

Not too long ago, I saw the film “American Underdog” which tells the story of Kurt Warner, the Hall of Fame quarterback who went to 3 Super Bowls and was a league MVP, perhaps the greatest undrafted player in NFL History.

It was one of the most uplifting movies I’ve seen in quite sometime, as it has a lot of positive messages, but one of the themes in the film is the constant sacrifice - and the challenges - that Warner faces both as he strives to become a great quarterback and even more importantly a husband and father.

Barely getting playing time in college, he refuses to give up on his dream.

But one of the most interesting parts of the movie to me was the role of Mike Martz, who is the offensive coordinator of the Saint Louis Rams.

When Dick Vermeil, Rams head coach, sees tape of Warner playing arena football and invites him in to try out for the team, eventually accepting him to the team, Martz constantly is on Warner’s case; he berates him, tries to get in his head to make him think he’s no good or inept, criticizes him when the team is watching film. It seems he hates him, but later when he’s made the starter and throws an interception on his first drive, Martz calls him

during the game on the phone from the booth and says all that stuff I put you through, I had to make sure you could be up to the task of leading this team, and you can do it - you proved yourself. This is your team. Warner then goes on to win the game and lead the team to the SuperBowl.

In all of our lives, we need people like Martz to help us, because one of the toughest things can be recognizing the areas that we need to grow in, in particular in families.

Debra Joy, who is an addiction specialist, sees this all the time.

And in one particularly powerful story she shares, she speaks of a grandmother who seemed to have everything together, but inside was a mess - until her family did the tough thing, and came through for her so she could help herself.

The woman's name was Ruth; a loving, church going, 73 year old mom and grandma who was revered by her family. Her family not only loved her, they revered her. They told Debra that she, too, would fall in love with Ruth as soon as she met her, as she had a love that just makes you feel all good

and warm inside. At just under 5 feet tall, they said she had more capacity to give than anyone they knew. She volunteered at a hospital, food pantry, literacy program and church. She made beautiful wreaths to give to the men and women living in nursing homes so they would have something pretty to put on their doors. She was renowned for her talents in the kitchen and always had a full house of happy, well-fed friends and family. Ruth had a way of making people forget their troubles when they were in her company. She was everyone's ray of sunshine. It was hard to believe she was also an alcoholic.

Her son and two daughters were grown now, and they were reluctant to talk to their mom about her drinking. Confronting her seemed disrespectful they thought. After all, she drank infrequently, and the binges were easily pushed to the back of their minds during the periods of abstinence. But after their father had a heart attack, their mom's binges became much more frequent and dangerous.

Ruth began disappearing for days. She'd start drinking secretly at home, but after a few glasses, get behind the wheel and drive to another town. She'd check into a motel room and begin drinking uninterrupted. Her family,

thrown into panic, would call motels, hospitals and police stations. Her son would drive to the places she had discovered in the past. Everyone feared the worse until she was found.

A week prior, Ruth disappeared for two days. She was rescued only after teenagers working at a fast-food chain called the police to report a woman passed out on the floor of the restaurant. Her son decided the family could wait no longer. They had to help her before she had a terrible accident or died alone at a motel. He called Ruth and asked about intervention.

She explained how they would harness the power of love to intervene on Ruth's alcoholism, and, by doing so, preserve her dignity. They chose an older adult treatment center for Ruth so she'd be among people her age rather than younger adults addicted to street drugs. Over the next several days, the family team - Ruth's two daughters, son, daughter-in-law, husband and granddaughter - worked together to thoroughly choreograph and rehearse the intervention.

The day of the intervention, Ruth was invited to her son's house after church to celebrate her granddaughter Miranda's 20th birthday. The cake

was out, the coffee made, and the doorbell rang. It was Ruth and her husband. Debra greeted her and began the intervention by saying:

“Mrs. Williams, your family asked me to be here today because they love you very much and have something important they’d like to share with you.”

Debra told Ruth that everyone had written her a letter. She agreed to listen as her son began to read.

Letters were read with many tears, each person detailing what they loved the most about Ruth and recounting the ways she had helped them throughout the years. The letters also tackled the job of showing Ruth how alcohol was failing her. Each letter ended with a straightforward request: “Will you accept the help we’re offering you today?”

