

Over the course of our lives, we all battle temptations. And sometimes there's nothing wrong with giving into something that gives us a bit of pleasure, because it is important to have enjoyment in life. But as we all know, sometimes there are things that can destroy us and take over our lives, so much so that our body is at war against the spirit in the sense that we indulge in things that become destructive, and lead to damaged relationships with ourselves and God and one another, and cause us to become people we don't want to be. The key for us as we reflect on this battle we all face that is front and center this week in our Gospel is to open our eyes to the things in our lives that are causing us pain and hurt, and to strive to have that right balance where we focus on heaven while living in this world, which means changing it for the better but at the same time enjoying the things of this world too.

Unfortunately, sometimes these things get out of control for one reason or another, and for Julie Orlando, who today works with women who are battling alcohol addiction, her life situations were taking a toll and she was turning to alcohol to forget about the pain in other parts of her life.

She writes that it was with unshakeable confidence that she began a reconciliation with herself, only to come home and quickly begin drinking again. She was in full-blown relapse, broken, hating herself and what she had become. She hated that she was smart, intelligent, had good sense and was educated about the disease, yet no knowledge was enough, no friend supportive enough, no children scared enough to make her stop.

From her very first drink at the age of 17, she could not handle it well, but would do it anyway. She went on to get married, have children and a job, and drink socially. Usually too many and usually wishing that she stopped at two. That was never an option for her though for once she started, she always craved more and after the first couple, who cares if it's two or 20. She still managed to moderate, after all she was a mom, a wife, and active in her church, and taught CCD (Continuing Christian Development) to the high school kids. She told herself hey I drink for the same reasons anyone else would; to relax, have fun, to take the edge off my nerves. Never did she want to be addicted and have a problem with it. But it led her to quit teaching and being a lector at Mass. She writes she had become a hypocrite, preaching one thing and living another. Telling kids to turn to God, when she would turn to wine. She couldn't live with that anymore. To instead of quitting the wine, she quit her service work.

It took a night in hell she says for herself and everyone else at a party to end the years of drinking. This time she entered treatment able to hold her head up and say she was an alcoholic. She went to group meetings and shared her story. She was asked to write her Step One of the 12-Step recovery program. It took her five days and was 8 pages long. She could look you straight in the eye and tell you all about her drinking and history, but not about Julianna. That's what cracked the case, and it became obvious to everyone where her pain was and the price she paid for grieving.

On December 18, 1995, she gave birth to her fourth child, Julianna Maria. She started life at less than 4 pounds, with 3 holes in her heart. Within a few weeks, she had gained enough weight where she could come home, but she didn't thrive. She outgrew 2 of her heart defects, but developed hearing loss, multiple seizure disorders and acute respiratory distress syndrome. She was diagnosed with epilepsy by the time she was one.

She had early intervention services in place at 6 weeks; an infant teacher, physical, occupational and speech therapy once a week, an audiologist to check her hearing aids and a fancy pink wheelchair. Despite all of this, Juliana was a peaceful and content child aware of her mom and dad and who they were to her. They had started to smile and make the sound "Ma" and she remembers her little chuckles and moments of happiness.

Sadly she'd lose her health battles. Julie was terrified, not knowing how they'd go on without her; but she wrapped her little girl in a pink blanket and she took two tiny breaths, dying peacefully 25 years ago today, February 18, 1999.

Julie said good-bye her way; she planned the funeral and wrote the words of remembrance and spoke from the heart. But then came the debilitating depression and despair and a downward spiral into numbness. The sweet release of alcohol never lasted long because drinking gave her an avenue to grieve and her grieving gave her an avenue to drink, the perfect cycle for doom she says.

She would write about this in a journal, always writing about the search for forgiveness for her lack of faith, for her selfish desire to make the pain go away, for her weakness when she knew she was hurting her family, for her cowardice at not trying faith on for size. Her hangovers were equal to how bad her heart was hurting. No way, she thought, were faith hope and love going to make her heart go away and it seemed God wasn't in a hurry to rescue her. And she needed Him to rescue her she says because by 5 p.m. she'd be pouring the wine once again.

Every day for nearly 18 months she drank, getting down to 92 pounds. Her husband she says was kind of distant pouring himself into his job, but she says while angry at first she learned he just wasn't buying into her self-pity or her drinking and opted to wait her out, waiting for the day that she would give up the fight to maintain her comfort zone of depression and numbness.

Her alcohol abuse had catapulted her into the later stages of alcoholism and her daughter's death broke her heart, leaving her little desire to remain in the world. She could say she was an alcoholic, but had a hard time saying she was battling depression. She'd go back to the first step and be OK until she got to the question "how as your drinking affected your relationships with your immediate family?" The same gut-wrenching pain of Julianna's passing came over her like an earthquake in that she didn't know the answer and could not answer it and would not know the answer until she

again returned home to face whatever damage she had inflicted on her husband and her children.

Looking at the hard question, she knew she wasn't there for her kids in their grief. What if they were hurt emotionally from the stress, what's left, is it too late, and what would she do; how can she repair the damage she asked herself. And in that moment of recognition and acceptance she says her true recovery began. It meant going home and facing the very people she hurt and finding a way to forgive herself and ask for forgiveness. She had to find a way to turn her back on alcohol and never again see it as an escape, a friend, a reward, celebration or vacation. She had to fight for her own life, the life that she counted as unworthy. All the unconditional love that she had given to her daughter she now had to accept was given to her too; for how hard it is she says it is to love difficult people, in particular when you are the most difficult of them all.

