

If you were to hear the story of a man who was in and out of trouble his whole life, who was kicked out of the marines for assault, battery and attempted rape, and who turned to alcohol to deal with rage and envy, ultimately taking the life of his wife and her unborn child, you might think you heard all you need to hear, and that this man should be executed or at least locked up for life.

But, as a priest friend mine recently shared with me, God can do such amazing things with people when we turn ourselves over to Him, recognizing that aware of His love, we humble ourselves and reach out to have God help us, and then take that love we are given and try to use it for His glory.

Recently I came across the story of Brother Jim Townsend, a Capuchin brother who died in 2011, who's story is one of the incredible response to God's grace.

The Capuchins, who share the story on their order's website, note maybe some people are into the story because hearing about murders and criminals and victims and justice is fascinating. But Brother Jim never really

wanted to be sensation, they note. Jim wanted his story to be known because he wanted to let people know that our God saves, even if his salvation did not appear to him precisely in the form for which he had originally hoped.

Jim had a different childhood from most friars. His family wasn't a particularly religious, church-going family. He was born in Bristol, PA, a town in eastern Pennsylvania, on January 27, 1927, but his was not an easy childhood. His mother, was chronically ill and spent most of her time in a bed in the downstairs parlor of their home. His father, Patrick, was not a man who showed much affection and tended to treat his oldest son harshly. Perhaps as a dad, it was easier to treat the other four children more kindly. Jim was not a boy who took discipline easy. He himself would frame his childhood as marked by a rage against and an envy of his younger brother, Bob. Whatever the cause, Jim was always getting into trouble; stealing and fighting, in and out of the reform school. After his mother's death was in an orphanage, kicked out for stealing within a few months.

At the age of 14, Jim entered the Marines as World War II began, thanks to his father's ready signature on documents attesting to his being of age, but he continued to battle his demons and was court-martialed for hitting an officer while in training. Finally, he was sent to a juvenile detention center in Camp Hill, PA, on charges of assault, battery and attempted rape of a young girl.

Jim moved to Pittsburgh because of a parole officer he respected, just one of a few respected fatherly figures who would be there at important signposts of his life. Getting a job at Allegheny General Hospital, he met his future wife, Alice Moss. They married in 1947 in a small Methodist Church in Pittsburgh soon after which Alice became pregnant with twins. The couple moved to Ohiopyle, PA, to work on the farm of a kind police officer who witnessed Jim's talent for working hard and completing a job.

Unfortunately, a 19 year old husband who drank would not make an ideal husband or father. Jim's drinking only allowed his rage and envy to surface irrationally, and on November 13, 1947, he shot and killed his expectant wife with a deer rifle in the kitchen of their home. He was sentenced to life in prison and was consigned initially to Western Penitentiary.

The Capuchins note that a network news magazine story might end there: a story of the tragedy and despair of a violent man brought to justice. But God was just beginning to shape Jim's story, and shape Jim's heart. God's justice is mercy, and that fact had yet to reveal itself.

In prison, Jim's plan was to excel in good behavior and get his ticket out. He became the custodian of the chapel and would later work in the chaplain's office. Unwittingly, it was the first time he had to interact with prisoners on a personal level, hearing their stories and hearing so much of his own in them.

Everything came together at Rockview in that prison. It was there that he met another mentor and confidante, Fr. Richard Walsh. Having joined the Order of Secular Franciscans as a further attempt to play the part of the good prisoner, he was obliged to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. It was in confession at Rockview where he bared his soul and brought his shadowy past before the Lord. He found a brother in Fr. Walsh who heard his story and brought God's forgiveness and compassion. Nightmares of his wife and of a little boy in her arms, which tormented him from that dark day in 1947, ended.

After 20 years as a prisoner, Jim was paroled for his good behavior, and returned to Pittsburgh, PA. He maintained his connection to the Secular Franciscans, and actually reached out to joining the order.

Beginning as an associate member of the Province in residence at the friary in Brookline, both Jim and the community were given time to sense the genuineness of Gods call. Jim was invested as a Capuchin on February 6, 1972. He was 45 years old and spent his novitiate year with men who were half his age. Humility marked him; he was never paternalistic or treated the other friars as though he had more experience than they did. He was a brother to them, and they recall him with a smile. Jim had never been to college and he finished high school only in prison. But Jim worked hard and led them in tasks that they would have preferred to avoid.

