

One of the easiest things to do in life is to “go with the flow” and not rock the boat; but as we all know life entails some hard choices. These include discerning what we are ultimately called to do with our lives, but also taking a stand in different situations and going against the crowd; or challenging someone to make a better choice by speaking up for what is right. And to help us with this, God gives us a powerful tool, namely our conscience, which is where in a sense we encounter God’s voice to help us determine what to do.

On April 1, 1942, Desmond Doss joined the United States Army, called to serve his country, and he’d go on to win the Congressional Medal of Honor. However it would at first seem that he would be the most unlikely man to win this honor, for he was a pacifist; and little did he realize that three and a half years later, he would be standing on the White House lawn, receiving the nation's highest award for his bravery and courage under fire.

Of the 16 million men in uniform during World War II, only 431 received the Congressional Medal of Honor. One of these was placed around the neck of a young Seventh-day Adventist, who during combat had not killed a single enemy soldier. In fact, he refused to carry a gun. His only weapons

were his Bible and his faith in God.

President Harry S. Truman warmly shook the hand of Corporal Desmond Thomas Doss, and then held it the entire time his citation was read aloud to those gathered outside the White House on October 12, 1945. "I'm proud of you," Truman said. "You really deserve this. I consider this a greater honor than being president."

The journey that had brought young Desmond to this day had been a challenging one.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, he was working at the Newport News Naval shipyard and could have requested a deferment—but he wanted to do more for his country. He was willing to risk his life on the front lines in order to preserve freedom.

When he joined the Army, Desmond assumed that his classification as a conscientious objector would not require him to carry a weapon. He wanted to be an Army combat medic. As luck would have it, he was assigned to an infantry rifle company. His refusal to carry a gun caused a lot of trouble

among his fellow soldiers. They viewed him with distain and called him a misfit. One man in the barracks warned him, "Doss, as soon as we get into combat, I'll make sure you won't come back alive." But he never internalized this anger or lashed out.

His commanding officers also wanted to get rid of the skinny Virginian who spoke with a gentle southern drawl. They saw him as a liability. Nobody believed a soldier without a weapon was worthwhile. They tried to intimidate him, scold him, assign him extra tough duties, and declared him mentally unfit for the Army. Then they attempted to court martial him for refusing a direct order—to carry a gun. But they failed to find a way to toss him out, and he refused to leave. He believed his duty was to obey God and serve his country. But it had to be in that order. His unwavering convictions were most important.

Desmond had been raised with a fervent belief in the Bible. When it came to the Ten Commandments, he applied them personally. During childhood his father had purchased a large framed picture at an auction. It portrayed the Ten Commandments with colorful illustrations. Next to the words, "Thou shalt not kill" was a drawing of Cain holding a club and standing over the

body of his dead brother Abel. A young Desmond would look at that picture and ask, "Why did Cain kill Abel? How in the world could a brother do such a thing?" In Desmond's mind, God said, "If you love me, you won't kill." With that picture firmly embedded in his mind, he determined that he would never take life. In the film depicting his life, Hacksaw Ridge, this is re-emphasized when he sees his father lose his temper at his mother and his dad is about to get violent but he stands up to him and holds a gun to protect his mother; his father breaks down in shame, and Desmond drops the gun vowing never to hold one again, recognizing in him and us all anger can get out of control.

However, there was another commandment that Desmond took just as seriously as the sixth. It was the fourth commandment. His religious upbringing included weekly church attendance, on the seventh day. The Army was exasperated to discover that he had yet another personal requirement. He asked for a weekly pass so he could attend church every Saturday. This meant two strikes against him. His fellow soldiers saw this Bible reading puritan, as being totally out of sync with the rest of the Army. So they ostracized him, bullied him, called him awful names, and cursed at him. His commanding officers also made his life difficult.

