

On Good Friday in my homily, one of the things that I reflected upon was how each of us has to ask ourselves a question: who is the person I want to be? Because for all of us, on the journey of life, no matter how hard we try, on our own, we inevitably will have setbacks. But when we face these in life, be they our sins, or the pain of loss, or the fears of the future, what Easter reminds us is that God's love for us is so incredible that the love of Jesus will set us free if only we are no longer afraid, but accept the peace that is offered to us.

Jim Wahlberg is the older brother of Mark Wahlberg, the actor who is also very active in helping Catholics row in their faith. Recently he came out with a book that tells his own journey from darkness to light.

He writes that if you had told him as a kid growing up in Dorchester, Massachusetts that he would be where he is today, he would not have believed you. He doesn't think anyone would have believed that, but God had different plans. He found sobriety — a true miracle — and a full life in Jesus, and his life has been permanently changed.

Jim was born above a bar in Dorchester, Massachusetts, which ended up making a lot of sense to him later in life. In the 1970s, Dorchester was an overwhelmingly working-class Irish Catholic neighborhood, and the Wahlberg family fit in well. His dad worked various jobs, including working at the bar downstairs and driving a truck. His mom took care of the kids and would work at night cleaning buildings. Jim was the fifth of nine children and was a typical middle child starving for attention. Growing up, he looked for it in all the wrong places. There's even a story that, he says when he was a toddler, he escaped from the apartment, and his Mom found him across the street at the bowling alley, entertaining the older kids with his limited vocabulary.

Like most traditional Irish families, he and his siblings were raised Catholic. However he says they didn't really do it for the faith part of it, but more just to check off the boxes. His parents didn't grow up with faith, and Mark notes you can't pass on something you don't have. They were raised in dysfunctional homes and received very little love. When he got older, he would talk to his uncle (his Dad's brother) about how he had never heard his Dad say "I love you" unless he had a few drinks in him. He said they were lucky because they had never heard it at all. This changed how Jim viewed his Dad. He learned that his dad just didn't know how to care for nine kids, for he was never taught how.

His mom was more affectionate; she would hug and let the kids know they were loved, and make sure Christmas was great.

But, Jim notes, there was a third member of the family, booze. He notes booze is a tyrant in the family of an alcoholic as it shapes every relationship. He had his first drink at eight years old, with some of the older neighborhood kids. He felt accepted, and a year later, wanting to impress the older kids, he bought a quart of Budweiser and a pack of cigarettes from one of the teenagers for \$50, which Jim had stolen from a wallet in the YMCA. He drank the whole quart and even started stealing the other kids' beers. He

got sick at home, his mom asked him if he was crazy, and grounded him, but it continued. He notes that that experience changed something in him, for it gave him a sense of belonging, and he started doing petty crime. He'd stay out later and later, getting more in trouble, and descending more into his bad choices as a teenager, spending more time on the streets. Jim recalls how he would see his mom outside the home, too. He'd be out by himself late at night, and he'd see her walking to Ashmont Station to catch a train, to clean floors in a bank, the mother of 9 doing what she could to support her family. He remembers that he'd watch her from a distance, wishing he could just run up to her and say, "Mom, I love you. Please help me." But he didn't. And there was nothing she could do, either. Jim's Dad wouldn't let him back into the house, and she still had eight other kids to feed. One time he did speak to her, but he looked into her eyes and saw sadness for she wanted to help him but didn't know how.

After getting in trouble a few more times, Jim ended up in the government system and spent years jumping between foster homes and institutional housing. Over six years, he went to six different schools. People would take him in, but he would leave on his own, or they would kick him out. By age 17 he had been stealing on the streets for nearly a decade and was finally caught and charged and sentenced to 3 to 5 years. He was sentenced to a medium-security prison but spent most of my time at a high-security prison, learning quickly that the inmates determined the rules, and most of the time, he learned them the hard way.

After Jim got out, his brother picked him up, and they went straight to a bar. He spent the next six months either blackout drunk or nearly so. I continued to do drugs and even tried new ones. I was as broken a young man as you could ever meet.

