

In my first year as a priest, I would on occasion be called to the workhouse, which was located in Plymouth not too far from the parish of Holy Name I was at. Here were men who were on shorter sentences for smaller crimes, and I would go there to hear confessions.

I've also been privileged to get to know people involved in prison ministry, both here at Saint Joes, and chaplains who have served in prisons. Two of our parishioners, Kevin and Fay Connors, are very involved in the prison ministry program within our archdiocese and have done a lot to bring hope to people and families.

If you think about it though, hope can be something that can be hard to see for those who are in prison. For the prisoner, they may be hardened from a life of poor choices; or be facing a long sentence, in addition to dealing with the difficult conditions on the inside. There are some who receive a very unjust sentence as well. And for those on the outside, it can certainly at times be hard to see the potential for change on the people within. Perhaps we can even see salvation as not applying to them.

Of course, Jesus has come for all of us; and despite the challenges of the Gospel where He says He came for the lost sheep of the House of Israel, we know from His birth and the presence of the Magi, and of all He does for people of different faiths that He has indeed come for us all.

Harold Smith, who was the former CEO of Billy Graham's magazine "Christianity Today," not too long before he retired underwent this own kind of eye opening experience as he too ventured into prison ministry, specifically with those leaving prison, with a bit of persistence from a friend that opened his eyes to both the importance of how he was living out his Christian life, and of how God's love can impact people so often not seen by others; but as we are reminded time and again in our faith, Jesus came for us all and His love can do amazing things.

He writes that he might never have become concerned about the physical, emotional, and spiritual condition of people leaving prison had not a long-time friend of his made it his personal mission to drive him crazy.

With unrelenting persistence, his friend Jim called him week after week for at least six months, describing the latest meeting of a local evening program known as Radical Time Out (RTO).

He was particularly enthusiastic about the evangelistic exploits of RTO's founder—and, it seemed, force of nature—Manny Mill. Born in Cuba, Manny had fallen victim to his mother's passionate prayers and accepted Christ in Caracas, Venezuela, while running from the FBI on charges of interstate transportation of stolen property. Now, Jim told him, he was a champion for Christ, redemption, and justice—not just for offenders, but for those on all sides of the courtroom.

Whether it was the movement of the Spirit or his selfish desire to get his friend Jim off his back (and off of his phone), Harold joined him at RTO on a Thursday night in October 2013. He's been attending ever since.

What began as a Bible study attended by eight men became an ever-expanding, ever-more-diverse community that now numbers over 100 one-time murderers, thieves, substance abusers, and gangbangers. Alongside them are mothers, sisters, and fathers whose family members are behind bars—some for life. And to round things out, Harold notes there are some run-of-the-mill sinners like himself—whose media-driven stereotypes of “ex-felons” have been blown to bits.

They come for support and a place where they will not be judged. Their sins are very real (just ask them!), but behind the criminal convictions are men and women in need of a Savior—people who have found him and been found by him.

RTO is a family gathering, complete with dinner, testimonies, prayer, ice cream, praise and worship, and lots of tears and hugs.

Then there's Manny's “salsified” brand of gospel preaching, punctuated by outbursts of expressive prayer. He notes Manny's jubilant blending of Spanish and English can, at times, leave his attentive hearers momentarily bewildered, but invariably the Spirit's own translation of the one-hour-plus message leaves everyone in the room eager for more. Indeed, no one in the church gym where this weekly family celebration is held ever seems to have his or her fill of God's Word. Or God's amazing grace.

“All are welcome,” says Manny every Thursday night. “No matter your crime, color, culture, class, or crisis.”

Harold notes how the all-inclusive nature of RTO presents a challenge—and a model—for all churches as they seek to obey the biblical mandate: “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3).

Perhaps never before in our history has that mandate been more crucial.

In 2014, the National Employment Law Project found that approximately 70 million Americans—roughly one in every four adults—have a criminal record that “could compromise their ability to get a job.”

Let alone, their ability to fully engage in or become a member of a church. Harold notes how “It's hard for church leadership and church volunteers to willingly take on known at-risk people when the societal norm is to be risk-averse,” citing Lynnea Martin, one of RTO's “fill-in” Bible teachers when Manny is traveling to area prisons. “Working side by side with someone who has been convicted of a crime and served time in jail or prison can be scary. Churchgoers may wonder if it is safe for them to

interact with an ex-offender, especially if they don't know what crime they were convicted of."

Harold witnessed this fear firsthand with one of his first connections at RTO—a man he'll call Joe—who was convicted a decade earlier. Now branded for life by the state as a "offender," Joe has nevertheless experienced God's grace upon grace, and has been walking faithfully in Christ since his last conviction.

Joe has also become a family friend of Harold's. As his friend, he shared his intense interest in becoming a member of a local church. He clearly understood the need to align himself with a group of believers for his own spiritual health and strength.

One pastor, Marco David of Midwest Bible Church in Chicago notes that "If we do not welcome the prisoner, or anyone else who is a sinner in need of the grace found in Jesus, we are resisting the Holy Spirit...At the root of our fear is a lack of our abounding in Christ's love. Love conquers all, including fear. Love compels us to take risks, to show compassion, and to extend grace to the undeserving and the unloved. If our love is not extended to the ex-offender, we are more like a social club than a church. We must increase in love. We must pray radically to love radically."

It is the tangible outworking of Christ's love that heightens Harold's own level of expectancy every time I make it to an RTO meeting. Paul's declaration that "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7, ESV) is patiently modeled every Thursday night.