Things began turning around when the men discovered that this quiet unassuming medic had a way to heal the blisters on their march-weary feet. And if someone fainted from heat stroke, this medic was at his side, offering his own canteen. Desmond never held a grudge. With kindness and gentle courtesy, he treated those who had mistreated him. He lived the golden rule, "...do to others what you would have them do to you..." (Matthew 7:12).

Desmond served in combat on the islands of Guam, Leyte, and Okinawa. In each military operation he exhibited extraordinary dedication to his fellow men. While others were taking life, he was busy saving life. When the cry, "medic" rang out on the battlefield, he never considered his own safety. He repeatedly ran into the heat of battle to treat a fallen comrade and carry him back to safety. All this, while enemy bullets whizzed past and mortar shells exploded around him. Several times, while treating a wounded soldier, Desmond was so close to enemy lines, he could hear the whispering of Japanese voices.

In May, 1945, as German troops were surrendering on the other side of the

world, Japanese troops were fiercely defending, to their last man, the only remaining barrier (Okinawa and the Maeda Escarpment) to an allied invasion of their homeland. The men in Desmond's division were repeatedly trying to capture the Maeda Escarpment, an imposing rock face the soldiers called Hacksaw Ridge. After the company had secured the top of the cliff, the Americans were stunned when suddenly enemy forces rushed them in a vicious counterattack. Officers ordered an immediate retreat. Soldiers rushed to climb back down the steep cliff. All the soldiers except one.

Less than one third of the men made it back down. The rest lay wounded, scattered across enemy soil—abandoned and left for dead, if they weren't already. One lone soldier disobeyed orders and charged back into the firefight to rescue as many of his men as he could, before he either collapsed or died trying. His iron determination and unflagging courage resulted in at least 75 lives saved that day, May 5, 1945, his Sabbath.

Eventually, the Americans took Hacksaw Ridge. Okinawa was captured inch by bloody inch. Several days later, during an unsuccessful night raid, Desmond was severely wounded. Hiding in a shell hole with two riflemen, a

Japanese grenade landed at his feet. The explosion sent him flying. The shrapnel tore into his leg and up to his hip. He treated his own wounds as best he could. While attempting to reach safety, he was hit by a sniper's bullet that shattered his arm. His brave actions as a combat medic were done. But not before insisting that his litter-bearers take another man first before rescuing him. Wounded, in pain, and losing blood, he still put others ahead of his own safety. He would choose to die so another could live. After all, that's what he read in his Bible. Such was the character demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Before being discharged from the Army in 1946, Desmond developed tuberculosis. He would spend most of the next six years in hospitals. Cold, wet, sleepless nights, shivering in a muddy foxhole on the islands of the Pacific, had taken their toll. As the illness progressed his left lung had to be surgically removed along with five ribs. For the rest of his life, he survived on a single lung, until it too failed. At the age of 87, Corporal Desmond Thomas Doss died on March 23, 2006, after being hospitalized with difficulty breathing. He is buried in the National Cemetery, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

What is compelling with his story is he had a great love for his country, but he also wrestled with difficult decisions and ultimately had to follow his conscience to do what he felt would be right. And this is a challenge we all have as well, to continually listen to the voice of God by discerning what we are called to do in life, what to do in specific situations, and continually form that conscience as life goes on.

As we begin this stretch of Ordinary Time for the next few weeks, we have an appropriate readings about beginnings; Samuel who is called to be a prophet, and then the first apostles who begin to follow the Lord.

Looking at that first reading, Samuel is the son of Hannah who had begged for a child, but when he was born she gives him back to the Lord; as such he is raised in the Temple under the care of Eli the priest. Samuel hears the Lord several times, not knowing who is calling him at first, and neither does Eli who thinks Samuel is dreaming, but eventually both come to realize that God is calling him. And then he says “speak Lord your servant is listening.” From this reading, we’re challenged to ask ourselves are we asleep or awake in the spiritual sense? Sometimes we just go through the motions, or don’t make time for prayer or listening to God. But when we



