

One of the principles of spiritual growth in life is that from something small, amazing things can happen over time when a person opens themselves up to working with God's grace. As we hear in the Gospel, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that when sown on the ground is the smallest, but once sown, springs up and becomes the largest of plants. And indeed, when we look back on our lives, there are many moments where when they began, we may have wondered where is this going, but then over time, seeing what God has done through us, we are amazed at the growth that has happened.

I think parents in particular can relate to this. When a person welcomes a child, it's not as if the child has an instruction manual. A parent has to grow and find their abilities to live out their vocation. And the newborn who is in many ways like a new mustard seed, will eventually grow when nurtured by the love he or she is given.

You are probably familiar with the name Charles de Gaulle, one of the twentieth century's greatest Frenchman. Yet for all his achievements, the ultimate drama of de Gaulle's life wasn't World War II. It was his daughter, Anne. And what Anne gave to him was immeasurable.

As de Gaulle confided to a priest at the beginning of his lonely crusade in 1940 to save France's honor, "for me, this child is a grace, she is my joy, she helps me to look beyond all the failures and honors, and always to look higher." His daughter helped him to grow into the great man he became.

On January 1, 1928 Charles and Yvonne de Gaulle's third child was born. Within a few months, it became apparent that Anne was severely disabled.

It's important to remember that this was an era in which disabled children were neither seen nor heard in polite company. Down Syndrome children were referred to as "mongols." Some even speculated that the condition resulted from alcoholism or some form of impropriety on the parents' part. It wasn't until 30 years after Anne de Gaulle's birth that another devout French Catholic, Professor Jerome Lejeune, and his research team discovered that Down Syndrome was caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21.

In the 1930s, it was common for French families to place disabled children permanently in hospitals that were woefully ill-equipped to care for them.

Charles and Yvonne de Gaulle, however, refused to send Anne to live with, as he would say, “strangers.” In de Gaulle’s words, “God has given her to us. We must take responsibility for her, wherever she is and whatever she will be.” In a way, de Gaulle’s reaction to Anne’s entry into his life foreshadowed the spirit of resistance expressed in his famous appeal of June 18, 1940 to Frenchmen to continue the war against Germany.

The de Gaulles worked hard to build a place for, to use de Gaulle’s expression, “a child who is not like the others” in their family. From all accounts, Yvonne de Gaulle adopted a matter-of-fact approach. She focused on the practicalities of caring for a disabled child. Charles de Gaulle’s contribution was to envelop Anne in a web of affection. According to his son, de Gaulle wanted to give Anne the assurance that he loved her just as much as her older brother and sister—that her disability meant nothing to him.

The tall army officer infamous for his air of haughty disdain as leader of Free France during World War II and later as French President didn’t hesitate to unbend to play on the floor with Anne. De Gaulle sang to Anne, told her stories, and even allowed her to play with one of his most

treasured possessions: his officer's kepi hat. De Gaulle also said prayers with Anne in the evening. Painstakingly, she would repeat each word after her father. "You see," de Gaulle proudly informed his relatives, "she knows her prayers!"

When away on army business, de Gaulle constantly inquired about Anne's well-being. On one occasion, Anne had an operation while he was absent on maneuvers. De Gaulle telephoned incessantly to ask if she was in pain, whether the procedure had succeeded, what the doctors were saying, etc. Anne seems to have been aware of just how much she meant to her father. Her first governess recalled that Anne adored him and would be visibly upset when his responsibilities took de Gaulle away from his family. Though the de Gaulles valued their privacy, they didn't view Anne as an embarrassment. There are pictures of her standing awkwardly with members of the de Gaulles' extended family. Most striking, however, is a photo of Anne taken at a beach in Brittany in 1933. She is sitting on her father's lap. He, dressed in a homburg hat and three-piece suit, gently holds her hands as the five year-old girl looks intensely into her father's eyes. It's an image of unconditional love.

