

Over the course of our lives, all of us come to know what hurt and pain are like. And often the worst kinds are the kind that are inflicted upon us by other people. A bully at school. A parent who doesn't live up to their vocation, or worse, is abusive. Cruelty from a boss. A spouse who isn't loving. A relationship with an adult child that falls apart. And then there are the added things that happen in the world; when we are gossiped about or hated by people at the office, or on social media; or when people find out our politics and instantly dislike us, or judge us.

Indeed, the world can be a very hard place. I know I find myself often just cherishing alone time, or time with my dog, because as every human friend of a dog can tell you, your furry friend will never burn or betray you.

In this though I know it could become easy to become jaded; to give up on humanity or just retreat and become reclusive with a small circle of people, not wanting to be hurt. Or, at times we might hunger for revenge or want to get back at people who wrong us.

All of this is understandable; but for the Christian, when we look at a crucifix, we are reminded of what we as humans did to our Lord, and how

He chose to suffer and die anyway to show us how deeply we are loved; to meet violence with mercy and compassion. To bring good out of the darkness of suffering on Good Friday. And, as followers of Jesus, we are given a challenge to do this too. To not give into the cycle of revenge and anger, but to respond to the darkness in our world with mercy; for when we do, what a difference it can make.

Some years ago, a woman named Patty Rose left home at the age of 18, and she was certain she'd never come back. Many years went by. And one day, she received a phone call.

The phone call came one cool winter day. It was the manager of the trailer park where her father lived. "Mrs. Rose, something is seriously wrong with your father," he said. "Would you come down here and check on him?"

It had been a long time since Patty had seen her father, and she wasn't in any hurry to change that. She had left home years ago and never looked back. She married a good man and raised a wonderful daughter. She had her own life now—one that she had worked hard to build.

Ever since his divorce from her mom, her father had lived alone in a small trailer in Southern California, 500 miles away from Patty.

The real distance between them though seemed so much greater. Yet somehow she heard herself promise the manager, “Yes, I’ll be there tomorrow.”

The whole drive down, memories flashed through her mind. Memories of the hurt she’d tried to put behind her. She remembered her father, the proud Marine, imposing military order on their household.

Making sure the first song she learned was the Marine Hymn. Snatching off the Christmas tree all the ornaments the rest of the family had put up and rehanging them so there was exactly the same spacing between them.

She remembered the battles he had with her mother and how their near-constant fighting was the soundtrack to my childhood.

She remembered longing to hear her father say just once, “I love you, Patty” only to have him yell at her, “You can’t do anything right!” so many times she actually believed it.

She remembered why she’d walked out the door at age 18, then left the area entirely in her late twenties, telling her dad, “I never want to see you again.”

And now here she was standing outside his trailer, trying to work up the nerve to face him one more time. She knocked on the door, her hand, her whole body, shaking. No answer. Slowly she opened the door. She took a few steps inside and stopped, absolutely stunned.

Her father was sitting on his sofa, looking confused and crying. This wasn’t the angry, controlling man she had known growing up. This man was stooped and fragile and smelled like he hadn’t taken a shower in weeks. He seemed broken somehow.

Part of her felt sorry for him, but another part of her was thinking this was exactly the fate he deserved.

She looked around. Everything was in disarray. Papers were stacked up everywhere. Rotting food sat on the counter. The stench was so sickening she had to go outside and get some fresh air. She stood on the porch, overwhelmed by what she'd just seen.

"God, what am I supposed to do now?" she wondered. But as soon as the words escaped her, a sense of sorrow overtook her, and she knew what she had to do. Patty went back inside and packed up some of her father's things. He was coming home with her.

Not permanently, she told herself; she figured she'd take her father to the hospital, and the doctors would find out what was ailing him. She would have someone come in and clean out the trailer while he was getting medical treatment.

As soon he recovered, she'd take him back there, and her life would return to normal. The sooner, the better, as far as she was concerned.

But things didn't go the way she planned. The hospital staff did a whole series of tests. Finally a doctor called her in and told Patty the diagnosis: Alzheimer's disease.

It didn't quite register at first. The doctor went on, listing the reasons they had come to this conclusion and explaining the likely progression of the disease. "At this stage, your father can no longer live on his own," the doctor continued. "He's going to need some assistance."