It's more than just the meetings and fellowship; it's a process of also patience and persistence. Chuck Martin, an RTO sponsor notes: "The hardest part of working with ex-offenders...is to be patient enough to understand who they are and where they are in life at the time they enter our care. Each one is different and usually comes with a lot of baggage. We need to know how to love them while being wise in all of those interactions."

Harold learned this lesson after coming to the aid of a recently released man who had been convicted of a felony for assaulting a coworker. Harold worked with Chuck to find this fellow housing, a job, and cash for essentials.

He claimed Christ was his Lord, and he had memorized a great deal of Scripture. But it wasn't long before his anger management turned to mismanagement, and he was off to prison again. There are few quick payoffs and the work is messy, but in time it gets results. Barbara, Manny's wife, said "You either walk away because it's too hard, or you wrestle with the issues. I've found out for myself that when we wrestle with God on these issues, we grow in our knowledge of him—and that's always a win for strengthening the body."

Harold closes by saying that RTO's weekly mixture of celebration, joy, and hope—always with a measure of life's messiness sprinkled in—regularly reminds us of our total

dependence upon God. For volunteers like him who are quick to wonder how we could ever relate to someone with such a different life, dependence means collaboration and prayer—lots of it—and an ever-growing awareness that we are powerless, on our own, to make a difference. All we can do is allow God's love to work in and through us.

"Sometimes, even now, when I hear a story of what my husband used to be like," says Barbara, reflecting on Manny's run from the law, "I think to myself, 'Who was that man? I don't know him at all. 'Then I remember that he is a 'living monument'—the old is gone, the new has come."

Indeed, the old can go and the new can come in all of us. But it requires persistence, opening our eyes to remember God is with us, and not giving up on those who seem so lost.

The first part, remembering God is with us, can be hard, because sometimes it seems God spars with us when we pray and live out our faith. For instance, He says things like our righteousness must be greater than the Scribes or Pharisees but also assures us of mercy saying He came to call sinners. He tells a rich young man to sell everything and follow him. As one Dominican Preacher, Fr. Richard Conrad put it, "Jesus sometimes expects us to juggle his sayings, while letting them keep us on our toes and stop us becoming complacent. More generally, the Scriptures often make us think. Which statements are literally true, which are meant as metaphors or images? Which Old Testament laws unpack for us the Natural Law that holds for all time, which are ritual laws that have been superseded – and how did these prophesy Jesus 'Sacrifice and the Sacraments he gave us?" Sometimes even when we pray, we do not get the answer we want right away, or encounter silence. However, might it be that we find that when we persist in studying the faith, we have better answers and understanding of our faith? And it also might be when we persist in prayer, we might find that in the end, we were not alone at all, but God was in fact listening - He wanted us to grow, or to go through something and perhaps look back and say we emerged stronger. Or maybe when we go through suffering, not getting what we ask for in prayer, we are invited by Jesus to reflect on His act of Sacrificial love for us, the act that won for Him His Resurrection, and our future share in that resurrection. The Father did not seem to answer Jesus on Good Friday; but the Father did not abandon the Son, He raised Him up. And so to is it with us. In this harsh Gospel, we need to remember this is a translation, and "dog" was often used to refer to Canaanites. Jesus very well knew what He was trying to do, to bring this woman along in her faith; perhaps like a professor who makes the student work only to find his gifts. And in the end, she does and her persistence and faith result in her prayer being answered. We need to persist in our prayers too, including our silence, listening for God and discerning what He says to us, for we are not alone and He journeys with us.

Our persistence in prayer though will also result in God working with us as we listen to Him. Harold had no desire to really get involved in prison ministry; but the Holy Spirit and his friend worked on Him. There are so many stories of people who have discerned vocations because God kept saying one thing, while they may have been saying

another. But God will keep coming after us, and when we listen to Him, we will find that we'll find new gifts and callings and ultimately be happier.

Lastly, how do we persist and not give up on those who have been lost? As I've mentioned, sometimes it's easy to talk to people who share our beliefs. And we should have friendships and talk after Mass or at events with family and friends. But at the end of Mass, we "go forth," and this is not just to our fellow Catholics who are here every week at Mass. Just as God does not give up on those in prison, God does not give up on your family member who is never here at Mass or who says I do not believe in God. He does not give up on those in the world who re-define morality. He does not give up on those who make selfish choices. For He sees the potential there. So how can we bring those people along? For indeed, as Harold also found out, some will let you down like the man who ended up back in prison who he lost touch with. But it did not prevent him from going back into the prison and forming new bonds with people. We need to continue to pray for one another but not fear challenging people. And this even goes for people who are weekly Mass goers; maybe like Harold's friend we know they'll be good for something. In fact, you may be challenged here in coming weeks by members of our Synod Evangelization Teams who will invite you to prayerfully consider being part of or leading a small group next Lent because they've discerned you might be called to do it. Small groups will develop through shared relationships—perhaps through existing common activities or ministries. People will gather to spend time regularly getting to know each other better while sharing their faith and their love for the Lord and in their lives. It not only spreads the Good News to others in the small group, but also deepens your own faith. We'll be having learning sessions this fall on them and how people can lead them, and I know they will bear much fruit. Going to Mass is a big part of our faith, but it always needs to be a springboard into evangelization which is meant to change the world, a world where God has come out of love for us all.

Sin is indeed an ugly thing, and at times we will all chose evil. God though chooses us - all of us - to follow Him. Hearing that invitation though and learning how to do that require a bit of effort, but He will always lead us and be with us, never giving up on us. May we never give up on one another, knowing that while the road to sainthood is never easy, with effort we can find so much grace and talent in ourselves and in one another so long as we listen, persist, and never forget the power of hope.