

Most of us have heard or sung “Amazing Grace” in our lives, and maybe you are familiar with the line “I once was blind, but now I see.” The line probably was inspired by John Newton’s own faith journey from agnostic and rebellious to gradually seeing the truth of God’s love for him, and then living it out as an apologist or defender of the faith helping to change minds and hearts in his fight for abolition in England.

Indeed, in all of our lives, coming to see is a process. But it’s also a process that once we see, can be very challenging, for Old Scratch or the devil is working hard like a prowling lion seeking the ruin and destruction of souls.

Like so many each year as we journey to the Easter Vigil, Jessica H., as she shared her story, came to see the truth and decided to become a Catholic. But much like the man born blind in the Gospel in his confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees who throw him out of the synagogue, her decision to become Catholic caused friction in her family as well.

As she shares her story, she shares how her parents were both raised religiously, but took the term very loosely, especially as they got older. They were married in a baptist church, but as the years passed they became less and less involved. They were married for about 7 years, had 3 children by that time, when Jessica's father had a "near death experience" when his motorcycle went off of a bridge and into the water below. He had been wearing an actual Crucifix for a few years, (Jessica was not sure why he was wearing it, since he admittedly associated it with Catholicism) and when he hit the water, it broke off from around his neck, and he couldn't find it in the water. He soon came to take this as a sign (again, strange that he would believe in signs at that time) that he should look into renewing his faith in the Baptist church.

He was a heavy drinker and smoker before the accident and soon after attending his 1st service he threw everything out, even shaving off his facial hair and getting a close cut hairstyle. Her mother despised this new behavior and for the next 3 years, their marriage was crumbling. She thought of divorce daily, especially when her father decided he had been "called" to be a Baptist Minister. One day she broke, when to church with him, and came home "saved". She threw out all of her cigarettes, alcohol

and even pants (the church they went to said it was sinful for a woman to wear pants).

He became a minister in 1982, the year Jessica was born, and soon took over for the residing minister for retirement. Along with the actual church itself, came the parishioners. The vast majority stayed for only a little while - until they realized he was a tyrant. He demanded insane rules, (particularly where women's clothing and behavior was concerned) and extreme loyalty, such as: No spiritual discussions outside of his sermons for fear they would come up with ideas of their own. Very soon everyone except about 2 families remained. Through the years, up until Jessica 18, he chased countless families away, each time anyone questioned his "God-given" authority.

Skip to Jessica: she had been questioning his teachings since I was a small child, (to the point of receiving punishments and unfair treatment for not taking what he said as Word)...specifically his teachings about women, which was misogynistic, and his hatred of other races, and Scripture in

general. A lot just did not add up to her. She was never interested and became less and less involved.

She met who is now her husband at the age of 19. Directly following their first date, she told her mother she would end up marrying him...her mother almost passed out - why? He is Catholic and Middle Eastern. She immediately told her father, and she was lectured for the next hour (or more) on how "evil" Catholics are, how they are not even Christians, and also how "horrible every Middle Eastern person" is. For whatever reason, Jessica ignored it all, and continued seeing this "evil" Catholic man. To make matters worse, her boyfriend (at the time) had studied for a couple of years in a Monastery in Lebanon to become a monk, then at a Seminary in the States, and had only left the seminary a year earlier when he realized he really wanted to marry and start a family...So you can understand her parents' "fear".

Even though Jessica had always questioned her father's teachings, she was still skeptical of course. So when talk of religion came up between them after only

2 weeks of dating, Jessica was adamantly stubborn and argued every single point she had been taught all her life. She even asked her father for pointers, hoping to gain his admiration. Soon though, all the points her boyfriend was bringing up fell into place and increasingly made perfect sense. Jessica says was still very stubborn and fought it for a few months. During these months of fighting the faith, she did her own independent research. There was no way, after growing up in an oppressive faith and household, Jessica was going to jump onto whatever my boyfriend was trying to "push".

Her father lost his supplementary job after 35 years, (with having only 2 families supporting his church, he needed supplemental work) and became even angrier. Strange super-natural things started happening at their house. Jessica would be awakened in the middle of the night to some of the most horrible, noises. So her boyfriend (husband now) secretly brought her a Rosary that she discreetly carried, a Crucifix that she taped behind her dresser on the wall, and a small Benedictine Crucifix which she placed under my pillow. All of these things she firmly believed in, even before she outwardly admitted that she would convert.

They got engaged 6 months after their 1st date - her parents were livid. Her husband's father suggested they let her father marry them, to try to make some peace; Jessica thought this a bad idea, but so desperately wanted peace. They told her parents that they wanted to be married by her father, and then the following year after her full conversion that they would be having a second marriage in the Catholic Church. They strangely accepted this.

As the second wedding approached, the subject came up and a huge, horrible argument occurred where her father threatened her husband and her husband's father; and told Jessica he, along with the rest of her family, would have nothing further to do with her. Jessica though and her husband had their beautiful Catholic wedding...without her family present. They made an attempt at peace a year later, things were OK for about another year, then practically the same thing as before happened...only this time it was while she was in the hospital, with a life-threatening, two-month early, emergency delivering of their 1st child.

At the time she wrote her story, she still had not heard from her parents. But she says I was a sheep that heard and recognized the voice of my

Lord. How beautiful it was to see the love, devotion and respect paid to Our Lady, when I came from a faith that saw her as simply a "vessel" to carry Jesus, and that is supposedly where her part ended. How easy it was, with being taught that women were nothing, for me to buy the teaching that Our Blessed Mother was practically nothing. Now, she is my only Mother...and God is my only Father. And I am perfectly OK with that, I live for what may be after this life...I do not live for this earthly life.

