs to be not a matter just of the head, knowing the responses and knowing what we've got to do which is avoid meat on Lenten Fridays and come to Mass on Sunday, but it has to be a matter of the heart. The older son does his duty, but while he is physically close to the father, he is in fact very much removed from him. The father though in love still runs out to him and pleads with him to come back to celebrate. "All I have is yours" he says; the language of grace. It's up to the older brother to hear it, and hopefully he eventually got it.

Lastly, there has to be a change. The parable ends with a bit of a cliffhanger; does the older brother come to the party? And how does the younger brother end up? For Don, he prayed, and he heard the response of God of love - but he responded. He knew that God had given him mercy, but also talent - and he gave it away; making banjos for others; sharing his music talent with his church; and setting things right with his spiritual health and in turn becoming a better dad. We all fall again and have setbacks. But

we also want to learn on the way how to grow; how to become a better person and learn from our mistakes and also learn how to love as God has loved.

So who do you want to be? Now is the time to get serious and to root out our sin and take off the masks we wear over our souls. We cannot put on a new cloak if we do not first rid ourselves of our ragged old cloak. We cannot receive a ring on our finger if our fingers have grown fat from the slop of pigs. We cannot receive new shoes unless we have cast off our old sandals in wonder and repentance before the majesty of God. Don needed to do that to become the man he could become. Like with the younger brother and with Don and all of us, God wants us to be truly alive. Hopefully like the younger son, we want to be found.