

Sometimes in life, there are things that can seem overwhelming.

Anxiety. Everyone deals with it. Health situations. Financial situations. Loved ones you want to help but who are making some bad choices. A sin we battle we fear someone will find out about.

However, so often what happens when we look at what we go through is that in hindsight, we find we get through situations when we take Paul's advice seriously, namely to not have anxiety, and to let go, let God.

In a story she shares about dealing with her mother in law's illness, Ava Pennington writes about having to deal with learning how to have this trust in God.

She recalls having a conversation with her friend Betty who was caring for her father-in-law years prior to when she would be caring for her mother-in-law, and Betty's father-in-law had a terminal illness. He had moved in with Betty and her husband several months earlier when his cancer prevented him from living independently. Most of his physical care became her responsibility, although her husband helped as much as he could.

Ava said to her “I could never do what you’re doing. At least you’re a nurse. you’re used to caring for people like this. Not me.”

Her friend looked at her and said “Never say never. When God calls you to a God-sized task, He gives you God-sized grace. But He does not give it ahead of time.”

Ava thought that sounded nice - even spiritual. But she knew better. God might indeed give her God-sized tasks, but she was certain it would not be that kind of task. Maybe someone else, but not her. It was just not something she was equipped to do, and she told herself that both God and she knew it.

Twenty years later, Ava found herself caring for her mother-in-law, Nan, at home during her battle with a host of illnesses. She suffered from heart disease, diabetes, lung cancer, and Alzheimer’s disease. As her dementia worsened, it became a daily struggle to provide her care. Ava’s husband helped as much as possible, but many of her physical needs required the attention of a woman.

The burden of Nan's care was made heavier by the change in her nature. The sweetness that had characterized her disposition seemed to disappear in an instant. She became suspicious of Ava and her husband's motives and actions. Anger permeated her every word. Her dementia prevented Ava and her husband from reasoning with her, and she soon retreated into a fantasy world where they could not follow even if they wanted to.

Their care for her husband's mother began as a labor of love, but it was quickly becoming an unmanageable weight. They needed grace and strength from a source other than their own efforts because their efforts were wearing thin.

As difficult as this was for her, she says it was more painful for her husband to watch his mother transform from a gentle parent into a hostile stranger. They had agreed to look after her at home, but with each passing day, Ava wondered if they would be able to keep their commitment. The strain of caring for her began to affect their marriage.

Then, Ava says, Betty's words, spoken so many years earlier, came rushing back. "When God calls you to a God-sized task, He gives you God-sized grace. But He never gives it ahead of time."

If there were every a period when Ava and her husband needed the ability to handle a situation bigger than themselves, Ava thought, it was then. She asked God to pour out His grace on them both and to give them an extra measure of His patience and strength. Most of all, she asked Him to help her see this stranger who was her mother-in-law through His eyes.

Ava says she won't pretend life became easy overnight. Nan's physical and mental health continued to deteriorate. The demands of her care intensified. Ava and her husband were exhausted, yet somehow each day their strength was equal to the task.

More importantly, Ava notes she began to see this difficult situation from Nan's perspective. As frustrating as these circumstances were for her, it was even more so for her mother-in-law. Her own mind had become her enemy. Past and present often collided without warning. She didn't know who or what she could trust. The result was constant fear and confusion.

Her heart ached for her. They could not give her physical healing, but they could surround her with love - the one constant in her bewildering world.

Once again, Ava thought of her words spoken in such determined haste decades prior. Love a stranger - a hostile stranger? She could never do that. She was partially right, in her own strength. But by God's grace, she realized she could become the vessel through whom His love would be poured over her.

As she surrendered to loving someone who was no longer able to express love to her or her husband, she notes something unexpected happened. She learned, in a tangible way, the true meaning of unconditional love. She was reminded of God's love for her, especially when she says she is unlovable, and she does not have dementia to blame. And she realized that the truest form of love is expressed when the other person is the most unlovable.

In the weeks that followed some were easier than others. Most days found her clinging to the Lord for all she needed to help Nan feel safe and secure.

Despite the fact that neither people nor possessions were familiar to her, she could still meet her most desperate need. Through total dependence on someone greater than herself, Ava realized she could wrap her mother in law in love - both God's love and the love of Ava and her husband.

Ava closes by saying she was privileged to care for her mother-in-law until she left Earth for a better place. Through it all, she realized the Lord had, indeed, given her God-sized grace for a God-sized task.

In life, at times it can be tempting to run from our problems, to procrastinate, or to not think about tomorrow. But, the reality is morning always comes. Problems are brought out into the light. And these are things we have to confront. However, the good news is we do not do it alone.

As Paul writes so beautifully, we are to have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make our requests known to God.