While Anne lived, the de Gaulles took her everywhere with them. That included less-than-hospitable locations such as the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon. De Gaulle was posted there in 1929, partly because some of his superiors wanted to sideline an officer who asked awkward questions about France's readiness for the next war. There was, however, no question of leaving Anne behind. Instead she went with them, with the de Gaulles hiring a full-time governess to help them care for Anne in a Middle-Eastern country.

There was, of course, a cost to all this. Though Charles de Gaulle came from a minor aristocratic family and his wife from an upper-middle class background, the de Gaulles were not wealthy. His modest army pay was their main source of income. Hiring full-time help was subsequently an enormous financial liability, but one they didn't hesitate to assume.

Then there was the psychological burden. As Yvonne de Gaulle's biographer observes, Yvonne was an exuberant, even care-free young woman before Anne was born. After Anne's birth, that woman gradually disappeared. Yvonne became a much quieter, even somewhat withdrawn person who dreaded public appearances. This, however, didn't stop her

from undertaking the extremely difficult task of successfully fleeing France with the profoundly disabled Anne in tow as the German Army swept across the country in May and June 1940.

The Nazis, not starting from much of a mustard seed but emerging right away as this seemingly insurmountable force, made clear right from the beginning, the disabled had no place in a National Socialist world. They were life unworthy of life.

Starting in September 1939, the Nazi government began removing Down Syndrome children and infants suffering from other disabilities from their parents. These children were taken to “health facilities” and killed by lethal injection or gas poisoning. In the name of “racial health” and other eugenics nonsense, the regime murdered thousands of disabled children. Among them was a 15 year-old Down Syndrome cousin of the future pope, Joseph Ratzinger.

This would have been Anne de Gaulle’s fate if she had ever fallen into Nazi hands. Although de Gaulle never referenced it specifically, it’s likely that the brutal treatment of the disabled was one of the things he had in mind when

referring to the evil of the Nazi regime. When de Gaulle refused to surrender in 1940 and was branded a traitor by France's political and military elites, it was certainly the act of an intensely patriotic man unwilling to accept his country's abasement by the Nazis. But de Gaulle's act of resistance also concerned safeguarding his defenseless daughter from those who viewed her as sub-human.

Like many Down Syndrome children, Anne de Gaulle died at an early age. Her brother Philippe recollects arriving at his parents' house in 1948 to find the entire residence immersed in silence. No one, he writes, dared to say anything to his grief-stricken father. Anne was subsequently buried in the cemetery at the de Gaulles' parish church. After attending their regular Sunday Mass and always on the anniversary of her death, Charles and Yvonne de Gaulle would visit Anne's grave. 22 years after she died, her father was laid to rest beside Anne. Her mother joined them in 1979.

That, however, wasn't the end of the story. Back in October 1945, the de Gaulles raised enough money from private donors to buy the chateau de Vert-Cœur in the department of Yvelines, not far from Paris. They then began creating a home for intellectually disabled girls. A few months after

Anne's death, the Fondation Anne-de-Gaulle opened its doors at the chateau. Staffed by nuns, funded by the considerable royalties generated by de Gaulle's memoirs, and presided over by Yvonne de Gaulle until her death, the Foundation continues to serve the disabled today. And all of this began thanks to the life of a little girl, and the love given to her by her loving parents as they grew in their vocation.

One of Charles de Gaulle's biographers, the late Jean Lacouture, records him as once saying, "Without Anne, I could never perhaps have done what I did. She gave me the heart and the inspiration." In that sense, the man of June 18 and his beloved Anne teach us something which we are tempted to forget—that all of us can find strength in weakness and that nothing is more powerful than self-giving love. A love that turns a mustard seed into a great tree.

