

When I lived closer to it, one of the places I'd often visit was the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum that's in Chanhassen. It was only a few miles from the parish I was assigned to at the time, Saint Hubert's, and if you've been there you know it's full of virtually every flower imaginable. They make for some nice photos, and when I just started getting into photography I'd go there to spend a some time in the various gardens.

Of course when you look at it and see the flowers, what you don't always see is the work that goes into maintaining the place. There is an army of people who work there and volunteers as well, and they are changing things around as bloom times come and go, and doing their part to keep the flowers watered and the things that don't belong there like weeds out of sight. It's something that requires a ton of effort and time for it to be as beautiful as it is every year.

So too is this true with our souls, and trying to strive for excellence and sainthood. To achieve that, we can't be spiritually mediocre. It takes time and commitment, and an awareness of when the weeds start to grow so that we can then do something about them.

Danny Abramaowicz, who went on to have a good career in the NFL, realized this when the weeds of alcoholism started to creep into his life - and he learned that getting past them would be a whole lot harder than training camp.

Born in 1945 into a Catholic family in Steubenville, Ohio, a steel-mill and coal mining town near the West Virginia border, he would attend Mass with his parents, go to a Catholic school, and got a solid spiritual foundation as a young boy.

He acknowledges though that as he grew older, he didn't tend the spiritual garden. His personal prayer life was, as he puts it "not much to speak of." He would pray when he was in trouble or when he needed something. His main interest was sports. In the summer he played baseball and football. In the winter, he could be found in the Catholic community center shooting baskets.

At Catholic Central High School, he honed his athletic skills. He even earned a football scholarship to Xavier University in Cincinnati.

During his time in college, his spiritual life remained stagnant. He went to Sunday Mass, and even would go to a daily Mass if he had a big est. But he looks back on those years and says he was spiritually lax.

In the spring of his senior year at Xavier, he was picked by the New Orleans Saints in the 17th round of the NFL draft. And since this was the last round, he says he decided that he needed to work harder than he ever had in his life, because he knew when he arrived in camp, the coaches he says would be dreaming up ways to cut him from the roster.

He actually wasn't cut. In fact, by midseason, he was asked to fill in as a starter because another player had been injured. During that game, he caught 12 passes against the Steelers, and he remained in a starting position for the next 8 years.

As a pro, he experienced success, fame, and a lot of temptations. He had married his wife, Claudia, while still in college, and they started a family. But his professional life overshadowed everything. He never actually left the Church, but his spiritual life dropped further and further into the background.

And added to this was a growing addiction to alcohol. He says his conduct put a strain on his marriage, and he remembers waking up in the morning with a hangover, telling his wife he wouldn't do it again. But lo and behold, sometimes he'd be back at it even the next day. And this behavior continued even after he retired from football.

His wife began to pray that God would intervene in his life. One morning, he woke up after a night of drinking, but something seemed different. He looked at his sleeping wife and then crept quietly into the bedrooms of his three children to watch them sleep. When he went into the bathroom to shave, he saw his reflection in the mirror and thought to himself: "I hate this person. And if this is the kind of life I am going to live, then life isn't worth living."

He had hit bottom. "Here I was," he says, "a man that the world thought had it all together - a former NFL All-Pro player and an executive in the business world with all the perks. Wrong! I was miserable. I was a lost ball in the high weeds." And the weeds were taking over his soul.

He went to see a Jesuit priest, who referred him to a drug and alcohol-treatment facility, where he was asked to complete a questionnaire.

Afterward, he was told that when people answer yes to two or more questions, they are usually on their way to becoming an alcoholic. Danny had answered yes to 14 out of the 15 questions.

And so on December 15, 1981, he attended his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. It saved his life.

He says he wasn't a happy camper in the early weeks of going to those meetings. He was filled with various emotions, especially anger and self-pity, but he kept going back, one day at a time. As a result he was becoming sober, but not serene.

He began to feel an inner nudging that awakened him to paying attention to the spiritual part of himself. He enrolled in a Bible study at a local parish.

After several weeks, the instructor invited him to attend a prayer meeting.

He says it was almost as if someone else was answering inside of him when he said he would attend.

He was irritated at first for saying yes, and went anyway. People would pray out loud and he was at first shocked, never experiencing anything like it. But he looked and saw people had their eyes closed and were even smiling, and he said to himself “That’s what I want.” But getting what he wanted took more work.

He went to a Life in the Spirit seminar, and he began to see that God had not been at the center of his life. It consisted of 7 sessions, each with a different spiritual component focusing on helping a person commit to know God more deeply through surrender, trust, seeing sin in our lives and committing to Mass and receiving the sacraments, reading the Scriptures and being involved in the local Church. He was surprised to find that after turning his life over to the Lord, things got worse before they got better. During his drinking days, he had made some bad financial decisions that resulted in large debt and the possibility of losing his home. He was even more surprised to find that in the midst of this tough time, the idea kept coming to him that the Lord wanted him to start a Catholic men’s prayer group. He tried to ignore the idea, but it wouldn’t go away. Finally he invited 12 men to a prayer meeting. They all showed up, but none of them knew what to do, so they prayed that God would reveal His plan for them. Over

time, that group to 90, and he says that men's prayer group was exactly what he needed at that time.

