

I think most anyone when asked if they want to be happy would say “yes.” But have you ever thought about what true happiness entails? I know at various points in my life, I’ve thought it meant one thing or another. And certainly winning the lottery, or having the perfect cabin up north, or some other wants and desires might bring some happiness. But not the deep kind of happiness that comes from following the invitation that Jesus gives us to come and follow Him. Saying “yes” to that invitation requires a bit of work and effort, but what we find is that it will lead us to a great place of peace.

Twenty-seven years ago, Clarence Thomas, one of the justices on the Supreme Court, came to this realization when his life had given him much and he had accomplished much, but didn’t find the peace he was looking for.

A descendent of West African slaves, was born in Pin Point, Georgia, on June 23, 1948. He was the middle child in the family, with one older sister and one younger brother, His parents divorced, and his father abandoned the family when Clarence was only 2. They lived with his mother’s aunt. “Nothing about my childhood seemed unusual to me at the time” he recalled. “I had no idea that any other life was possible, at least for me.”

Everything changed after his aunt’s house burned to the ground. His mother left her daughter in Pin Point and took her two sons to Savannah, where she worked as a domestic earning 10 dollars a week. They lived in a tenement apartment with an outdoor toilet. Clarence slept on a chair and attended a public school for black children. He remembers “hunger without the prospect of eating and cold without the prospect of warmth.”

The following year his mother made arrangements for Clarence and his brother to live with their grandparents, who owned a new cinder-block house with two bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, den and indoor bathroom on East 32nd Street in Savannah. To Clarence, it seemed like luxury. His grandfather made it clear however that if they were going to stay there, they would abide by his rules, regulations, manners and good behavior. It wasn’t long before Clarence grew close to his grandfather and thought of himself as his grandfather’s son.

Most of the members of Clarence’s extended family were Baptist. However the nuns at a local Catholic parish had taught his grandfather to read, and in 1949, his grandfather had converted to Catholicism because he liked the Catholic rituals and discipline. He also believed that children behaved better when they were in uniforms, so he enrolled Clarence and his brother in a Catholic school for black children run by the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

His grandfather also took Clarence and his brother to Mass every Sunday at St. Benedict the Moor, the first black Catholic parish in Georgia. Clarence received his First Communion, and when he was in the third grade, he became an altar boy. He made frequent visits to a local monastery where a priest helped him learn Latin. After graduating from grammar school, Clarence entered Saint Pius X, the only Catholic high school for blacks in Savannah. He was a good student, and he thought about

becoming a priest. He hoped for some divine revelation that would make it clear whether he had a vocation. In 1964, he attended a diocesan convocation for altar boys, and afterward he told his grandfather that he wanted to transfer to the minor seminary to finish high school. His grandfather agreed on one condition: "If you go, you have to stay. You can't quit."

Clarence was one of only two black students who had been admitted to the minor seminary. He felt as if he had landed in another world - an all-white world - where he was surrounded by a "sea of strange white faces." He remembers feeling constantly anxious and insecure. His day was rigidly structured with little free time. Classes were tough, there was a lot of homework, but he did well. When the racial prejudices of other students revealed themselves in things that they said or did, Clarence found comfort praying before the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel. He persevered and graduated with outstanding grades. The faculty recommended that he continue his studies for the priesthood.

In 1967, he entered Immaculate Conception Seminary in Missouri. It was a time of unrest with the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and the changes in the Church with the Second Vatican Council.

It was during this time that Clarence and another black seminary student both reeled from episodes of discrimination. They began to admit to each other their frustration at the way the Catholic Church treated blacks. Clarence became more uncertain of his vocation. During the Christmas break, he met with a priest in Savannah who encouraged him to give it another semester to listen to God's call. When he went back that spring, in April he was walking into the dormitory when someone shouted the news that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot. Another seminarian replied that it was good and he hoped he died. For Clarence, that hate-filled comment was a confirmation that he did not have a vocation.

His grandfather was devastated about Clarence's decision to leave the seminary. He told him he was no longer welcome in his home. He told Clarence he would end up a failure and made it clear if he enrolled in another college he wouldn't help him with tuition or expenses.

