

## **Change: An Important Part of our Spiritual Growth**

By now you've probably heard me mention my love for photography in my homilies, in particular bird photography.

So when I came across this story in the Christian magazine "Guideposts," it struck me as something good to share.

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Written by Elena Tafone, it tells the story of how a bird taught a farmer a valuable lesson on the importance of change in his life.

Tom Barry, a farmer, was out in his fields one fall day and snowflakes were the last thing he wanted to see. It was already late and he still had more than half a field of corn to harvest. Snow would slow him down more than anything. It would not only make the corn harder to pick but also make hauling it away nearly impossible.

Why this? he thought to himself. Why now? For the first time since his father had died, he felt the careful control he'd worked so hard to maintain slip away.

His dad had always been his rock. Growing up in a large family with limited means, he had learned at a young age how to carry his own weight—a lesson he passed on to his children. Tom had inherited not only his dad's work ethic but also a place at the family farm in Pisgah, Iowa. After graduating from college with a degree in agronomy, he returned to the farm to work there full-time. As his father aged, Tom slowly began to take over more and more of the responsibilities. Still, his dad had always been by his side to offer him advice.

In fact, he was even out in the fields feeding the cattle the day before he had heart surgery. "See you tomorrow," he said that evening, adding as usual, "Good Lord willin' and the devil don't care!" He never left the hospital. Tom's father passed away at age 73 following complications from surgery. Now, Tom glanced back up at the sky hopefully, but the flakes continued to fall. I have to finish this harvest, he thought. But he wasn't sure how.

The family was devastated when Tom's father died. There were so many decisions to make regarding the daily running of the farm. Tom didn't truly appreciate how much his father did until he was gone. His mother and siblings did what they could, and his wife and kids were there to help with chores and some of the fieldwork, but most of the responsibilities fell to Tom. They sold a few of the cows, until the herd was a manageable size. They also got rid of some of the machinery, mostly the equipment that needed two people to operate. Life went on.

Against all odds, the crop that year was good. Tom was impressed by the yield, but when it was time to get out the combine and harvest, Tom missed his dad more than

ever. Running the combine had always been his job. Tom would haul the been crop in and do odd jobs, but it had always been his dad in the driver's seat. It felt weird taking his place. But Tom had to. His son helped when he could, but between college courses and a part-time job, he wasn't always able to.

Combining and unloading by himself was a slow process, which was why Tom was out so late. Now the snow that dusted the half-harvested field was just going to make a painstaking task even more painful.

"What do you want from me, God?" he asked the darkened sky.

He didn't know what to do. He desperately wished he could turn around and ask his father what he thought. But Tom couldn't stand here wishing any longer. The snow was still coming down, and it would only get worse from here on out. He decided to finish filling the wagon before calling it quits for the night.

Tom worked as quickly as he could. As he was making the last round, something fluttered up in front of him. A little bird—a sparrow, perhaps—that had been nesting in the standing corn. He'd scared it up with the combine. That wasn't unusual. Birds always flew away when it came close.

But instead of flying away from the lights and mechanical clanks and groans of the combine, this sparrow swooped in front of the combine's window once, twice, three times before alighting on the combine's railing. Though it was still snowing and the wind was picking up, that little bird sat perched there, keeping Tom company as he continued to combine the field.

Look at me, it seemed to say. If I can handle this, so can you.

As Tom came to the end of the field, the sparrow looked at him one last time before taking off into the snowy night. Tom sat there, the combine's engine still running. What was that? he asked himself. A sign from Dad? Or just a weird coincidence?

Tom still doesn't know for sure. What he does know is after that night his outlook was changed for the better. "I realized I had been working with God to take care of his land and the animals that I love so much. And just like the heavenly Father, my dad was working with me too as I carried on the tradition of our forefathers."

The years have passed by quickly, as everyone says they do. Tom has slowed down some, but like his old combine, he's still chugging along. His son has stepped up to help with most of the fieldwork, as Tom did for his dad.

Life goes on. Things change. But Tom looks to the future, secure in the knowledge that there's someone looking out for him.

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The short story is entitled "How This Mysterious Visitor Changed a Farmer's Outlook on Life.

Change. It's easier said than done isn't it? For all of us can be stubborn at times. But God is always inviting us to change.

This week's Gospel, which is a bit of a hard one, has the story of a woman who comes to Jesus for help. At first He is silent; then when she won't be quiet the disciples tell her to go away; then when she keeps it up Jesus says it is not right to take the children's food and give it to dogs. A harsh translation into English, but a term used by Jews towards Canaanites. But she keeps going and says even dogs eat the scraps from the table. In the end Jesus is so impressed with her and she is healed.

What happens here?

For one, like Tom the farmer she persists. She knows she will reach her goal and things will get better with her faith; she does not give up. Tom will still have the pain and the challenges ahead, but much like the sparrow that did not give up, neither did Tom and neither do we.

But we also listen. Tom was alone with his thoughts but the sparrow helped him to listen to himself and to God and to change his outlook. Do we take the time to be introspective, to ask ourselves what needs to maybe change in our lives? Sometimes we just go from one day to another and forget we can be better in how we parent, how we relate to our family, how we deal with our coworkers or how we look at life. I hope and pray that I will be different for the better as the years go by, but this means being open to listening to God. Believe it or not, I often find God in my nature photography and God speaks to me too, sometimes through gazing at a bird or other magnificent creature, but often through silence, and through other people as well. What is God trying to say to us? Hopefully we listen.

So what is God calling us to do differently in our lives or to think differently about? When we listen and do as He tells us, we can find the path to spiritual greatness.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul