

Sometimes when we make some bad choices in life, it seems we can cover them up, or deal with them. But not only do these decisions tend to snowball, but they also tend to isolate us. We can feel like we have to make sure they are hidden and no one knows. Or we may find that they are preventing us from becoming the people we want to become, and preventing us from true happiness.

Into this though comes our Lord, who, much like when He meets the woman at the well. Like with her, He meets us where we are at and offers us happiness. But while the offer is there, it also requires a bit of effort on our part to make sure we stay truly happy. And with it comes a challenge that when we obtain it, like the woman going to tell others about her experience, so we must do the same for one another.

In 1977, a young woman named Tracy Lee went off to college. But in the years that followed, the walls closed in on her through some choices that she had made.

She found herself one day, 20 years later in 1997, sitting down at her computer dreading this first assignment she had through her treatment program, but she knew it was a critical step she had to take. She says it was still a new concept for her to with just a week in treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. Her assignment was to write a letter to someone important in her life about her addiction and to commit herself to recovery.

She knew instantly that she had to write the letter to her parents. For years, she watched their confusion at the chaos in her life. Somehow she had been able to hide her drug habit so all they saw were the consequences. But now, the cat was out of the bag. They were at a loss to understand how why, of their 7 children, only she had invited drugs and alcohol into her life. The other members of her family had normal, successful lives - lives Tracy envied but could not seem to emulate. At the many family gatherings Tracy says she felt like an outsider, living a lie, dreading the day anyone discovered her awful secret. She was the last to arrive and the first to leave, anxious to be alone and giving into her addiction.

In this assignment she was given, she would meet her worst fear head-on. Finally her parents would know the awful truth she says about their worthless daughter. For years, she believed God would have nothing to do with her. Now, in her deepest heartbreak, she prayed and asked for his strength and love. Then she wrote the letter, which she would then read to her parents.

Little did she know that on the day she chose to share that letter, her mother had prayed, yet again, for her. She gave her up to God, told God that her daughter was in His hands. Her concerns for her and for her little boy were killing her. She just could not worry about her daughter another day.

Tracy drove up to their lovely home. She walked in the front door and found her parents in the cozy family room with her sister Deidre. She asked them all to sit down. then she took out the letter and read it to them.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Hi, it's me your long-lost daughter. You know, the one with "so much potential." God, I have missed you these past 15 years - you and Wendy, Deidre, Shari, Dean, Randy and Daren.

I suppose the best way to break this to you would be to sit quietly while I let you read the contents of this first assignment and then watch your hearts break while mine disintegrates with more guilt and shame.

You did everything right. You have 6 wonderful kids to prove it and yet I am such a loser. I have often wished you would discover that I was not your child after all. That would at least explain my worthlessness.

It is 3:21 in the morning and I am clean and sober - for 8 days now. And I am determined to finish this letter as part of my first assignment and part of a series of steps toward my recovery. I dread telling you about me but I know it will answer so many questions for you. You always say how much you miss me. I could not figure out just what, exactly, you missed. Of your 7 children, I let you down the most. "You have so much potential." Mom, you have said that more times than I can remember. I hope you are right.

I am so tired of being alienated from you all. I miss you so much. I feel as though my happiness stopped in 1977 when dad held me so tight in my little dormitory room at Montana State University. I'll never forget the look of love and regret in your eyes, dad, the day you left me there. And I'll never forget my own grief, how I cried at watching you leave.

I am sorry for the pain my choices have caused you. I am sorry for the agony my revelations will cause you now. You have always been there for me, when I asked and even when I couldn't. You have loved me unconditionally and that is what makes hurting you now so hard. My only prayer is that in this hurt, true healing will finally begin.

I do so want to please you again. I so much want to be part of my family again. I do not want to be an addict - on drugs - anymore ever again. But I am so afraid of failing. You know I never tried much anymore because that way I could not fail. But this is my greatest challenge. And if I fail the only answer for me is death. So I have to succeed. I will always be an addict in recovery and wonder, can you live with that label? Is this just too much?

I need you to know. I need to know you still love me. But I am so afraid. I suppose I am afraid of losing you. But I lost you long ago in my addiction. So maybe, I really have nothing left to lose by sharing this with you. I will do this, Mom and Dad, for my son. Yes a drug addict has raised him - until now. And I will do this for you, and I will do this for me, in the hope that indeed I am worth it.

I love you more than life, far more than life. I even love you more than death. And that is something because I have longed for death for so long. Yes I love you more than death and I want "My Recovery" more than death. That statement is profound and awesomely powerful. And it means I have a choice. If I can just know you are there my recovery is only a matter of time, work, God and me.

Pray for me. And pray for all that potential. I am gonna need it. I'll keep you posted.

All my love,

Tracey.

As she read this, her parents moved closer and closer to her as the words spilled from the page. Deidre got up and held her sister. At the end they were all holding one another, crying and hurting. But through the tears, they all tasted hope and she knew without a doubt she would have all the love and support she could dream of from her parents, brothers and sisters. She had been so afraid of their judgment and rejection.

She was surprised further when the next Saturday when her whole family, her parents, brothers, sisters, their spouses and children and her son, showed up at her treatment center in a massive show of support and love.

At the time she wrote her story, that was 7 years prior. She says the love and encouragement has never wavered. She became fully enmeshed in her family. She got a great job working for Health and Social Services. She became the Chair of RAFT, Recovering Advocates for Treatment, an organization that speaks out about the importance of treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. She returned to church and became an active member.