As Ruth listened, she alternately wept in gratitude and choked with pain. All the letters had a profound effect on her, but none more so than the one read by her 20 year old granddaughter Miranda. She wrote of how she and her grandmother had a special bond; how they would talk, solve the world’s problems, and how of how grandma was like a second mother, and that

she loved her so very much. And she told her grandmother she was here for her today because of this love. That when sober, she was as reliable as a clock; but when drinking, while she'd try to think "maybe this is the last," it would become too easy to pretend nothing is wrong - especially a week or so after a drinking binge. It is more comfortable for to concentrate on the good stuff. But after an incident last spring when everyone was worried about her safety and where she was when they couldn't find her, and she was so stressed wondering "What made her do it this time? "How bad was it?" "How long did it last?" "How far and where did she drive?" "Did she hurt herself?" "Is she at home or in the hospital?" "Is Granddad okay?" She also told her grandmother that while over the years she tried to hide it thinking Miranda wouldn't know, she always did; as did everyone in the family. But the most recent incident was when Miranda now an adult recognized when her grandmother had been drinking. She wrote: "The Thursday you started drinking this last time, I remember coming home and finding you sitting in the kitchen. Granddad was doing dishes, and you and I had a great conversation for about five minutes before I realized your laugh was a little too hearty, you were talking a little too much. The realization came upon me like a slap in the face. I actually backed away from you physically and could only respond in one-word sentences. I just

wanted to get out of there and forget what I was seeing. When Mom told me you had drank, it felt like a punch in the stomach.”

I don't have many memories of witnessing your binges. Instead, what I have is a feeling that is always with me. It is a fear that nags at me, “Someday Granny is going to die from alcohol.” A lot of the time, I rely on my denial so I can go on without going crazy from that thought. A picture that stays in my head is you lying dead in a snowdrift, having passed out after a binge. I read about a woman in her forties dying that way a few years ago. The image stays with me. Granny, I don't want to have those kinds of thoughts about you.

A few days ago, I started thinking about the fact that despite this devastating, debilitating disease you've been suffering with for nearly half a century, you've accomplished so much and deserve the love and respect of so many. You're really quite amazing. It takes a strong woman to do what you have done for so long in the face of a disease that kills so many. I know you can beat this disease, but that is not accomplished alone. If it could be done alone, you would have done it by now. But no one recovers alone. It requires reaching out to others.

So, will you please accept the help we are offering? The help I am asking you to take? we are together as a family and I promise I will do my part. Please take the first step toward recovery with us today.

Love, Miranda.

Ruth looked up at Miranda and through tears said “Yes, my dear, I’ll accept your help today.”

Everyone jumped and hugged Ruth and each other. After all the tears dried, they celebrated Miranda’s birthday with a piece of cake and a cup of coffee then everyone got ready to go with Ruth to the treatment center.

Before walking out the door, Ruth turned to Debra and said, “When I get the urge to drink, it’s like a locomotive is coming at me and I can’t stop it.”

Debra smiled and said to her, “but today, you’ve made the decision to get off the tracks.”

Miranda is right in her words “no one recovers alone,” and they do not just apply to someone who may be struggling with addiction, rather they apply to us all. For all of us as we strive to grow in holiness, as we strive to become the people we want to become, must do the work it entails for growth, be open to listening to the voice of God and our conscience and others, and also take the challenging steps of acknowledging we have family and friends who have struggles too, meaning we need to get involved in their lives to help them even if we fear upending the apple cart or someone or others in the family being upset, for only through the pain comes the gain - of eternal life.

This week’s readings are hard.

The first reading in Jeremiah tells us what happens to people who speak the truth; we are told that the princes say to the king Jeremiah ought to be put to death for demoralizing the people, for his message is one of the consequences of sin - namely that the Israelites should surrender to the Babylonians. His reward is he is thrown into a cistern. The point is that in a world gone wrong with original sin’s impacts, people don’t want to hear the message. And the same is true in our lives or the lives of others; it’s far

better to pretend all is well then to want to look at the truth which can be hard. And when we do speak up, be it talking about moral truths to others on social media or situations like Doris' family faced like Jeremiah found out, people may get defensive or angry. But it's the right thing to do for that growth.

