

As we hear in our second reading this week, there is a new Jerusalem, a heavenly city we are all invited to go to. But how does one travel the road to get there? Discerning right from wrong is a process. Pilate asks Jesus, “you speak of truth, what is truth?” and there is an answer. God gives us a conscience, and His Law, and the gift of the Church to help us learn the truth. But just as it takes time to learn how to read, it takes time to understand this law. Pilate had Jesus - God Himself right in front of him - but he could not recognize the love or the truth. How about you and me?

In recent years, one-time abortion activist Abby Johnson, now a practicing Catholic, has come to understand better what this means.

In sharing her story, she says that she always had a determination to help women in need. It was this desire that led her to a career with Planned Parenthood.

While there, she rose in the organization’s ranks and became a clinic director. She was largely not a participant here in active pregnancy terminations, but she writes one day she was asked to go into the exam room.

Abby looked up from her paperwork, a bit surprised, and said “sure.”

Though by that point she had been with Planned Parenthood for 8 years, she had never been asked to go into the exam room to help the medical team.

But as clinic director, part of duties were being trained to fill in any position in a pinch.

There was a visiting physician, one who had been to the clinic before. When Abby talked to him about his work, he said that at his own facility, he only used ultrasound guided terminations of pregnancies, as he felt this allowed the least risk of complications for the woman. It allows the doctor to see exactly what is going on inside a woman’s body. But it also added a half hour to the procedure.

Abby made her way to the exam room, and said she never liked going in during a so-called procedure. But she nonetheless pushed the door open and stepped in. The patient was sedated; conscious but groggy. Abby was asked to assist with an ultrasound probe. All the while, she said to herself “I don’t want to be here and take part in this.” And she said “it’ll be over in

just a few minutes.” But the next 10 minutes changed the course of her life on September 26, 2009.

She looked at the image on the screen, which was of course never shown to the mother. And she thought of another image she had seen; of Grace, her daughter, when she went in for an ultrasound at 12 weeks. Up to this point, she never wanted anything to do with ending a pregnancy. As odd as that sounds for someone working for Planned Parenthood, she believed the primary purpose of the group was to prevent unwanted pregnancies before they happened, and that Planned Parenthood actually saved the lives of women. But as she went through this procedure and saw it unfold on the monitor, she was horrified. She began to think about what she had done, asking herself what kind of damage she had done over the years through her words, counseling women to come to this place. She realized that when a loved one had talked to her about what she was doing, saying that her child was not a fetus but an unborn baby, that they had in fact been right.

She left the organization, and then began a new life determined to become an advocate for life in the womb and expose abortion for what it truly is.

This began after she spent a lot of time praying, and realizing the truth of the evil of what was occurring at the place she worked.

In the months that followed, Planned Parenthood did not take her exodus sitting down. They took action with a gag order and took her to court, but the lawsuit was quickly thrown out. She has frequently been a guest on various shows, and wrote a best-selling book, “Unplanned,” which focuses on her experiences at Planned Parenthood and her exit, and then it became a film. Above all else, she is a pro-life advocate. She became Catholic in 2009 and in part of her story that I found very interesting, she got a lot of flack from Episcopal Christians, of which she was once one. She was welcomed there as a Planned Parenthood employee, but not for being pro-life. The pastor of her parish took a very Pilate-like stance, saying that he was there to simply minister to all people no matter what their position on the issue was. Again, to borrow from Pilate, “what is truth?”

Well, Ms. Johnson is doing what she can to answer that question by helping people to see it. In fact, when she left Planned Parenthood, her goal was to just get a new job and get out; but after Planned Parenthood went after her legally, she decided she would not be scared into silence. Not only was there

the legal action, but she was also quite aware that shortly before she left, Planned Parenthood was increasing what they call “family planning” or ending unborn lives as a way to increase their revenue during the recession of 08. At the time that would run \$500, but as she points out there is no money in adoption or prenatal care. When she went to the regional director, her boss, she was told never to question what they do. She also learned how Planned Parenthood didn’t care about the women who came in, and would control employees through fear, for having where they worked on their resume would be like a scarlet letter.

Besides the prayer though, there was another reasons she left, and that was the presence of people peacefully praying outside of the Planned Parenthood facility through “40 Days for Life.” Its what our parish participates in with other Catholic Churches too twice a year. When she met with the people, she said she was welcomed with open arms. She had prior referred to the group as “40 Days of Harassment” when she worked at Planned Parenthood. She would even lie about them, as part of her job as clinic director was to make the people outside seem dangerous.

As Ms. Johnson puts it, “God opened my eyes” and she saw on an ultrasound what the effects of original sin had darkened. And as soon as she understood, she chose to fight it. Today, Abby travels across the globe sharing her story, educating the public on pro-life issues, advocating for the unborn, and reaching out to abortion clinic staff who still work in the industry. She is the founder of *And Then There Were None*, a ministry designed to assist abortion clinic workers in transitioning out of the industry. To date, this ministry has helped over 430 workers leave the abortion industry. Abby lives in Texas with her husband and eight precious children.