He ended up getting a summer job and living with his mother. He feared he'd never break through the wall of segregation, and he felt anger rise within him; he began to cast off the beliefs he learned from his grandfather, the nuns, and the Catholic Church.

A friend, who was attending Holy Cross College in Massachusetts, urged Clarence to apply. He was accepted with the assurance that tuition costs could be worked out. He was one of 6 black students in a class of 550. He later said "During my second week on campus, I went to Mass for the first and last time at Holy Cross." He says he went out of guilt, but walked out during the homily.

Here he met his future wife. But it was also at this point that he began to become ambitious and struggle with things such as doubts and drinking; he was even hungover

he admitted on his wedding day and had doubts about saying "I do." He'd work for the Missouri Attorney General who became a Senator, and was eventually invited to work in DC. His professional life soared, but his personal life remained troublesome, and he hated himself for his inability to be a loving husband.

Two years later, he went to work in the Regan administration as assistant secretary of education for the Office of Civil Rights. But the emotional emptiness in his marriage reached a point where he realized he could no longer pretend. He admitted "I left my wife and child. It was the worst thing I've done in my life."

In 1982, he was named chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. During that time he tried to reconcile with his wife but they separated for good. In 1983, his grandparents died within a month of each other leaving him grief stricken. In 1984 his divorce was finalized and his son, Jamal, came to live with him.

It was at this point that he turned back to God. He says "I was so unhappy that I started going to church again. Saint Joseph's on Capitol Hill was only a short walk from my new office, and I went there each weekday to ask God to give me the wisdom to know what was right and the courage to do it - though I still couldn't bring myself to go to Sunday Mass. I wasn't yet ready to take that leap of faith."

In the spring of 1986, he met Virginia Lamp, a labor-relations lobbyist for the US Chamber of Commerce. Their friendship blossomed and in 1987 they were married in a Methodist Church. Together they joined an Episcopal church, which they attended every Sunday - but during the week Clarence still went to Mass.

Two year later he was appointed to the US Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia. When Thurgood Marshall announced he would retire, George H.W. Bush nominated him as a replacement. The confirmation process was tough, as there were the accusations against him.

But in his moment, he turned to his faith. In his words, "It had long since become clear to me that this battle was at bottom spiritual, not political, and so my attention shifted from politics to the inward reality of my spiritual life."

He described it as a dark night of the soul. He knew that his enemies wanted to break his spirit so that he would walk away, but he felt that he owed it to his family and to the memory of his grandparents to confront the truth. During his appearances before the Senate Judiciary Committee, he denied every allegation that had been leveled against him. He later revealed that throughout the ordeal, he found strength in God. After a Senate vote on October 15, 1991, he was confirmed, and sworn in 8 days later.

Acknowledging the dark days during the confirmation hearings, he notes that Psalm 30 brought him comfort which reads ***I will praise you Lord for you have rescued me. You refused to let my enemies triumph over me...weeping may go on all night but joy comes with the morning. I had forgotten that it was possible to know such joy.***

In his own words: “Thanks to God’s direct intervention, I had risen phoenix-like from the ashes of self-pity and despair, and though my wounds were still raw, I trusted that in time they too would heal.”

During this time, he continued to attend morning Mass but remained officially an Episcopalean. The turning point came when he finally admitted to himself and his wife that he wanted to come home to the Catholic Church.

And so on June 8, 1996, he announced to classmates at a Holy Cross reunion banquet that he had officially returned to the Catholic Church. He received Holy Communion that morning for the first time in 28 years. He had been granted a decree of nullity from his first marriage, and his marriage to Virginia was convalidated. He had forgiven the Catholic Church for the racism he experienced in the seminary.

Looking back, he said “Years later I would find out, as you get older, that it is not the religion that is the problem. It is the fallibility and imperfection of man.”

He’s quite right, because in our lives, we become tethered if you will to things that lead us into places that aren’t good for us; dark places; places of anger; addiction to alcohol or money or power or ambition. Jesus, when he invites us to come and follow Him because His yoke is easy and burden is light, is inviting us to be joined to Him as He is joined to the Father. For in the Father, who loves the Son unconditionally, the Son returns this love unconditionally, the Spirit the outflowing of that love; it’s the perfect relationship that leads to true happiness. The question for us is how do we get there?