Making his first profession of vows in 1973, Br. Jim was assigned as Director of Maintenance at St. Fidelis High School Seminary in Herman, PA, where workers were welcome. He prided himself on a well-waxed floor and clean cars. He found prayer to be a constant place for solace and for peace, and he could enjoy a good story in the colloquy room as much as a rosary prayed in the Chapel. He supervised the student work program, and

though the students encountered the details of Jim's story at some point in their years at St. Fidelis, they would only remember and know the friendly and humble friar who treated them with respect and kindness. If a student didn't know how to wax a floor, Jim would teach him. If he didn't do it correctly, Jim would do it for him, but you never heard Jim denounce or degrade someone for their lack of expertise. Yes, one would always risk becoming a part of his future story-telling, but he always talked about you with a smile and with a great respect for human diversity.

He made his perpetual vows as a Capuchin in 1976.

Br. Jim spent 40 years of his life as a Capuchin friar, known as a man of work and prayer. He mentored; he helped out at parishes, once showing up in the middle of the night when the sisters called him fearing a break in with a baseball bat to keep the church safe. He continued to touch the men in formation as a model and as a brother.

Br. Jim loved sinners too. Very early in his religious life, at the invitation and provocation of his friend, Fr. Walsh, Jim would regularly visit Rockview Penitentiary to talk to his fellow prisoners about his experience with the

Lord. It is said that he brought the hardest of hearts to tears as they heard their stories reflected in him and hoped for the kind of salvation that Jim had experienced.

He loved his prayer time and the opportunity for spiritual reading. He would visit the children of a school near the friary, and they would always find a warm embrace and a welcoming smile among them. His bout with colon cancer in 2001 was a blow to his energy and stamina, but only Jim would find a great opportunity for yet more tales of his colostomy and the various imperfections of medical apparatuses in its wake.

Health problems did not stop Brother Jim from his ministry to Rockview, where he continued to preach at the annual retreat. His dedication to the inmates of Rockview inspired the prison to rename the "Monsignor Walsh Award," which honors one prisoner at a banquet at the end of the retreat each year, the "Jim Townsend Award." It was a special honor for Brother Jim, who had received the award when he was a Rockview inmate.

Word of Jim's conversion story found a new outlet when a Lutheran Minister, the Reverend Paul Everett, visited the Hermitage and found the

witness so compelling. His work, *The Prisoner: An Invitation to Hope*, was published in 2004 and has been cited and quoted in innumerable homilies, high school Religion classes and, yes, in prisons.

Some people who did not know Br. Jim or had never met him would almost reflexively question Jims motivation and the genuineness of his conversion. One friar remembers substituting for a pastor whose parish was hosting Jim at the local CCD evening. When the students went home and recounted the story, the phone at the rectory continued to ring well into the evening with most calls lamenting how the parish would dare to invite a murderer and molester to speak to their children. Many would decry how a man “like him” could be in a Religious Order when he should be spending his whole life in prison. But they did not know the man the Capuchins knew; nor do they know the God they came to praise through Jims words.

He died on June 12, 2011. His good friend and confidante, Fr. Lester, spoke at his funeral of the Prodigal Son and of Jims own fear of trusting in a loving Father who might receive him despite his reckless living and the hurts he had caused. Trusting his Father took a lifetime, but in finding Him, the Capuchins note how Jim has shown them all a thing or two about

mercy and redemption. The love and support Jim felt from his Capuchin brothers over the years enabled him to become more convinced that God really did love him just the way he was: he was an Irishman who liked to exaggerate a bit in story-telling, and he was a hard worker who took pride in a polished floor.

So, too, does God loves us in the same way.

Throughout our readings this week, humility is a theme; Sirach speaks to us of conducting our affairs with humility and that if we humble ourselves more, the greater we will be; and Jesus tells us the story of the man who comes into a wedding banquet and sits in a lowly place and is then invited to a higher place. He then speaks of inviting all to the celebration you hold, doing things not for repayment but rather for love. It at first sounds like this Miss Manners advice column. But there's a deeper meaning here, namely that of God's incredible love we are called to emulate, especially through the power of humility.

Saint Catherine of Siena said that humility is the ground in which the tree of charity, the mother of other virtues, is planted and from which it is nourished.