listen, we too can hear the voice of God. And the first part of that entails listening to what God is ultimately calling us to do. Recently Shai LaBeouf made news for being fully received into the Catholic Church after New Year's Mass; he's been in 40 movies but also battled alcoholism, plagiarized a script, was charged with public intoxication, harassment and disorderly conduct. But then he began listening. As he said in an interview "My life was on fire. I was walking out of hell. I didn't want to be an actor anymore and my life was a complete mess. I'd hurt a lot of people." He learned how to pray; he fell in love with Mass; and he needed to discover a "purpose" in life as he put it beyond acting; it led him to get spiritual direction from a Capuchin priest. One of the Capuchin friars confirmed him just a couple of weeks ago. Hopefully his journey will continue well as he strives to become a saint like we all do. But for this to happen, he had to listen; and so do we. We ask ourselves am I truly happy? What are you calling me to do Lord with the next chapter in my life? What in my life needs to change? And hopefully like him, we too say here I am Lord I come to do your will.

Secondly, our conscience is that voice that tells us in a particular situation what to do and what not to do. And so often this will be difficult as Dostoevsky's

story goes to show you. When we follow our conscience, people might not like it; they might turn on us or label us. But in so many situations that come up, we have to make a choice - to go with the crowd or do what's easy, or do something difficult. From a teenager saying no to alcohol and drugs, to not doing something that "everyone is doing" and says isn't a big deal, or something as simple as seeing a neighbor who needs help shoveling their walk, or thinking about how to respond to someone who isn't being very nice on the road or in their actions, every day before us are moral choices. And it's so important to listen to our conscience so we can act in these moments.

Third, that happens through formation. We follow our conscience, but sometimes it can be in error. There are people who mean well, but also are making the wrong choice. Even in the case of Corporal Doss, were he coming to me for spiritual direction, I'd tell him he should not be forced to carry a weapon, but in time of war or for defense, that it was not wrong to do so. The problem with formation of conscience is people have their consciences formed not by God and the Church, but by culture, by media, or even by people they know who are in error. Part of my job as a confessor for instance is to help people, as sometimes a person thinks a

sin is major and it's not at all, or they aren't looking at something deeper that needs to be examined. Dust off the catechism, or do some formation with some great online sources like EWTN's website, or Fr. Michael Schmitz's Bible and Catechism in a Day, or even use "Formed.org," a great website with videos for kids and adults. There's so much good stuff out there, but we also have to think more deeply about our faith. The Church will often challenge us on faith and morals, but this is so that we can truly grow into saints. Formation also happens through prayer, and heeding the words of the Act of Contrition to avoid the near occasion of sin by eliminating from our lives those things that may make us cause to sin.

Lastly, how do we form the consciences of others? My sense is that the men who served with Corporal Doss were changed because of their experience with him. Our actions, and inactions, can do so much. The people who are angry at us at one point may look back and see how they were wrong and later in life be changed for the better. But it is not easy is it? When you are talking about faith and morals and it intersects with politics and a person gets upset; when you lovingly have a conversation with someone about the choices they are making morally in life, or why they never go to Mass anymore and how you'd like them to think about

that; or when you are the one to speak up and say “that’s not right” whether someone starts going down the road of gossip or racism or looking at something that shouldn’t be looked at. Perhaps it’s hardest with our families, but we are prophets at home (often without honor!) and in the greater world. As Bishop Baron put it so well in his homily last Easter, the Christian is meant to be weird; namely we are in the world, but different, for our priority is to be a beacon that points to heaven and we help people get there by speaking up for what is right and helping them to see the right path.

From Corporal Doss to so many others, what we find is that living the faith isn’t easy. It’s one thing to go to church or to pray in private. But we are not meant to hide from the world, we are meant to change the world. To do this, we change ourselves by listening to the voice of God, and saying as we sing those words in the popular song “here I am Lord,” and then doing His will by following our call and living that out day in an day out. Costly? Yes. But also the path to true happiness for ourselves and one another. So let us truly not be afraid to go and make a difference.