Following this, there was the surrender. This was the moment she says she had always dreaded, the minute that she knew she could never drink again and nothing would bring her daughter Juliana back. She was going to now have to find a new way to life, to survive her despair, to regain her soul and she had to find a way to be happy or at least content in this world. She had to find a way to talk to God. She had to find a way to believe that there was still something worth living for in this world, something maybe not equal to loving Julianna, but at least good and rich with purpose.

One of her most profound memories of her early recovery are the words she spoke out loud, hoping God would hear.

"God, do you know how hard it is for me to love you now? Do you know how hurt I am? Do you know that even though I don't understand why me - why I am an alcoholic, why on earth I had to lose my child, why - why - I don't need to know the answers to those questions anymore. In spite of every trial and cross that I carried, either by my own free will or by your command, even though my soul cries constantly for release, even though I will always feel this way - I still love you, God. Even though I wanted to blame you and hate you, I love you anyway."

She cried and cried, praying for God to be there for relief from her hopelessness and despair. And then it came. A small flicker of faith, a bit of courage and tons of honesty. Acceptance and surrender became the foundation of her recovery. With her heart open and her tiny angel tugging on his sleeve whispering, "Hey, can you help my mommy? I think she's lost." She had just enough courage to trust him one more day.

She's been sober since early 2000, and went on to help so many other women make that journey as well. But it only came with soul searching, and with Jesus, going into the desert to confront the temptations and demons.

In all of our lives, it is so easy for things to get out of control and become disordered. And how easy it can be to ignore them, to justify them, to pretend they aren't there; but

they can cause so much harm in our lives. As such its so important to not be afraid to confronting them so we can, like Julie, find the way to true happiness. How is this done?

The starting point is the love of God, who is always reaching out. The flood in our first reading is the consequence of sin; the outcome of a broken relationship that will end in total destruction when on our own. But with God, this of course is not the end of the story. A new covenant is made, one of love. The Father sends the Son to restore us to be the people who we can be. As such with God, the waters of the flood are no longer destructive, but the waters of baptism. God does not will a little girl die. But while He allows things to happen that we do not understand, in this He stands with us, always with His love. The Father allowed the Son to die, but this ultimately led to the resurrection.

Lent gives us a chance to rise too; to be washed from our sins. For while we are baptized often as infants, as Saint Paul tells us baptism isn't a total removal of dirt from the body; the impacts of original sin, namely the problem of sometimes choosing bad things, remain. So now is the time to go into the desert and confront them, always remembering God does not look at us and see the bad so much as the potential and the good, for His love is so deep.

Once we recognized we are loved, let's use that love to identify the temptations and battles in our lives. Alcohol is but one of many things that can be misused, but with so many things the attitude of the addict is the same; ignore it; rely on it as a crutch to get through something; justify it. On the journey of life there are many wild beasts though that can devour us. So we need to identify them; for some it's an addiction to work; for others it's an addiction to sins of the flesh and looking at things that shouldn't be looked at on a phone or a computer and acting out on these urges. With these, I think it's important to also dig deeper; maybe there is something behind the action it self, such as with Julie, the loss of her daughter and depression and grief that led her to rely more and more on alcohol. Maybe in your life there is stress, a mental battle, a feeling of inadequacy, trouble at school or work, or something else. We need to dig deep and find not just the things we are giving into, but the deeper reasons why these things happen.

With that, think of the words of Mark how the angels ministered to Jesus. In our lives, there are many angels; as Julie said she sensed her daughter was interceding for her saying "Mommy needs help" to God. This is why as we face temptations and addictions, we need to be vulnerable. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but strength. So pray. Seek out a confidant. Consider a good counselor to help you dig more deeply. We can't do it alone, but with God's help and that of others, we can be victorious over the Devil.

Third, its good to always have a battle plan. Temptations come and go; it's why we pray the Lord's Prayer so often. Johnny Cash, a man of deep faith who also battled addictions in his life, said in an interview late in life that you always have to be aware of the demons; they are sinister he says and they'll sneak up on you. All of a sudden there will be a beautiful little drug there and you'll want it. He'd cling to Romans 8:13, which

says if you live according to the sinful nature you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” So lest we think hey I’m all good, that sin was years ago, that battle is over, we need to think twice. For temptations will come again and again. So a good battle plan is to look at a way to confront them in the moment; maybe its prayer, or calling up someone for advice, or leaving the house, or making sure certain things aren’t in the house or that we don’t have access to certain things. A wise general doesn’t wait until the enemy is at the gates to come up with a plan for battle, and the same needs to be true for us as we fight sin.

And lastly, again through it all remember God is there for us. We will fall as we fight these temptations; but that is why confession is there, that is why we come to Mass every weekend, that is why we remind ourselves of our sinfulness; not to wallow in shame, but to remember again and again that we are loved.

So entering into this season, let’s be willing to get uncomfortable. Let us Befriend the shadow of our souls, and use the season to incorporate a true digging policy that allows us to find what it is that prevents us from loving God and one another as much as we should. By doing some hard digging and letting those words from the first letter of Peter sink in, that Christ suffered that “he might lead you to God,” we can really make it an effective Lent and find out what needs to be done for us to take the hand of the Master. Only then will we recognize that God acts powerfully, makes the ultimate sacrifice for us and accomplishes great things for our benefit!