In our Gospel, Jesus talks about the mustard seed being the smallest of all, but when it is planted and grows, it turns into the greatest of trees. It doesn't happen overnight, but through the process God is working to bring about His plan. But it takes people like Charles de Gaulle to respond to that plan. And he's one of a long list: Mother Teresa of Calcutta hearing God's

call within a call to combat poverty; a young man named Benedict living as a hermit in a cave for a few years to listen to God as people thought he lost his mind going on to found the Benedictines; a widow in New York converting to Catholicism, becoming Mother Elizabeth Seton and being ostracized by her neighbors and family for it going on to set up the Catholic School System. The point is that so many big things start small. But God has a plan. The challenge for us is do we want to listen to that plan and participate in it.

Well, we are here today, so hopefully that means the answer is “yes.” But just how does one do that?

I think it starts with listening to God. Saint Paul says in our second reading “we walk by faith, not by sight.” Charles de Gaulle would spend time in prayer discerning his vocation and how to lead the French through war, and also his family. When you look at all of the big things that happen in our faith, they start with that encounter with God. We have a lot on our calendars, but is there any room for God? How often do you pray during the week? Do you try to make time for silence too so you can just listen to the voice of God? Like Elijah the prophet who heard God’s plans for him in

the tiny whispering sound in the cave, sometimes when we are quiet God speaks the loudest.

Once we do that, it's important to trust in God along the way. Ezekiel prophesies from Babylon after the kingdom of Judah had failed when they gambled that foreign alliances could protect them (rather than just trusting in God.) Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, trusted in Egypt, not God. Ezekiel though identifies a more reliable way to achieve that security - trust in God without a backup plan. It's easy to get frustrated when things don't work out. To wonder why more progress isn't being made. But remember God's plan takes time to unfold.

So, too must we trust in ourselves. Sometimes something seems overwhelming. We might think we can't do it, or a person will never change so what's the point trying to evangelize to them. Some of the other defeated French leaders wanted De Gaulle to give into the Nazis, but he refused. We can't get bogged down into "what can I do" kind of thinking when the odds seem insurmountable. Even against insurmountable odds, over the long term it's amazing what can happen. Our job is to plant the

seed, make the move, to take the risk and the small step. God wants to use us. He believes in us, we must believe in ourselves.

Patience is also so very important. It might take a while, but with patience it is amazing at what can happen. It's frustrating when things don't happen overnight with projects we start or when we are trying to help others, but over time amazing things happen.

As we go along, we must also celebrate the small victories and the simple joys too. Take a couple who builds a marriage over many years. There are many memories; the honeymoon; buying a home; a family trip or milestone. But all along that marriage, there are a million little things that happen where two people grow closer together, so many acts of love from saying "I'm sorry" to doing an act of kindness for the other person to praying together. For de Gaulle, it was seeing his little girl smile, and then learn to say prayers with him, and a number of other small steps. Sometimes we are so focused on the end goal we can't see the progress that is being made along the way.

Right now we are in the midst of celebrating 150 remarkable years as a parish. Back then, we were in farm fields and our ancestors were celebrating Mass in area homes. A church was built in 1868, promptly destroyed by a severe storm in May of 1991. Then in 1924 along came another church and in 1953 a school, and in 2003 our new sanctuary was completed with a new school in 2008. Down the road, I have hopes for possibly a chapel and a youth minister too - but we'll see what happens. Whether I see that or not, what I see every day at Saint Joseph's are great things going on. Even in just 3 years that I've been here now, there've been changes as programs and staff have come and gone, and that will always be the case. But what I know is that as our parish moves forward, it continues to thrive because God has a plan for us. He's sent us the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. And that Spirit has inspired so many people here to realize the vision that began in the mid 19th century with some farmers and townspeople having Mass in their homes - that a parish was to be built in the prairie, a parish that grew and grew as the years went by. This parish grew from a mustard seed, and so many other things in our lives do too. So listen to what God has to tell you. It might be tough. It might seem impossible. And you might be tempted to give up along the way. But when you keep at it, you also will stand before God one day as He says

“well done good and faithful servant welcome home” and shows you all that you did with His help and grace. So plant that seed and work the vineyard, and don’t fear saying “yes” to God because when we do, the work might be hard, but the harvest will be something truly amazing.