Her relationship with her son became even stronger. He became a 4.0 student, wise, centered and compassionate. She is now there to guide him more clearly, to love him and to be a light in this world.

She closes by saying once again her mom was right - she does have potential. And every day in her recovery, she lives it.

Indeed, we all have potential, and God sees this. The problem is just like Tracey, we all have addictions, too, namely to sin. What is needed is an acknowledgment of what it is we cling to, a realization of how much God loves us, a making of the difficult journey to liberate ourselves from our sins, and a willingness like the Samaritan woman and Tracey, to help others do the same.

The starting point is recognizing we all cling to various things. In the first reading, the Israelites grumble because they are thirsty. And as with the water, or not having food, or not having meat, on various occasions they forget. They forget how miserable they were

in Egypt, and so they say to Moses at least back there we may have been slaves, but we had water, we had food, we had meat. And they are tempted to go back. Moses intervenes, and as you read through their journey you keep asking yourselves how stupid can these people be, they were miserable there. Moses helps open their eyes, but yet they keep forgetting. So it is with us. The deeper meaning there is they cling to the things which don't really fill them or quench their thirst. For Tracey it was the addiction to drugs and alcohol. So what is it for us? It comes in various forms. Perhaps it is substances like Tracy battled that are taking over. Perhaps an addiction to sins of the flesh or things on the computer screen. Maybe it is an addiction to power, and having to control people in the family or on a committee. Perhaps you've got an addiction to your job and are a workaholic. Maybe it's praise and the need to be recognized by others. Maybe it is anger or wrath; and you keep getting too angry over politics, or that family member who wronged you, or that coworker or person at school who isn't treating you right. Perhaps it's making poor choices in relationships and people you associate with, or are dating, who don't treat you or respect you as you should. Pick your area, but what they all share in common is a "going back to the well" which leads to misery. The endless cycle of being addicted to it, of giving into it, and of it not making us happy or who we want to be. Now is the time to break the chain. Now is the time to say "I don't want to be this way any more."

And this is where God bursts in. Notice the detail in the Gospel that the woman is alone; she's known and has a reputation so others avoid her. Also notice the detail it is about noon. The hottest time of day and there she is getting water when others would go when it's cooler. But also note noon is the brightest time of day; the sun is directly overhead. Jesus is the Son who now is present, filling this woman's world, which is spiritually dark with God's love. So it is with us. In our sins and battles, like Tracy, we become marginalized; we try to hide them or conceal them. God sees through this though and gives us His gift of mercy and forgiveness. There is a judgment of what is going on - you have had 5 husbands and the one you are with now is not your husband - but there is no shame. Just an offer to drink the water which won't make her thirsty any more, to have to keep going back to the well so to speak that is her case is the need for affection and love which isn't really being met through the choices she's made in her relationships. And gradually as the story goes on, she begins to see that she is loved. Like Tracey feeling the love of God and not His condemnation, feeling the warmth of her family who embraced her and did not ostracize her, so it is with God who wants us to come to the well and receive that gift of mercy.

With this though there is the journey. She finally sets the bucket down; this bucket of heavy water that is like the bucket we carry of our sins. Now is the time for us to put it down, but now is also the time to journey like the Israelites did. And how hard this can be. How tempting it can be to just go back to old ways, because that's easier and we can make excuses; no big deal, everyone does it, no one really knows, in the grand scheme of things it's minor. But we know it makes us miserable. The path forward is one we journey with Jesus, but it's also one that takes effort. To be proactive and ask ourselves what caused me to make that choice; what causes me to fall into that sin. Maybe I need to change what's in my house, who I associate with, how I think, my

mindset and talk to a confidant or a counselor, get serious about getting exercise and healthy, think about my anger and other emotions, or whatever it might be. Yes we will fall along the way again which is why we go back to Mass and confession and pray. But we have to keep going forward, not backward, if we want to come to the end of our pilgrimage. Anyone can change for a day. But it's making it a way of life that is the hard part, but doing so leads to true happiness.

Lastly, like the woman, like Tracey, we go and proclaim our joy to others. Come meet the man who has told me everything I've done. She is now an evangelist. She wills others have what she has. It's why Tracey's family did not give up on her, and why Tracey emerged from her addiction to go and help others do the same. The joy of finding happiness in God can't be contained. As one definition puts it, evangelization is one starving person help another starving person know where to find bread. So let us not give up on people in our lives who seemingly are lost; who are going to the wrong wells. Let's not give up on the world and think there's nothing we can do. Because in other people there is indeed so much potential; it takes us with our prayers, our fortitude of journeying with others, our patience, and speaking to others about what true happiness really is for them to find it.

Much like the end of the day when darkness gradually sets in, so it does in our lives through the choices we make, and sometimes we can feel so alone. But God never gives up on us, and neither should we give up on ourselves or one another. So let us open our eyes to the reality of God's infinite mercy, and let His light illuminate our shadows, no longer drawing the blinds out of fear of what the neighbors might think, but knowing that our God loves us more than we can ever imagine, and learn how to respond to that mercy by drinking the water that satisfies our deepest thirst and gives us the happiness and joy that comes from being truly liberated from the burden of our sins. Jesus shows us the way, let us make the journey with Him to be truly happy and set free forever.