

One of the things that we can sometimes overlook is how we each have the power to cause such a difference in this world for the better. Through our baptism and our relationship with Christ, we are sent; and as we are sent, through our words and actions, we can help people come to know God and come to know what it means to follow God. And, as we work with God, we can help bring forth an abundant harvest.

Born when most felt she would never even survive, today 45 years later a woman helping to do just this is Gianna Jessen. She came into the world as a surprise. Her 17-year-old mother knew she was pregnant. She also knew she didn't want to be, and so, late in her pregnancy, she decided to end it.

Jessen, then in the womb for 7½ months, endured a procedure meant to cause a still birth. But, she did not die that day. She was delivered alive in a Los Angeles County clinic that specializes in ending lives, not saving them.

Raised in California, Jessen lives in Nashville, Tenn. She has traveled the world since she was 14, telling of her experience.

Jessen spent her first three months in a hospital incubator. Doctors at the hospital did not expect her to live. But she did. She was then put in emergency foster care, before being placed at 17 months with a foster mother who would become her adoptive grandmother. Afflicted with cerebral palsy resulting from lack of oxygen in the womb, Jessen was “32 pounds of dead weight,” she said. She wasn’t expected to hold up her head, sit up, crawl or walk.

Her foster mother worked with her, who at age 3½ began to walk with a walker and leg braces. Today, she walks with a slight limp in her left leg.

Jessen has done indoor rock climbing and the Music City marathon in Nashville. She’s taken tango dance lessons. She also writes and performs songs, ranging from love ballads to social commentary.

“Never say never,” she said in a recent phone interview. “A person and God always have the opportunity to progress. No matter what point you are at, you can always do something, even if it is just the tiniest thing.”

On Christmas when she was 12, Jessen learned she had survived an abortion attempt. Before, when she had asked why she had cerebral palsy, her adoptive mother — the daughter of her foster mother — told her hers was a traumatic, premature birth. But that day when she asked, her mother decided Jessen was ready to hear the truth. She told her that her biological mother was young and without hope.

“I was aborted, right?” Jessen asked. Her adoptive mother confirmed it. Jessen was calm.

Looking back on that moment, Jessen says “It must have been the Lord, because I didn’t freak out. I totally believe that the Lord Jesus spared my life and I would not be walking today if it were not for the grace of God and the power of Christ. I know that when you need God to walk every day, you know that God is real.”

At that point, anger could certainly have taken over. But not for her. Jessen said she never dwelled on feelings of rejection, and someday wants to have or adopt children herself.

In the years that followed, she's met with other survivors, and been all around the world to help people think more about choosing life. She's helped counsel women too, encouraging them to think about their decision, and realize their motherhood and what they can do for their child.

Jessen is also conscious that examples speak louder than words. She often talks to young people about the value of chastity, modesty and honor. She wants to remind people that all of their choices have consequences. In her words "My biological parents made some really poor choices. I forgive them for what they did (but) I live every day with the result of the 'choice' that my biological mother made 27 years ago. So it's ridiculous to think our choices on a moment-by-moment basis only affect us. They always affect someone else, for good or ill."

Jessen is sometimes unprepared for the grief that pours out from others when they hear her story. "Women who have had abortions have come up to me crying, saying, 'I wish I had never done this. I had no idea the pain I would live with for the rest of my life,'" she said.

Men, too, have talked to her of feeling powerless or regretful about supporting an abortion. But she is there for them too, as Jesus was, not condemning but loving. She says “At the end of the day, I do a lot of listening. This listening has shown how God’s mercy is given to to all of us, as she helps people find hope and comfort.

Said Saint Mother Teresa of Gianna: “God is using Gianna to remind the world that each human being is precious to Him. It is beautiful to see the strength of the love of Jesus, which he has poured into her heart. My prayer for Gianna, and for all who listen to her, is that this message of God’s love will put an end to abortion with the power of love.”

Edmund Burke, the Irish statesman, is famous for saying “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for goodmen to do nothing.” And sadly, one of the greatest things that we face in our world is apathy; so many people who do not know the truth, because no one is willing to testify to it. For doing so is costly; we are reminded of this every time we look upon a crucifix, and see how the world responded to Jesus’ message. He loved, he forgave, but He also challenged, unafraid to testify to the truth. And when He did this, we often hear of Pharisees and Scribes wanting to kill Him;

when brought before the Sanhedrin and He testifies to the truth, the high priest tears his garments in anger and rage against Him. But at no point does our Lord back down. And, after the ascension when the apostles are sent, neither do they.