All we have is a gift from God, even our existence is a gift. And we are all equal in this; be you Brother Jim Lester, or Padre Pio, or one of Arthur's knights of the round table who sat at the table so no one person was at the head. Each of us is made as a gift. So this starting point helps us to remember no one is better than anyone else in God's eyes, and we are each given this gift of love. We do not want to be like the judgmental people who called up the parish for daring to have in a man with a past, but rather love all as God loves us. How then, do we receive and give it?

Like Brother Jim, we first let go, and let God. Brother Jim in his life was in part turned into a person of anger and rage through the actions and inactions of other people in his family. This does not mean he bore no responsibility for his actions; far from it. But it was only when he came to know God in that prison, and really know God, not just going through the motions so he may get out early, that he was truly set free. It is hard to own up to our sinfulness; it is hard when we feel such pressure to present an

ideal image to others. But God sees into our hearts, and this should not fill us with fear, but with hope. However it entails humility; it means sitting with our conscience, going to confession, having that humility to say I am not perfect, here's what I'm battling, and to turn it over to God. It also means daily listening to God which is true humility. What is God telling you to do? Don't resist or let your ego get in the way. Surrender to His will and it will always lead you to happiness.

We can then, if we are willing, do what Brother Jim did love as God does, much of which entails a humble way of life.

For one, we remember, we are many parts and one body; no one is more important than the other. Last week, my dad went in for what we hoped would be an appointment showing he didn't have much to be concerned about, or at worst a simple procedure. It turned into having to endure a triple bypass. Thankfully dad came home last night, and though in a lot of pain, is walking more, eating again, and in coming weeks and months will be get back to the important work of spending time with his grandson. But one person who struck me was his surgeon at the hospital. A seasoned veteran, working there since 1987, he was a man of humility; he calmly

talked about how things would go without any sense of haughtiness or pride; he praised the team around him and the amazing nurses and staff; he even invited me to pray before dad went in, and set his hand on my dad as we prayed together for the surgical team and dad. What we do as individuals is important, but it is only working together we make this a more beautiful world.

Second, we ask for help. Sometimes that can be so hard; we are used to doing things a certain way, or maybe being the one who has all the answers. But sometimes there's something we can't handle on our own or do right; or maybe are overwhelmed, or struggling with a sin or spiritual battle. Brother Jim had to learn that and we all do as well - asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.

Third, we respect the gifts of others. At times we want to control people. Ego can sometimes get in the way especially when we have power at work or in a family. But the saint is someone who uses authority to bring someone closer to God; someone who helps someone find their gifts, recognizing their gifts may be different than our own and are unique.

And lastly, we do simple things with great love as Saint Therese of Lisieux would remind us. My dad worked his whole love very hard in school maintenance; he'd make sure the boiler was running perfectly, do anything a teacher needed, work especially long hours in August to prepare for the first day of school, and did so much for our family and extended family. Like Brother Jim I think he'd take pride in a waxed floor that looked great. But this was not for him; it was for other people; he wanted the kids and staff to have a great experience at the school. As Jesus tells us, we don't do things for anything in return, but for simply making this world a better place.

I only learned about Brother Jim after he was mentioned in an interview given by the actor Shia LaBouef, who recently did a film on the life of Padre Pio that is coming up. LaBouef is interviewed by Bishop Robert Baron, and LaBouef was in the news recently not so much for the film but for his conversion, as he said making the film inspired him to become a Catholic. Look online and you'll find stories about it, including some critical of LaBouef because like Brother Jim and like all of us he's made some mistakes. But in his interview, there's a point where he says to Bishop Baron before when I was an agnostic and living for myself, I believed society's message that you are in control and you have to get the career,

get a wife, put all the work into things and you can do it. As he put it your managerial skills could give you happiness. But his actions were not doing that. He threw up his hands, felt worthless, and descended into alcoholism, mistreating his girlfriend, and eventually hit rock bottom. But living with the Capuchin Friars at first to prepare for the role, it ended up changing his soul, because he realized how true happiness could be found, not in serving himself, but in serving God - the God who can do such great things with him, with you and me if only we reach out and trust Him, and work with Him to use our gifts for His glory. For when we do, as Jesus promised his host, this God will reward us, for he who lives in such love, lives in God and will live richly forever, affirmed and exalted by God, with a good place at the heavenly banquet.