All of a sudden the reality of what he was saying hit her. She panicked. There had to be a mistake. "Isn't there some medicine for him to take so he can get better?" she asked. She was sure he could hear the desperation in my voice.

The doctor shook his head. He didn't have a lot of answers.

Her heart sank. Her father wasn't going home to Southern California. Not anytime soon. Not ever. He was her responsibility now.

Back home, Patty told her husband the news. Her dad would be staying on with them indefinitely. "It's okay, Patty," Dennis said. "We'll manage."

She wished she could believe that. Instead, her mind roiled. How could God allow this to happen? Why was he asking her to take care of the man who never took care of her? It was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. This just wasn't fair.

Fair or not, though, it was happening, and Patty had to learn how to deal with it.

The physical tasks of caregiving—cooking for her father, helping him with shaving and bathing and dressing, keeping an eye on him so he didn't wander off into the road or accidentally hurt himself—those she managed to handle, with a lot of help from Dennis.

It was the emotional part she struggled with. The days of looking after her father turned into weeks, then months, and her resentment grew. Every night she battered God with complaints.

“Why did you put this burden on me?” she demanded furiously. “Nothing’s going to change. He’s always going to be the same hard-hearted man who made my childhood miserable.”

Not that he had the ability to carry on long conversations, but she could hardly bring herself to say anything to her father beyond what was absolutely necessary for his care. The more forgetful and confused he became as the Alzheimer’s progressed, the angrier Patty grew inside.

One night she was putting my litany of complaints before God as usual. “He ruined my childhood. He was angry, bitter and hateful.” Only this time the words reverberated in her head. Angry, bitter, hateful.

Was I talking about my father, she asked herself? Or was I talking about me?

She tried to push the thought away, tried to remind herself of every hurtful thing her father had done to her growing up. But all she could think about was her own hard heart.

“Oh, God, I am so sorry,” she said. “I’m the one who’s angry and bitter. I’m the one who’s been acting hateful. Please help me. Help me change!”

Then it was as if the floodgates opened. All the pain, the conflicted feelings she’d been holding back over the years came rushing out. She sat there for quite some time, crying, talking to God, asking him to help her let go of the ugly feelings she had toward her father.

Patty didn’t even have the words to explain everything, but she knew God heard her. Because when she was finished, she felt an incredible peace, as if every burden had been lifted from her. She wasn’t angry at her father anymore. She wasn’t bitter. Forgiveness had cleansed all that from her.

For the first time, she was free. Free of the pain of her past. Free to start living the joyful life God wanted her to live.

And that life, Patty knew, included her father. From then on, she made a real effort to connect with him. The nature of Alzheimer’s meant her dad would forget some very basic day-to-day things yet his memory of long-ago events remained as clear as a bell.

So she asked him about his boyhood and his service as a young Marine in World War II. He had never talked about these things when she was growing up, and she began to understand why.

She discovered how her dad had been traumatized by war. She learned that he too had had a painful childhood. His father had taken his own life, and that loss was so inexplicable to him, Dad had never been able to get over it.

When he told her about his father, her dad sounded so young and frightened and vulnerable. She took him into her arms and held him like he was a lost little boy.

To counterbalance all his painful memories, she told him about the many blessings in her life—her marriage to Dennis, her daughter and granddaughter.

She took Dad everywhere with her, to church, to ball games. She spent hours with him, just talking to him and holding his hand.

Something truly wonderful was happening between them and Patty didn't want it to end. She only hoped that her father could feel it too. She could never tell what he understood with the Alzheimer's.

Until one day at dinnertime. She set his plate before him. Her dad looked up at her. "Thank you for taking care of me," he said, the words coming slowly but clearly. "I love you, Patty."

At the time she wrote the story, Patty says it had been eight years since her father died. Now when she thinks of him, those are the moments she remembers. Those moments of, as she put on Dad's headstone, God's amazing grace.

Grace is indeed amazing; but it's up to you and me to cooperate with grace. To put God's love into action.