Our call as Catholics is to follow our Lord to evangelize too. As we hear in this Sunday's Gospel, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves." It's a very timely message. And urgent.

The 72 disciples are sent out to proclaim the Good News of salvation. He sends them as people on an urgent mission; they are not even to bring provisions with them. They aren't sure where they are going to stay. God will reveal where they should go and what they are to do. They need to trust God, and work with Him on the mission.

When I read Gianna's story, this is what she's done her whole life. Rather than take a horrific thing that happened to her as an infant, and become embittered, she has forgiven, she's taken her Christian faith seriously, and she's gone out into the world. Jesus shows us how God shares the word:

through human interaction. God wants his people to share in his work, and as the Gospel expands, so does the need for the number of workers in the field expand. That is you and me. Our job isn't to just sit here at Mass. It's to go out and proclaim our faith. So a question is how do we become evangelists? What does an effective disciple look like who goes into the world? To that, there's a few things to bear in mind.

One is a knowledge of the faith as a matter of the head and heart. As we go through our lives, we need to learn how to respond to love. The basics we learn hopefully right away are that we are safe and loved. But our parents teach us things; they set boundaries for our own good; they help us to see some things we think are good are actually bad. For a time we maybe think about being "grown up" and doing whatever we want, but what we come to learn is that our parents had wisdom. So it is with God.

Prayer is so important to inform the heart. We grow in love by prayer and spending time with Him. Prayer also helps us to discern how to go about our evangelizing and to know what God is calling us to do. Sometimes we may think we are called to this or that, but through prayer, we discern something else. In prayer, we can listen to the voice of God to give us

insight as to how we are doing as a parent or in our vocation; of what we should do next, or what maybe we should step away from. It's why we pray before all meetings we have at the parish - we go about our work, but we need to get the work order and learn how we are doing.

But we also grow in love by learning the meaning of love. What does it really mean to love my neighbor? What does it really mean to forgive? What does it really mean to say no to some things and yes to others? Here the successors of the apostles, the Church are there to guide us too through their teaching. But the question is do we know what it is we profess to believe in? Sometimes the Church challenges us. The issue of human life is a very serious one; a dogma of our faith, because ending unborn human life is always an attack on the innocent child. So too is being at Mass serious, not watching it virtually unless you're of course ill, but because receiving the Eucharist matters. So too is forgiveness. But the sad thing is some people are like those the disciples encounter who Jesus tells them to shake the dust from their feet in protest against - they don't want to hear the message, because it is hard. Sometimes that is us, because the Church is pushing us. So the first thing that we need is that daily ongoing groundwork so we think about our faith. We pray daily to come to know

God. We listen to the Church and dust off the catechism, or try to do some spiritual reading or watching some apologetic videos online; we consider the faith formation of the catechetical institute, or whatever it may be. You don't have to enroll in a course, but we as Catholics need to remember faith formation never ends. Pray about and wrestle with those things that are challenging, and trust the Church - Jesus didn't make a mistake when He created it.

Second is working with others. Note the disciples work in pairs. Last week, when I preached on Kristin Hawkins, I shared how her husband is her teammate and helps her in so many ways. Gianna works not alone but with the pro-life movement. As a priest I work with a great staff and volunteers who make our parish thrive. Parents work together to raise their kids. No matter what type of ministry and evangelizing we are called to, we can never forget it's not just us, but we work together for the greater good

Evangelizing also includes for one forgiveness and compassion; Gianna actually met her birth mother unexpectedly. She was at an event where she was speaking, and introduced herself. Sadly, it was not a positive experience. She was greeting people; and her adoptive mother met with

her and told her of Giannas forgiveness. Gianna said in that moment she prayed, and looked at her and said you must need to know I forgive you. Her birth mother said I do not want your forgiveness, and was full of hate; she said you are an embarrassment to this family. Gianna though said our battle is not against flesh and blood; and she is not who I fight against. Her adopted mom had no idea she would be that hostile. But here was a moment where she was truly like Christ. Gianna points out it was probably due to her birth mom's shame and inability to forgive herself. A good thing to remember with evangelizing is how do we meet people like that with forgiveness and mercy? It means trying to forgive those who have wronged us, but also reaching out to people who are hurting. With the life issue, the Church works to help people who are dealing with shame or remorse through retreats and programs like Rachel's Vineyard; there are similar programs for people in or transitioning from prison, going through recovery from drugs and alcohol. We always need to meet the sinner with love and compassion, not silence, and this is a powerful evangelizing tool.