So how about you and me? How will we, like her, testify to the truth?

In this, I am not just speaking of the issue of the right to life. I’m speaking of the truth that God loves you. That God cares about you. That there are certain moral laws that are not forced on anyone, but that we are called to follow if we want to understand what love is. And that we need to come to know what love entails. It’s not easy; but by looking at our past, and turning our sins and struggles over to God, and taking our baptismal call seriously is something God calls us to do.

As we continue through the Easter Season and read through the book of Acts of the Apostles in our first reading, we hear how the young Church is growing. The apostles preach a new commandment: love one another as God loves us. And this Good News guides the lives of Christians from those early days to today.

Just as things were not easy for Abby after her conversion in how people turned on her, this is nothing new. Paul, Barnabas and the other disciples who established Christian communities in Asia Minor faced much hardship in their work. The hardship is all around us; in parts of the world missionaries are kidnapped; people are still imprisoned; and as the life issue becomes covered again with the possible Roe v. Wade overturn in coming weeks, there will be a lot of rhetoric and pressure on faithful Catholics to keep their mouths shut. Perhaps even people you've known for years will go from posting light hearted things on social media to decrying the so called "right to choose" being infringed upon. What then? Hopefully, a call to action on our part.

For doing nothing when it's tough, this this is not love. Love is not forcing our wills on others. But love is what brings about a true change; it's what

helped Ms. Johnson to change; and it's how souls are changed. As such, our faith needs to be a true journey, and we need to be a true fisher of men as we live out our faith.

The starting point is knowing that no matter what our past is, God loves us, and our eyes need to be opened to what lies ahead: heaven; the new holy city; a new Jerusalem as we hear in that second reading. The author tells us that "God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes...the old order has passed away...behold, I make all things new." This is the place belonging to God where death, mourning and pain are gone forever. This is our true home. And we are indeed welcome there; so as Abby did through prayer, and conversion, we know God's love for us is there. Our past does not disqualify us from God's love nor to from testifying to it.

But then, we need to grow in the faith. Abby went through a conversion, but then learned more about the Catholic faith. Sometimes we lose our way. So many people stop coming to Mass because they don't understand the reality of what they encounter there - Jesus Himself in the Eucharist. And, sadly,

so many people don't understand that the law God gives us is meant to fulfill us, to help us reach our potential, not to inhibit freedom. So, hopefully we think about our faith and why we believe what we do, so we can then proclaim it.

And this is perhaps the hardest part. How do you love people who are so hard to love, or so anti-Catholic? Having been at Planned Parenthood with parishioners, while I've never experienced shouting, I've seen looks of hate and expressions of hate on people driving by. What we have to remember is John 13:1: "Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end." The Gospel begins with Judas leaving; going out into the darkness. And yet Jesus washed his feet too. He also shared the meal with him, dipping the morsel of bread in the wine with Judas, showing how while He is not forcing love, He is doing all He can to reach out to Judas to try to bring him back. This is the background in which Jesus gives us the new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." This is how people know we are his disciples; when we love one another. We don't pick who becomes a disciple; Jesus chooses them. And what a hard commandment it is, for Jesus doesn't command that we love those whom we choose, but rather love one another. So as Christians, my hope is that this can be

manifested in how we live. Through forgiving those who have wronged us. Through praying for those who are at odds with what the Church teaches. Through bravery when we are counter cultural, knowing that it's our job to follow the example of people like Abby Johnson: to not keep what we believe a secret, but to educate, whether we are talking about the unborn, an issue currently on the front burner, what marriage really is, or to that family member who hasn't been to Mass since the last time there was a wedding or funeral. Love means saying "no" to your kids at times, or having a sit down with someone whom you're worried about in the lifestyle choices they are making. Love means not letting anger and hate take over our hearts, but a desire to help the people who like Judas leave the presence of God or never knew Him to come and find Him. We can't fear being disliked or hated for the Gospel if we want to convert minds and hearts.

At the end of Mass, we are sent out. It is worth pondering our 'going out'. We do not go out into the night as Judas did, but we do go out into a world where darkness remains and it can draw us. How many people lose their way in life little by little becoming angrier, sadder, or hostile. Yet we belong to the light, which the darkness cannot overcome. John's Gospel portrays Judas as one caught up in the work of Satan. Satan enters him and takes

him over. Our 'going out' is about getting caught up in the work of God, works of goodness and light, works that are from truth, that give life, and that have the shape of his way. Yet before this 'going out', we must strive to love one another. This loving of each other is nothing less than loving as he has loved us. It is the very ground of our witness to him in the world today. Some people are awfully hard to love when they hate us. But let us never forget, God loves us entirely and forgives us, and comes to us, and sends us to be His light in a world that can be quite dark. Like with Abby Johnson, God has a mission for us - and as this Easter Season reminds us, the powers of sin and darkness will never have the last word. So let us go forth and truly be not afraid to share the good news through our lives and through our words and actions, countering the lies of the devil that corrupt so many with the truth of God's love that invites all to come to the New Jerusalem.