The starting point I think is to ask ourselves what do we really want in life, and remembering the words of Augustine: my heart is restless until it rests in you. Many things we think will make us happy, but ultimately they don’t. Some cause emptiness and are sinful; some are addicted to sensual pleasures, or drugs or alcohol. Other times like Thomas, we get focused on our careers or ambition, or even pass this on to kids like the man in Harry Chapin’s “Cats in the Cradle.” If we can’t answer the question directly, we might look at what we are yoked to; the yoke being what was put on the oxen so the farmer could guide them. We might find all our focus goes on this or that, and it’s diminishing who we really want to be. Thomas as a rising legal star, but inside he was empty, because he was yoked to his career, but also to some of the anger and pain that he was carrying. When we make time for silence and prayer and meditation, we might find in our hearts, there are things that diminish us from loving God as much as we should. Maybe we are yoked to bad stuff. Or perhaps it is anger, or racism, or animosity with others over politics, or an anger at the world, or indifference and apathy at the world. Odds are it changes as our lives go along. This is where actually taking Jesus up on the invitation requires an effort on our part.

Helping us in that effort is of course the Lord. When we are yoked to Him, we are invited to love like He does and receive that love. We can go to confession or make an act of contrition or receive Holy Communion and be reminded that we are loved and forgiven. We can feel His peace and hear His voice when we pray and turn off our phone or

technology for a bit, whether you are here at church or alone in the woods or your back yard. We can get direction. It took a while, but going to Mass every day and keeping his heart open helped Thomas go from the anger he felt in 1967 to the peace he felt when he received Communion again in 1996.

A third thing that is important to remember is sometimes yokes were put on us by others that need to go, because they were wrong. What I'm getting at is that for many of us, at points in our lives, people or institutions will let us down. In Clarence Thomas' case, his grandfather was overbearing; he wasn't called to one vocation but was called to another. He also suffered because of the racism of others who were studying for the priesthood. Some have been hurt by those who work in the Church, or by family. And if a person doesn't deal with these yokes if you will that are yoked to hurt, to pain, they can become embittered and angry like Thomas was for a time in his life at the Church. When we make that time for silence and meditation, or talk to a good confidant or friend who shares our faith, we can, with God, go to those places of hurt and pain. The Crucifixion reminds us how far God goes for us (the first reading we often hear on Palm Sunday reminding us of Jesus entry on a donkey into the place of His Passion). Our God loves us and suffers with us and will never leave our side - it's important to be vulnerable and let Him remove the yokes that cause us pain, and be yoked to Him so we can have true peace.

Fourth, as Thomas learned, the Church brought Him true peace. Jesus established one Church, not many - it's what we say in the Creed. There are elements of truth in other religions, but in our Church we have the sacraments and the Eucharist. We also have the guidance of the Church in faith and morals. No matter where you are on the "spectrum" politically, you'll find the Church will challenge you. So don't turn the channel or dismiss a Church teaching you don't like as did the audience of Jesus who would often cover their ears or tear their garments or walk away. Loving Jesus is a radical way of life; we say yes to some things, no to others, and the words of the catechism and Bible should cut to the heart, because they are meant to challenge us because love and learning how to love is radical.

And lastly, we lead. If someone learned you were Catholic and had no knowledge of the faith, and followed you around for a week, what would they learn? If you are like me, you have moments that you are embarrassed about or look at and say "what was I thinking?" But hopefully we are honest with ourselves and strive to evangelize. We do it through our words and talking about the faith, but also through our actions of love and mercy. Hopefully when the people in our lives, especially our immediate families, know where our lives are centered - not at youth hockey or baseball, not at the office, not on getting another toy, but around God and wanting to get to heaven.

No matter what your opinion on Thomas as a justice, I think most anyone would look at his biography and be amazed; a man who dealt with racism and injustice; a man who was born into poverty who worked hard and made it to the Supreme Court. But a man who is probably more concerned not with being a household name or rich or famous, but one day being a saint, because he realized something - for that to happen, he had

to be joined to the Lord and truly follow Him, and love the Lord with his whole heart, mind and soul. As we prepare to receive Him in Holy Communion, may we do the same, knowing Jesus loves us so much, and that trusting in Him and letting Him lead us will truly bring us happiness that eye has not seen and ear has not heard.