One night after getting drunk he robbed again, invading the home - of a cop. Home invasion carries a life sentence. Jim knew he was in trouble this time, so he pled guilty. No one from his family was in the courtroom, but the cop who busted him was, and incredibly, he spoke up on Jim's behalf. He knew Jim needed help. He ended up getting six to nine years.

Looking back on this journey, he writes how every big moment in his life was pushing him toward God. Left to his own devices, he ran into nothing but trouble. But when he let God take over, my life changed for the better. One of his priests and one of his saints pointed the way for me.

Jim was in prison again. He was 22 years old, no education, no hopes, staring at a six-to-nine-year prison sentence. If he messed up here and had to serve the whole sentence, he'd be thirty-one when he got out. So what was he going to do?

The Big Hustle, of course, he thought to himself. He had to create the illusion that he was trying to change. He had to shorten this sentence. He needed to give the appearance of being a good boy, a model prisoner, a young man bent on self-improvement.

This was all a lie though he admits; for he just wanted to get out of prison and resume his criminal ways. But to create the illusion, I started going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He went to therapy groups and said what he thought they wanted to hear.

That's when Father Jim Fratus, one of the greatest men he has ever known, approached him. He didn't give him any hard sell. He just told Jim that he had an opening in the chapel for a janitor, a handyman, and a cleanup guy to sweep the floors and empty the trash. Would he be interested?

Well, why not Jim thought? This looked like the perfect hustle. The guy was a priest. He figured he was probably as naïve as a newborn baby; Jim could con him out of anything: cigarettes, food, access to the phone. He could hide away from this crazy place in a quiet chapel. It would give him a chance to think, to be by himself. So "Sure, Father, I'll do it."

Then, little by little, Father Fratus drew Jim in. He said, "Hey, I need you to clean up after Mass Saturday night. Since you have to be there anyway, you may as well come to Mass." Week by week, he tried to bring Jim home to the Faith: a faith that was his by inheritance, but about which he knew less than zero.

One day, he told Jim that we were having a special visitor at MCI Concord: Mother Teresa. "Oh, that's great, Father," he said. Pause. "Who's Mother Teresa?"

Jim really had no idea who she was. To Jim Wahlberg, inmate #44563 of MCI Concord, she was "Who?"

Mother Teresa had come in part due to an invitation from Donald Ouimet, a prisoner who had once been a Franciscan monk. He had written to ask if she'd visit. "If it is God's will," she wrote to him, "I will be able to come to you." It was God's will.

The day came for Mother Teresa's visit: June 4, 1988. Jim saw her from a distance, walking through the entrance to the prison, with its imposing 40-foot walls. Here's this little 77-year-old lady walking toward Jim, surrounded by all these important people — the governor of Massachusetts, the prison warden, the commissioner of the Department of Corrections. Mother Teresa was five feet tall if she stood on her tiptoes, her moth-eaten sweater had holes in it, and her sandals looked like she'd been wearing them since the time of Christ. As she got closer, Jim could see that her pockets were stuffed with money, as if people were trying to buy their way into heaven.

Mother Theresa had a special spot reserved next to the governor, but, instead, she stayed with Jim and the inmates. They were on their knees, along with her and the sisters from her order, brothers and sisters before Christ. Jim reflects that these guys are prisoners and rapists, murderers and bank robbers, drug dealers and just general scumbags like him. Mother Teresa stayed there and prayed with them.

For the first time in his life, he says, he saw the face of Christ. The face of love. Mother Teresa knew that they weren't just inmates. They had names, they had stories, they had souls. When asked by the press why she had come, she responded simply, "You must find the face of God in the faces of these prisoners."

That meeting with Mother Teresa changed his life. Almost immediately, I also started to make changes in my life. I stopped hustling people. He still had temptations, but others saw the difference in me. His mother even came to his confirmation at prison. Even years later, she still tells people the story. "I just watched you walk around that room. I watched the way you talked to people, the way you smiled. I knew that was my son."

Paroled early, when the time came, he was nervous about getting out of prison, and he I started volunteering at an after-school program, to help troubled kids, and here he met his wife Benerada, or "Benny." Father Jim married them in a Catholic church in October of 1995, and he also helped them mend their relationship.

But more still needed to be done.