If there was anyone who should have anxiety, it's Paul. Beaten up, shipwrecked, put in prison, left to die on the side of the road, dealing with persecution from some within the Jewish community and the Roman government, dealing with infighting in the communities he set up. Surely like Ava he probably thought well others could do it, but not me, I could never do it. But he did. He did not run away, but dealt with what God asked him to do.

So how do we do that? How do we not let the anxiety overwhelm us? Self-help sections at bookstores are full of suggestions, but looking at Paul's words through a Christian lens, I think there's a few things that can be helpful to remember.

One is the words of Ava, namely that God's love is the truest form of love, expressed when the other person is unlovable, and she knew at times in her life she had been unlovable. I know in my life, I've done things I'm not proud of, because I am a human. The tenants of the vineyard have been given everything and still can't seem to do anything right as it bears no fruit. The response of the Father is to send the Son, and in the Passion as one preacher put it, the line of history begun by original sin reaches it's climax

and awful conclusion. And here is where a new line of history begins, the new kingdom given to people who will make good its fruits. That is you and me. On the one hand we are not accountable for the original sin of Adam and Eve, but we are now learning to grow in our freedom. We will be judged, but we need not be condemned when we let go and let God. When we remember that we are loved. So sometimes when we get anxious and worry about our past, about what the neighbors might think, about our secrets, we need a reminder that God's love is always there. St. Thomas More, from his prison cell wrote to his daughter, "I will not mistrust Him, Meg, although I shall feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear. I shall remember how St. Peter at a blast of wind began to sink because of his lack of faith, and I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to Him for help. And then I trust He shall place His holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning." When we are drowning, Jesus is always there to pull us up.

With that, prayer is also a big help. We can make time for silence. We can pray in the car. We can also pray for others. We can talk to God from our hearts, telling Him, conversationally, about our fears. We can ask for the intercession of Mary and the Saints; Saint Teresa of Calcutta (Mother



Teresa) said: "If you ever feel distressed during your day - call upon our Lady - and just say this simple prayer: 'Mary, Mother of Jesus, please be a mother to me now.'" Prayer can also include the Bible or Spiritual Reading, or even just silence. These are great ways for us to calm ourselves down.

Third, as Ava said God will give us the grace. Sometimes we think we can't do it; and on our own, that might be true. God loves us and gives us the grace, but we have to cooperate with it. We will fail and all have bad days at times. But when we face a difficult situation, we do so with God, and we will find that as we go through it, much good came out of it for ourselves and others. Because Ava didn't give up, her mother in law was comforted, and she also found gifts she did not know she even had that God helped her to unlock. Sometimes we want to say "I can't" when we confront a challenge, but there was no detour around Good Friday; the Son goes to the vineyard and is killed, but this leads to the redemption of us all and Easter.

Fourth, be patient with yourself and others. As I said, you will fail, you will let others down. As Thomas Edison said I haven't failed I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work. So it is when we set out with God to do

something, be it a new vocation, career or trying to overcome a sin that is a long struggle. Again, God never abandons the vineyard that is our soul. So we should not give up either.

Fifth, we seek others. While we pray and talk to God, it's also important to remember we work in the vineyard together. Ava had her husband and they were a team. Sometimes in our lives we can feel like that kid who had a no good very bad awful day at school and say "nothing" as the answer to "what happened at school today." We go through battles; it's so important not to bottle things up, especially secrets that may impact others in the family, and to remember there are people who love us that God puts into our lives for a reason.

Lastly, I think it's so important to remember that things will be okay in the end. In the moment when we get caught up in the stress and pressure, we wonder how will this all work out? Our mind can race. But time and time again, we are reassured that we should not let our hearts be troubled. We should let go and let God. We might not be able to see the end of the path which goes through some windy, difficult and steep parts on the road that is

life, but with us always is God. The night is darkest before dawn as the saying goes, but it will be okay in the end for we are not alone.

Over the course of my priesthood, I've been amazed so many times by people who are in tough situations, but have this resiliency. Indeed, our festival this weekend is a big part of that; Jordan Ecker, who serves as our Director of Engagement and Communications, has been working for months on it. It's an incredible burden, as there are so many moving pieces, people to contact, permits to get, things to think about. But she never gave up, and helped by a small army, we are able to have a remarkable event as a parish family because Jordan and others had a vision of what they were called to do. So it is with us all; God has such great things; some we've realized, some are waiting to be written. Often these things will not come easy, and sometimes it will be tempting to give up, to look back, to say someone else can do it, or it's just not something I can do. But rather than listen to the "what ifs" and the self doubt, let us take a page from Saint Paul who changed the world by saying "yes" to what God called him to do. Let us turn our anxieties over to God, and with Him go on the adventure that is life, and truly make a difference in our world, knowing

that working with the Good Lord, the vineyards of our souls and world are capable of producing a bountiful harvest.