

One of the things we believe as Catholics is that God sets the bar high, namely we are called to be saints - and we aren't quite there yet. We've got work to do, and that entails a daily growing in holiness, and trying to become a better person. And sometimes we can all get a little high on our horse, and need to remember two very important truths: namely we are running the race, but with that when we fall, God is there to help pick us up time and time again with His loving mercy.

In the mid 1970s, Carol Fleenor, the wife of a minister, moved to Karuizawa, Japan, a summer resort area at the foot of Mount Asama, in Nagano (home of the 1998 Olympics) with her husband to work at a missionary camp that his parents managed where people came to deepen their faith.

She looked as a bicyclist pedaled closer, his face unshaven, his eyes hidden beneath round wire-rimmed glasses. Hair spilled from his wide-brimmed hat. His clothes fluttered in the breeze. "How you doing?" he shouted, waving hello. A hippie, she thought, dismissing him as she walked up the busy street with her family.

He coasted past, vanishing down the road. Something about him seemed familiar. A minute later another bicycle raced by: a Japanese woman, with long, curly hair—and an unmistakable face.

“That’s Yoko Ono,” she said to herself. Oh, my...That “hippie” had to be John Lennon.

What are they doing here in Karuizawa?

Her husband, Stephen, was a minister and they moved to the Japanese mountain town five years earlier, in 1971, to work at the missionary camp his parents managed, a place where people came eager to experience a new world and deepen their faith.

But it was hard work raising their three young children, Becky, 7, Peter, 5, and Debby, 2, on top of the chores that had to be done. She cooked three meals a day for up to 50 people. Nights she set up the coffeehouse they ran.

“Come to the Power and Light Company,” read the signs they put up along the machi, the main street in town, inviting the community for free coffee, cake and conversation in English.

Missionaries had been coming to Karuizawa for years to enjoy the cool breezes coming off the evergreen slopes of Mt. Asama, the charming little shops that lined the machi, which sold cherry-wood carvings and kokeshi dolls.

The Japanese elite fell in love with Karuizawa too. Emperors, diplomats and entertainers built grand, Victorian-style homes with gorgeous moss gardens. That must be why John is here, she thought. He must own one of those mansions.

Carol says she wasn't a Beatles fan. Back in Oregon where she grew up, she adored Pat Boone. Beatlemania shocked her—the mopy hairstyles and the loud, raw rock 'n' roll. “We're more popular than Jesus now,” the papers quoted John as saying.

Carol was appalled. How could he be so arrogant, she thought? She wasn't surprised disillusioned Beatles fans burned their records in response.

Anyway, she decided to put the John and Yoko sighting out of her mind. “I’ll never see them again, I bet,” she thought to herself.

That Sunday, as always, missionaries from the different denominations in town packed into Union Church. Midway through the service, Carol heard murmuring in the back. She strained her neck to see.

A man and woman were walking down the aisle, looking for an open seat. Who should it be, but John and Yoko. They settled in, but the whispering didn’t stop.

“Who is that?” “He’s one of the Beatles.” “I didn’t know they went to church...” The minister cleared his throat, loudly, and everyone went back to listening to his sermon. But Carol couldn’t focus. What was John doing in our church?

Later that week Peter and Debby played in the sandbox in their yard. Carol sat in a lawn chair, keeping an eye on them while some people from the church were visiting. She just wanted to relax before she had to bake the cakes for the coffee shop.

Suddenly two bicycles slowed down at their house and pedaled into their yard. It was them! Their son, Sean, was sitting in a child's seat attached to John's handlebars. Stunned, Carol got up and walked toward them. What do I say to the most famous Beatle of all, she asked herself.

"I saw your signs on the machi and thought they were clever," John said, breaking the silence. "I was telling Yoko here that we needed to see what it was all about." The camp volunteers saw who'd showed up and quickly began gathering. "What are you doing in town?" Carol managed to ask.

"We're staying at a cabin owned by Yoko's family," he told her. It was crazy. John Lennon, coming here because he saw their sign?

One woman pushed in front. She had a reputation for being blunt. "I read about your divorce—how could you leave your first marriage?" she asked.

"What are you doing now that the Beatles have broken up?"

Everyone crowded closer. She expected John and his family to turn around and pedal away as fast as they could.

But John just smiled. “Right now I am putting my music on hold to spend time with my wife and son,” he said. The woman didn’t seem quite satisfied.

“Do you belong to a church?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m C. of E.”

A worried look came across the woman’s face. “The See...what?”

John laughed playfully. “The Church of England. Haven’t you heard of them?”

More questions came, and he listened to each, answering kindly and politely. He didn’t contradict anyone in any way. One of the most famous people in the world—notorious even, to some—in our humble yard, being scrutinized by people he didn’t know, and taking it all in stride.

Even Carol had to admit, she was surprised by his patience.

“How could you say those things about being bigger than Jesus?” someone asked. Carol had wondered that same thing myself.

John shook his head. “When we talk to reporters, we play around with them,” he said. “We’re just a music group. Don’t people know that Jesus is far greater than we are?”

Finally, the crowd seemed satisfied. Maybe he wasn’t just some arrogant rock star.

Just then there was a commotion in the sandbox. Debby had hit Peter with a plastic shovel. Carol knelt down to placate the two of them.

“How old are your kids?” John asked.

“Debby’s two and Peter is five.”

“Sean’s about the same age as your little girl, but he’s so quiet and shy. Maybe he could benefit from playing with a girl like that.” Carol looked at Sean as John reached down and gently ruffled his hair. In that moment,

John didn't seem like a hippie anymore—he seemed like any other concerned dad.