She shares her story with others because she too, wants others to see.

Hers, like the man in the Gospel, is a story of gaining sight. But it's also a story that is much like the man born blind because for the person who has faith and can see, they will often face adversity and trial, much like the man in the Gospel.

The starting point is darkness for the man, which is all he has known. Such is the case for all of us; without God, we are in the dark. To quote Mary Poppins, there are many people who can't see past the end of their nose. To the world, they may appear to have it together; they may be successful, have the "good life" but how many are spiritually blind like the man.

Enslaved to various sins they can't control and have taken over their lives. And even through original sin, like a child born to a drug addicted mother, that is humanity without God. This is where Jesus enters the picture to give us the light of his love and mercy.

He makes mud paste by spitting on the ground and rubbing it in the man's eyes; a rather odd thing it would seem. But the deeper meaning here, as Saint Augustine saw it, was the meeting of the divine and the human. Jesus rubs the earth and when the paste is placed on the man's eyes, the sight is there. This is the part of the journey where we begin to see. For Jessica, it was her conversations with her future husband as he helped her, and then her reception into the Church. It's what the candidates and catechumens, who this week celebrate the scrutinies, have been doing as they study the faith. It's what we do when we think about the faith and celebrate it in the sacraments, which have elements such as bread, wine, water and oil. It's what we also do when we come to Mass and think about our relationship with God, and when we go to confession. Much like I've had to regularly visit an eye doctor since I was a child to fine-tune my prescription, so it is with our faith as well. Note the end of the Gospel when he says "I do believe Lord" and then he worships Jesus. Jessica's father

may have had a moment where he wanted to see like the blind man. But he became blind by his pride, his ego, by his bitterness that drove away people and made him blind to the truth, much like it did for her mother. So it's worth asking ourselves how is our spiritual vision? Is it getting clearer and better, or are the cataracts of sin and poor choices or laziness setting in to cause us to become more blind to what it means to really live out the faith?

And lastly, the man worships Jesus, but notice what happens in between. The trials. You'd think others would rejoice and come to believe having just seen a miracle. Not so much. He goes home and tells his friends, and they do not believe him, but instead snitch on him to the religious authorities. Then the authorities won't believe what ha happened. They, much like Jessica's father, believe they know how God acts in the world and so they think the man is a liar. They reject his story, and they reject God's invitation to a deeper faith. Jessica though who resisted at first came to see this truth and so let the faith grow. And much like Jessica, the man did not recant. Even the man's parents do not tell the authorities what they want to hear, and so as the man sticks to the truth, they kick him out of the synagogue. This reminds us of how our faith is costly. And that cost comes in many

ways. It's hard to believe how a parent would disown a child who is living a good life and simply wants to become a Catholic. But think of the hostility people face both in families and in the world. The easy way is to be Pilate; to wash our hands of a problem. But this is not what we are called to do; remember we are sent out. And this can result in friction. Blindness comes in many forms. Some are blind to the need for change in their lives, or in a parish and become stubborn, not open to growth, so things that need to change or end don't, and new things don't emerge because of all the weeds in the garden. Others are blinded by hate; I think of the hate some people show people who pray at Planned Parenthood. Others are blinded by lies of culture and society. I think of a recent viral video I saw of a young woman, about 14, who was sharing to the world how awful her grandmother was because she calls her by her birth name when she now wants to be a boy; but she shared her grandmother's letter that said I love you, always will, and I pray for you at Mass every day as do others in the family, you'll always be my granddaughter and you're just going through some confusion right now. What that grandmother is doing is living out the faith. Because on so many things, we live in a very blind world that redefines morality and what happiness is, and acts like the Pharisees who want the formerly blind man to shut up. Hopefully though as people who

can truly see, we can help others to do the same. It is our job to be sent forth to give water, light and life to a world that needs it very badly. We needs to be the hands and voice of Christ. And again, how there will be friction. You can't do that, we've always done it this way. Who are you to tell me what to do. Shut up, go back to your church. Online shaming. But how far are we willing to go to help create a saint? The devil prowls the world seeking the destruction of souls. You and I have a call to action. So let's get going.

One of my favorite shows of all time is the Andy Griffith Show, and in an episode where Opie befriends a carefree hobo who goes from town to town living a carefree life, he causes Opie to become confused. When the hobo, played by Buddy Ebsen before The Beverly Hillbillies got going, says to Andy well whats wrong, I've grown fond of him, and why not let him decide what he wants to be happy. Andy in his wisdom says, *Nah, I'm afraid it don't work that way. You can't let a young 'un decide for himself. He'll grab at the first flashy thing with shiny ribbons on it, then when he finds out there's a hook in it, it's too late. The wrong ideas come packaged with so much glitter it's hard to convince him that other things might be better in the long run, and all a parent can do is say, "Wait. Trust me," and*

*try to keep temptation away.* Too many of us want to live like the hobo, which is fine if you're taking a vacation or some time off, but not if you want to get to heaven. And far too many of us are silent, thinking doing so will make us happy by avoiding conflict, and making others happier too. It is important to respect someone's decisions, to be patient, and to love them; but if we will their good, we also will challenge with love. But what's better, getting thrown out of a clique or unfriended by some people on Facebook, or having someone being thrown out of heaven at judgment because no one helped them see or they became blind? Being here at Mass is a big part of keeping our spiritual vision sharp. Like the man who meets Jesus, may our encounter with Him here help us to truly see, and may we leave this encounter to go out into the world to help restore the sight of our brothers and sisters so like this blind man, they can see Jesus in their lives and follow Him and in the process find true happiness and joy.