As Jesus says, God makes his sun rise on the bad and good, and causes rain to fall on the just and unjust. The sun shines on all because that is its nature; to give light. And the nature of God is love. It's not given in different

amounts based on the worthiness of the individual; rather it shines on all. Love is not conditional. The love of God is a radical love.

And such is the challenge that Jesus gives us in these words, for as humans, we are so prone to resentment and anger, or getting back at those who wrong us. Indeed the limitations on this that we get in Leviticus; of just say taking an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth were seen as a big step forward, as most would subscribe to the wisdom of Officer Jim Malone, Sean Connery's character in *The Untouchables*: "They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue; that's the Chicago way." Perhaps good advice for dealing with Al Capone, but if you think about it a way of thinking for humans up and down through the centuries. At best, we might think well I won't escalate it but I'll eliminate this person or not think about them at all. And who could blame Patty for wanting to get out of a tough situation? To be sure, there are many situations where a person needs to separate from a family or a relationship; you have lots of situations of abuse or that are just toxic. But more often than not, what we find is there is more to the story. And that deep down is the good that has just been covered up by the sins of others or life. To borrow from another Kevin Costner movie, *Field of Dreams*, he

like Patty ran away from his father as a young man, but he sees him differently by the end of the movie when they are reconciled. So what is Jesus inviting us to do? To have this radical kind of love; go above and beyond. Because what happens when we do that? The answer is we surprise people with compassion, if only we are courageous enough to offer it. When we offer forgiveness and compassion to those who offend us, it's a great act of love because it opens the avenue for reconciliation and even more than that a person changing their heart. Offering your enemy both of your cheeks gives them only two targets and maybe causes them to think about remorse and conversion. Sin and anger burn white hot; but eventually it dies out. Compare this to the love of Jesus' Sacred Heart, which is now ours through grace, and as such we can live out the commandment Jesus gives us to love our neighbor as Jesus does. So how can we do this?

It starts with an interior change. We are not going to love everyone thinking all are great. We will always have differences, and that is OK. But we need to look into our hearts and ask ourselves where is my tendency to be angry with others? Who do I hate? Who do I need to forgive? How do I let this anger fester? Who do I need to love more deeply as hard as that is? It

is important to acknowledge that anger is sometimes justified; maybe like Patty you were not loved by a parent or family member as you should have been. Maybe someone wronged you. But sometimes we can just let anger burn and burn at people in the family, or former friends, or with others over politics or other disagreements and no good comes of being perpetually angry. The feelings have to be confronted though and dealt with. The Cross of our Lord changes rage and fury that come from sin into love and mercy. And through grace, the Lord's Heart can become ours too if we open ourselves up to that grace.

It then continues in how we spread this into the world. Practically speaking, there are ways we can do that. We can think about what we write on social media. We can bring joy and peace to people by doing something like writing a note of thanks on a receipt at a restaurant; by saying something positive to a person working in the service industry; by using patience on the road; by changing the subject when people start gossiping; by praying for others living and dead who maybe are people we don't like. In many simple acts of mercy, we can do great things.

And then perhaps the hardest thing - with the people we know, situations like Patty's. Family members, close friends, these relationships can be complicated indeed. Sometimes truly no contact is best for a person's welfare and safety. But more often than not there's an argument that has gone unresolved; or a person was not as loving as they should have been, and that was passed down as Patty's grandfather passed it to him. But in Patty's story, what happened was the transformation of two people and peace that led her dad to finally say "I love you" and Patty to be truly free. Especially as we begin Lent, maybe a good thing is to think about how we can love our families more; how we can be more patient and kind; how we can talk about the past rather than bury it; how we can try to reach out to those with whom we are estranged, first by praying for them or asking God's help to try to find peace, and maybe reaching out with a letter or a phone call or invitation to lunch. Each of us has the power to do such amazing things with the grace God gives us.

As you know, I'm a dog lover, and a dog, especially a golden retriever, is easy to love because with a dog there is no catch, no asterisk, no angle; just love for you (and perhaps a tennis ball and treat you have in the fridge). People are more complicated, and in life, there are people who

won't love us back. But can we give our love to them too? Can we love as Jesus does? God wants us to not just be ordinary, but like Him, who makes His love shine on the good and bad. May we do the same, and use that love to change ourselves, and one another.