They talked a little more about their kids. Before Carol knew it, an hour had passed, and he, Yoko and Sean prepared to pedal off on their bikes.

“It's good to talk to all of you,” John said. “I've been looking for something this summer, something spiritual. I've been speaking with a lot of the missionaries I've met here, about life and what it all means. Thank you for your words.”

He waved goodbye—and Carol waved back as they rode off, little Sean perched on his daddy's handlebars.

Carol says she had made all sorts of assumptions about John Lennon—that he was arrogant, disrespectful, anti-religious, a rebellious hippie. But the man she met was none of those things. In fact, he was modest and self-effacing. Not like her idea of a rock star at all!

Carol never did speak to John again. But she hopes they helped him that summer. He certainly helped her, he says. He reminded her of why she

had come to Japan in the first place. To welcome people—not to judge them. And to grow in her understanding of the world.

As Paul says in our second reading, “Brothers and sisters, we speak a wisdom to those who are mature, not a wisdom of this age...rather we speak God’s wisdom, mysterious, hidden.” So what is true wisdom? Sure there’s knowledge of subjects. But we don’t just call someone who’s good at trivia wise. Rather, when we say a person is wise, we say they have a deeper insight into something, a knowledge into what matters most. Saint Paul had this deeper knowledge in mind. Wisdom is this right order found in the world created by God; a right order in our lives, that we seek for and live so as God wants us to. The kind of wisdom that gives us true happiness. Jesus shows us the path of right living, of how to truly flourish. And this kind of wisdom is what Jesus reveals to us on the Sermon on the Mount, which teaches us the perfect Christian life. The kind of wisdom John was looking for that summer of 1976 in Japan, and the kind that Carol gained from her experience with him as she grew up herself spiritually. So what about you and me?

In life, it is easy to be mediocre. To coast. How often do we maybe think “well I didn’t kill anybody” or perhaps compare ourselves to other people like those involved in some scandal that makes the headlines. But remember we are not called to just be average. We are called to spiritual greatness. This is why Jesus this week goes through some of the commandments and says “You have heard it was said...but I say to you.” He’s appealing to His divinity as God himself. He’s raising the bar, and he wants us to look more deeply at how we live out our faith.

Looking a little more deeply at that, it starts by going back to Paul’s words of speaking a wisdom to those who are mature...God’s wisdom, mysterious and hidden. We have to seek this out. John Lennon was one of the most famous people in the world, a multi millionaire. But he was seeking something deeper which took him to Japan. His spirituality was a journey, like it is for all of us. But sometimes we get caught up in the busyness, the running around, that we don’t take time to stop and reflect. Think for instance of the opening words to the first reading, “if you choose, you can keep the commandments.” Are we choosing to do that, or just some of them? A good thing to do is to dig deeper; go through each one; do a good examination of conscience; take your faith to the next level. You need not

go to Japan or do a four day darkness retreat like Aaron Rodgers, but perhaps just a few moments each day of silence and reflection; or at least once a week going through each commandment and thinking about them more deeply.

Jesus picks out a few teachings to do just that with.

He begins by saying you shall not kill, but then says if you are angry with your brother, or harboring grudges, first make peace. Jesus sees anger as a form of killing. So maybe we ask where is anger in my heart? Have I strived to forgive? Do I hate over race or politics? Do I gossip or tear others down? Even Carol needed to grow in this, as she jumped to conclusions about John Lennon, as did the member of her congregation who jumped to noticing the splinter in her brother's eye before the wooden beam in her own when she judged Lennon and his first marriage. Lennon though showed tolerance and peace in the true sense of the word. We need to ask is anger taking over and turning into the sin of wrath? Am I dealing with it in a healthy way by talking through my disagreements with someone? Am I becoming an angry person and passing this anger on to my spouse or my kids?

Jesus then touches on adultery; divorce was common in His time and it was very one-sided; the man could present his wife with a bill of divorce. Jesus though recognizes the sacredness of marriage and gives us here a theology of the body. Certainly some marriages do have to end because love as we live it out as humans is flawed; you have situations of abuse, or where a person is not living out their vows. But married couples also have to challenge themselves to communicate, to forgive, to work on things when there are rough spots. And all of us have to be mindful of adultery in our heart. Certainly there are temptations and thoughts; you cannot control these any more than you can the clouds in the sky. But how often can a person just say well it's private, it's just here on the screen or on the magazine, no one knows about this, no big deal. Well it changes how we look at other human beings and interact with them. We have to remember, Jesus tells us, we are body and soul.

Lastly there are oaths; an oath being a solemn promise. Jesus does not simply advocate making sure one's oath is honest; rather he's opposed to oath taking because his reasoning rests on the necessity of integrity when dealing with other people. People of integrity value honesty and are

committed to truth that does not need oaths. Yes means yes, no means no. So again, how about us? Are we honest? Or do we lie? Do we speak directly to people (and God) about what is on our hearts and minds, or do we tell people just what they want to hear? Do we keep promises? Do our actions correspond to how we live our lives? How easy it can be to slip up here and make it a way of life; from lying to mom and dad about doing our homework or cleaning our room, or lying to our spouses about something more serious like finances or not following through on a commitment.

The point in all of these is that Jesus wants us to dig a little deeper. To not just say “all is well” but to truly grow in holiness. The good news though is we have our Lord with us every step of the way. He challenges us to be perfect, but also is there with His divine mercy and love to pick us up when we fall. May we keep our eyes on the goal, knowing that while the training is tough, it will bring us true happiness and spiritual greatness. May the feast we now prepare to celebrate in the Eucharist help us walk in the ways of Jesus and to speak words of truth and love.