It wasn't long before he began to realize that the same spiritual atrophy he had experienced was affecting other men. So he started to give talks, using athletic terminology in a spiritual context. He'd go around the country and talk about spiritual fitness. He'd go on and write a book "Spiritual Workout of a Former Saint." He'd go on EWTN's "Crossing the Goal" which uses a sports-show format to encourage men to get into spiritual shape. And over the years, men have responded as he's continued to work with it to have Internet outreach, speaking engagements and conferences and leadership training courses working with others.

He closes by saying: "The disease of alcoholism was the best thing that ever could have happened to me because God used it to get my attention. If God can change my life around, away from the lifestyle I was living, then I think anybody has a chance of having his life changed, if he really wants to and if he is open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit."

The key words there for me are “really wants to,” because do we “really want to” change our lives? Or do we become fine with the mediocrity?

This week’s Gospel is a call to action, but doing so in the right way.

The first is being aware of evil. We are told the seeds are sown - that is the good and it’s done by God - and then the enemy comes and puts seeds in amongst the good that produce weeds. Evil and temptations are all around us. How many of us are like Danny? On the outside, we’re doing well - have a house, a family, a car, a job, going places, even come to Mass. But then, well that thing I battle. That stuff I shouldn’t look at. That stuff I shouldn’t put into my body. Those words I shouldn’t say. The getting caught up in the gossip that brings others down and destroys and seeds more weeds in the world. Whatever it might be, the weeds generally come up at some point. And we can either live with it and say well so what, or work to pull them out. Because God wants us to do that - there is a judgment we hear about in the parable. And the good news here is that this is a Gospel of hope. Jesus wants to work with us to do this. So we then work with Him to pull up the weeds carefully. This is why an examination of conscience is so important, or thinking about our lives and what’s going well and not so



well, and where we are not happy or at peace, or what may be getting out of control like Danny looking in that mirror.

Second, the weeds will be burned but in time. God wants to help us. And this is the good news here. Jesus does not condemn the sinner, but wants to liberate us. So what do we need help overcoming? Only by being spiritually awake - by not making as Danny did sports or fame or success or whatever it may be as the center but God - can we see the weeds that are growing and work with Jesus to do that. How we work with the Lord is doing what Danny did - going first as he did to AA but then a spiritual group and working on his faith life. When we pray daily, when we go to confession even confessing as many of us do the same things again, when we read the Scriptures, when we study the faith and share it with others, good things happen. This is what the Synod you've been hearing so much about will do as it will be a bit like Danny's prayer groups - starting small and growing as we eventually have small groups form to foster personal relationships, build community and provide formation for parishioners to grow as missionary disciples so we can proclaim the faith to the world. The synod will continue in 2024 and 2025 as we try to help people understand and appreciate the Mass more, and help parents to pass the faith onto their

children. All of this is a way to keep the garden growing and the weeds out, both in our lives and in our parishes. Together with God and one another, we can keep the garden growing.

Third, this takes time. The garden doesn't grow right away. And weeds will come back and the garden needs to be worked on again. And this is important to remember too - as Danny said, his life got worse, not better at first when he got serious about his faith. Not because God was out to punish him. but because the pain comes before the gain. So we must remember as we try to grow spiritually, there are setbacks. And as we try to help others too, the same is true. We don't give up or get down, but keep at it with patience.

Fourth, it's done carefully. Note the detail - don't pull up the weeds quickly right away, because you may pull up the wheat too. Sometimes what happens when we don't put the careful time into something is it can push people away, or make things worse. For instance, a person isn't catechized or doesn't seem to live their faith. If we push too hard, we may push them away. Priests deal with this all the time; the temptation when a pastor wants to see something change can be to go too fast. Sometimes a quick

change is needed if there's a serious situation. But more often than not patience and skill is needed, like a surgeon who removes the cancer without destroying the organ. This patience is hard though. I've worked with people in parishes over the years who were great at preaching to the crowd, or working with the "super Catholics" or youth who are already active. But for the many others who never show up to Mass, or don't seem interested, they give up. Jesus though took Peter and told him to go out to the deep water. We have to do that too if we are going to change, but also be clever in terms of how we articulate the faith and wise in terms of affirming what others do well, and help them to truly grow by carefully working to build up their gifts and relationship with God and not going too fast.

One last point: why are there weeds at all? Well Danny said it best at the end of his story. Alcoholism was the best thing that happened to him because God used it to get his attention. On the one hand it might be nice if there were no temptations or sin were easy to overcome. But sometimes the weeds end up helping us to see our gifts. God does not will evil, but He allows it. There is the evil that people have no power over like disease, disasters, and death. But in this, Jesus is with us - Jesus dies; Jesus is with

the sinner; Jesus is with those who are hurting, and is with us always which is what ever Mass signifies. But in our own lives, sometimes we learn from the valleys we walk through. We learn empathy when others like our kids or grandkids battle these things. We learn patience. We emerge stronger. Our true gifts rise to the surface. As Thomas Aquinas said sometimes sin is permitted because it allows virtues to appear. So when we see the weeds in our souls and others, maybe we can see that in time, some good will come from them being there in the first place.

I know nothing about gardening. But I do know that as I look in the mirror like Danny did, I see some things I want to change. I get frustrated when things don't change overnight, but I do know that working with the master gardener, I can become a better person as I prepare for the day when I will stand before God. Until that day comes though, God doesn't call me to look at the garden and take a picture. He calls me to get into the garden and into the garden of others, and carefully work to help bring about something beautiful with Him. So may we not fear the weeds we see, but work with the good Lord to create a garden that will bloom forever.