After a move and more children, they decided to move to Florida. Jim continued to live a sober life their family grew, but he was still missing something. He had given his life to Jesus, but he wasn't living my life for Him. He wasn't happy. He went to Mass sometimes, but other times he would just drop off the kids and leave. Eventually his wife and daughter got him to go on a a retreat, Road to Emmaus and as the retreat went on, the ice around my heart began to melt. They provided an opportunity for Confession, and I finally let it all out. It was a long confession. Afterwards, he had the undeniable feeling of the presence of Christ in my heart.

His heart had been ignited for God. Jim knew I needed to start living for Jesus, but just as it reads in John 16:33, there will be tribulation in this world. Shortly after the retreat, he found out his son was doing drugs. In and out of treatment and trouble, they got him into a Catholic faith-based community for addicts, were giving their testimony. It was powerful. It wasn't easy, but his son agreed to stay with the community, and Jesus used it to save my son's life. After three years there, he decided to stay clean and continue serving.

Jim reflects that he's not a perfect man, but has been blessed as the husband of an amazing woman and the father of three children who have never seen him drink. I also won — or "won" — the trifecta: he was raised by an alcoholic, he became an alcoholic, and then he raised an addict. But his faith, and the steps he took to heal and grow out of this condition, enabled him to find healing, then to be there for my son, learning from him, too. His addiction brought his family to the foot of the Cross. What greater gift could there be?

Jim notes he is not a finished product; he still has so much more to learn. But it is his mission to be a follower of Christ, to show others that there's always hope, redemption, and healing through Jesus Christ. Not everyone will accept his story, but he knows that

God has a plan for everyone, and that He will help others like me to achieve all that God has intended for them. We just have to give Him all we have and see what He can do.

Easter is a day of transformation. The story of the Passion and Resurrection is the greatest love story ever told. And the challenge for us is like Jim, to stop pretending - to remember it's not about putting on a show for others, but letting God's love transform us.

If you think about it we do as humans put a lot of energy into trying to put on a good image. And yet deep down we all have flaws. In this though is the incredible love of God. Perhaps you are not in prison like Jim was but are in a prison of sin that you battle. Maybe you've tried for a long time to overcome it, but can't seem to. Maybe no one really knows about it. Or maybe you justify it and think to yourself, no big deal, it's just a bad habit. And so what happens is it gets hidden, and it can overtake us. We can rely on it more and more to cope with things in life. We can avoid talking about it thinking no one will understand. But in this, there is God. God does understand. He chose to do something about sin, and today is our liberation day. As we hear in the second reading on Easter Sunday, "do you not know that a little leaven leavens all the dough? Clear out the old yeast so that you may become a fresh batch of dough inasmuch as you are unleavened." Look at your lives and realize that whatever it is you might be battling or justifying is "no big deal" or pretending isn't a part of you is there, and turn it over to God. Go to Mass. Go to confession. Pray. Let God into your life, not just a little bit of it, but all of it. Release yourself from shame, and know that God loves you more than you can ever imagine.

And lastly, take a page from Mother Theresa and Father Jim in the story. If we open up our eyes, there is need all around us. There are people with material needs, but so often there. Her entire life she cared for the poor, but also the spiritually poor like she and her sisters did on that day in prison when Jim met her. As Jim put it playing the "big hustle" at first in prison, trying to appear to be changing on the outside while inside he was still quite broken, so it is with so many people God put sin our lives. Maybe you'll see some of them later today when you gather with loved ones. The best gift a person can receive is that of peace, and it is given when we listen, when we forgive, when we pray with someone, when we show compassion, when we give people hope that there is a better tomorrow.

As the Easter story continues, next week we will hear of Jesus meeting the apostles, and the first words He will say at this moment are "peace." Jesus does not come like a character done wrong in a western to seek revenge on those who left Him. Like the apostles, locked up in the room, so we too can be locked up in fear - fear of what others in the family or people we know will think, fear of the "real us" being known, fear of the past or the future. Jesus though meets the apostles where they are at, and does the same for us. So be not afraid to let Him know the real you - and let His peace set you free. Sin is powerful stuff and can ruin a soul. But today is our day of victory and liberation - so let us let go and let God, coming as we are to Him, and like the apostles

and women who left the empty tomb, help to fill this world with hope and peace by letting others know they are loved and welcome, and how truly amazing grace is.