This is why in the Gospel Jesus says He has come to set the earth on fire and how He wishes it were already blazing. Much like a fire is necessary at time to clean a forest of unhealthy trees, the same is true in our lives too. But the consequence of this is division; as such Jesus says "a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three," parents and children an in-laws all against one another. Now this is not to say family is not important; far from it, for remember Jesus remains at home until he is 30 and lovingly is with Joseph and Mary, and family matters a great deal to our Lord. But the point is that if we put God first, He will order our lives so we seek what is best for our families; so we will be willing to be hated at times if it means doing the right thing. When we chose God first and say I want to be with Him; I want to go to heaven, this will order all that we do and help us to persevere when the going gets tough.

So a few things to consider...

First, it starts with ourselves. Do we want to be just OK, or great? For this to happen, for us to become saints, we listen to God. We let God challenge us. We listen to our conscience. We pray and make time for silence. It is important to acknowledge the progress, but it is also important to think about what in my life am I not seeing right, or what can I do better? If we listen, we may find there is something we aren't paying attention to as much as we should; perhaps a sin we are ignoring, or we've become too greedy with time or money or short tempered or judgmental, or aren't loving others as much as we should. Listening to God's voice we can set out on the path for growth.

Second, we remember we are not in it alone. Ruth maybe knew she had a problem but was justifying it, but sadly she couldn't ask for help over the years. Some things we can do on our own, but growing in faith, hope and love require others. God is certainly with us, but so too are people who, like in Ruth's family, love us and are there to help. So let's dispense with the concern of what people might think, even in our families, and not fear letting someone know if we are going through something. Our loved ones

are there not just to send us a Christmas card, but to help us when we need them - so don't be afraid to give a different answer to "fine" when someone asks "how are you doing?"

Third, we have to be willing to intervene, to use the "tough love," to keep our eyes open to when there are problems. Most every family has issues, and it's hard to look at someone we love and see the flaws; we don't want to think someone has a drinking problem or a gambling addiction, or that our kid is the one who is the bully or someone is misusing the Internet addicted to sensualism, or that the arguing isn't arguing anymore but yelling and shouting and using hurtful language. But problems don't just magically go away, they'll snowball. Sometimes like in Doris' family we need others to join us, but other times its just important to lovingly talk to a person in a non-threatening, but caring way. Obviously in a situation of abuse, a person or persons need to separate immediately from the abuser; but more often it's a person just descending gradually into an abyss of bad decisions, or being blind because no one said "hey, this is a problem." If we love God though and want them to become spiritually healthy, we need to be willing to have them hate us because that is what love entails.

Lastly, we have to remember this is a long haul thing. In the film, Warner goes through a lot; he changes his style to trust his offensive line more in college and at practices gets hit again and again and again as he learns to release the ball quicker; he has to deal with the negativity; he has to mature as a person, and as he does so he not only gets into the NFL, but finds happiness in life through his marriage and faith. I've never played football other than with friends on the playground as a kid, but obviously football players especially quarterbacks get hit again and again. But the first thing you see a good quarterback do after an interception or bad play is to look on the sidelines at what happened on the tablet, learn from it, and get back in the next play. And much like Martz calling Warner and saying I believe in you, God does that to us every time we pray. Maybe we have a bad day; maybe someone we love doesn't seem to get it. But God never gives up on us, and may we never give up on one another. We go to confession. We own up to our faults. We pray with people and forgive. For when we do with God's grace such amazing things can happen.

Would that life were like the family photos we send out each Christmas that shows smiling and happy people, with a letter about the family vacation over the summer, what Jimmy and Susie are doing in fourth and seventh

grade, and how we were looking forward to all the fun stuff in the New Year. Life is sometimes like a Norman Rockwell painting; other times not so much. But what a great gift our lives are, and also what a great gift the people in our lives are. Let us together as the author of Hebrews tells us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us, and together run that race that lies ahead keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is waiting there for us at the finish line, on our part we just need a little help from one another to get there to see the race through to it's completion.