Actions are also evangelizing. Think of what your actions say about you. Sacrificing for your kids. Being present at a funeral. Praying the rosary in front of Planned Parenthood. Going on a mission trip. Changing the subject

when the gossip starts. Treating people with respect no matter their politics or skin color. Showing patience as you drive. All of these are important teaching tools.

But, with that, so too is going out to proclaim the truth with words. And this is hard. There is also the challenge of going out and being counter-cultural. As Gianna says, you can't just blame others for what may have gone wrong in your life; in her case she wants to move forward helping others, which she does with forgiveness and action. There are a lot of people like her birth mother in our world; people who have been hurt by their own actions or are angry and bitter or who have shame, or are just angry about this or that and do not want to hear the truth. In one instance when she was brought in before a The Colorado Legislature as a guest to sing the national anthem at the start of a legislative session, she was applauded by all when the representative told others she was dealing with cerebral palsy and spoke of all of her medical procedures she had a 20 second standing ovation; but, not knowing the circumstances of her life, when the representative then got into how she was born, the speaker gavelled him down because there was legislation on the matter of unborn life before them that day. The representative was putting a face before them of what

they were debating, a resolution honoring the 90th anniversary of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains. Such is the reaction at times to the truth: you are sheep among wolves. But she is not afraid to speak to the truth. So how about us? What the Catholic Church teaches can be challenging. What Jesus says is often challenging. But is it our goal to be liked or tell people what they want to hear, or to tell the world what will bring them true happiness and salvation?

Sometimes in a homily, you will strike a chord with people, and they won't like what you have to say. Frankly, I take it as a good thing if I find someone is irked or angry at a message because it means they are hopefully listening and thinking. Nonetheless, I was a little taken aback last week when a visitor said there may have been people who have gone through abortion and my message was judgmental, and that I was, as he put it "taking a victory lap." Hopefully he wasn't just looking for a fight, but thinking about his faith, which is why he was at Mass. Admittedly, after four Masses and not a lot of sleep, I was in a James and John mood, not wanting to call down fire and brimstone but I would have liked to have maybe had a cream pie to hurl at him. But in all seriousness, what I did say was well, in my homily I explicitly talked about forgiveness and mercy to

help people who made that decision know they are loved. But the key word that bugged me was “victory lap.” The overturning of Roe v. Wade was a great thing, but the work goes on. It’s heartbreaking he doesn’t see it as a good thing, but it is no victory lap I was taking. The ending of slavery and the work of the Civil Rights movement were milestones in racism, but the work goes on. The confronting of the victims of abuse in the Church, and the greater awareness of what transpires in abusive families were milestones, but the work goes on. Because there will always be evil. Some people will see nothing wrong with taking life in the womb; people will victimize others and abuse them in families and in churches and schools; there will be human trafficking; there will be hate based on race. We see milestones, but we are in a marathon. And it all goes back to Edmund Burke’s famous quote. Are we going to do nothing, or are we going to, like Gianna, do something. For the devil certainly is. At a speech she gave at Catholic Charities of Denver, she once said “I want to leave beauty in the world.” The gala was called the “Beacon of Hope” gala, and we need to be that beacon - by being sent. By not being afraid to live out our faith, to forgive, to proclaim, to challenge, and to help others see what it means to truly be free and live in God’s freedom. By not being silent when we are aware of evil in the world or in our own family or neighborhood. On a

weekend where we celebrate our independence as a nation, hopefully we as Christians can help the world to see that so many who think they are free are actually enslaved to anger, to guilt, to shame, to choosing things they think are good for them that actually lead them to misery. By being sent, we can help people truly become free. So let us not be afraid to go forth, knowing that while at times we may feel like a sheep among wolves, we are never alone, for the Lord and other people are with us every step of the way. On our part, we just have to listen to God's call and remember now is the time to get to work helping people become truly free through receiving and responding to God's infinite love and mercy.