

I think it's safe to say that if we were to ask for a show of hands and ask the question "who here would like to go to heaven?" Most everyone in the church would raise their hands.

The issue though is to get to heaven, we have to keep our eyes fixed on that goal. We have to grow in holiness and have that complete focus on God, who will satisfy all of our deepest longings and desires. Doing that is pretty tough, because while we are on this earth, it can seem like heaven is far away. On top of that, it can be easy to look for the heaven in the here and now, putting our energy into things that we think will fulfill us, when in fact they hold us back from reaching our potential and perhaps even enslave us in a vicious cycle of addiction.

The good news in all of this though is that heaven is attainable, because of what Jesus had done for us, because of God's infinite mercy, and because He has given us the tools we need to make the choice to follow Him. The challenge though is doing that requires truly looking at where we have been and where we are going, and surrendering to and trusting in that love while at the same time remembering that while He journeys with us and gives us so much on the way, we also have to own up to our actions and work on daily becoming a better person by putting our sins and struggles on the forefront and striving to grow in grace.

For many people, there are sins they battle with over the course of many years, and the more they happen, the more they become a part of one's life, and it can be something that just keeps bringing them down again and again and again.

Today, Audrey Assad is a 30-something practicing Catholic, but her road to finding freedom in God took a number of years of a struggle, a very personal, private one she felt she could tell no one about.

She recalls as a child, she was prone to shame. She'd have a hard time accepting that she was not perfect. It was her fig leaf she says and in some respects, the extent of her faith. She looks back on instances in her life and says with certainty that shame was at play in her childish mind so many times, and she lived in fear of it. It sometimes caused her to avoid sin, but not for love of God.

She was raised in an evangelical protestant home, later converting to Catholicism. And while there was teaching on loving the word of God, formation in other areas was lacking. Among these was the intimacy between men and women. She knew there was physical intimacy between couples, but didn't know what it was about. Come adolescence, she would have crushes on boys but had a hard time working out these emotions.

At the age of 15, she was flipping through TV channels in the era when some cable channels were scrambled, and on one, she saw a somewhat decipherable image not sure of what she was watching, but the static cleared just enough so she would see partially disguised bodies. And unfortunately, not having had teaching on the theology of

the body, she began to have even more shame. Whereas prior shame drove her toward the God she feared, what she saw that day drove her into a pit of isolation. Now, she listened to the voice of the Enemy, who condemned her, and she listened. She felt dirty; she'd feel disgusting, and no longer was shame constructive but rather destructive, and it took over.

In Sunday school the teachers one day talked about the harmful effects of inappropriate images of the human body in media, but it wasn't all that helpful. She feared her handwriting being figured out on the "anonymous" questionnaire; the youth were given some facts on a sheet of paper and watched a movie that stated the worst criminals often had addictions to what she had. Of course, all this was not all that helpful other than to reinforce to Audrey that what she was dealing with was bad and really bad. It only ignited a forest fire of more thoughts in her mind about how bad she seemingly was. On top of this, it implied it was a male problem, not a female problem. And so the cycle would continue; shame, and acting out on temptations through visual images or abusing the body, followed by more shame.

During this time though she was more visible at church. She was even on the board of directors to help for youth events; taught vacation Bible school; sang in the choir. But inside she had these temptations, sometimes giving into them, and this unhealthy silence and sadly self-hate.

Eventually in her late teens, the addiction was not as prevalent, in part due to shame. But she writes it drove her to avoid sin but kept her from away from the God she loved. And it hit a point where she knew God was not satisfied with this, and neither was Audrey. Life was better without the constant presence of sensual images to look at, but she was dying inside. She believed in God she says, but she did not know how to let Him love her. And she did not know how to process her addiction.

In college, she lived at home and commuted, and went to a Baptist church where she led music for a Bible study and even sang. It was difficult because in her mind, she was thinking about her past addiction. But healing slowly began; among 10 other college students, singing songs of worship to God, the concept of redemption began to form within her. When she finally cracked open a book called *Secrets of the Vine* by Bruce Wilkinson, she got the message: Jesus is the vine and we are the branches; the branches though must be pruned, cut, if they want to grow and stay on the vine. She knew in that moment that God was calling her to more than just an iron will to addiction and a life of shame and isolation. She understood then that freedom meant more than not sinning - it meant receiving the mercy and love of God and finding her identity in that love. Her ability to absorb, accept and truly internalize God's love had been hindered by the same shame instinct that drove her to avoid sin as a child. Now, instead of helping her, it was holding her back. She realized she had to ask forgiveness and then receive it, and move on to better things. Suddenly she knew and believed God really loved her. He actually saw something good in her and always had.

She spoke about her past one night with her parents, who were supportive and loving. She prayed about who to tell, and one by one certain friends came to mind, and something amazing happened. She found out she wasn't alone. Those friends spoke of the same addiction. She heard a phrase from both sides of the conversation: "I thought I was the only one!" All those years she thought she was the only one in her prison, but there had been so many more behind the same bars - they were just living in isolates cells.

And now, freedom began to flourish in her heart finally. Now on staff at the Baptist church, she spoke to the high schoolers about her struggles, and was overwhelmed by the response of several of the girls, all of whom were in youth leadership positions. They sat up straight and listened, and this experience made Audrey realize how much freedom there may be for women in bondage to the same struggle she had, if only those who had been delivered from it would speak up.

The one thing she still needed though was to travel the road further, and receive formation. Jesus rescued her, but she needed to go further. And so she explored the Catholic faith at the age of 21, and read Christopher West's lectures on John Paul II's Theology of the Body. She remembers a line about ghosts and corpses that arrested her: that a corpse was frightening because it was a spirit without a body, and that when we lust after someone, we separate the person's body from their spirit and as such do not give them the full dignity that a human deserves. Finally, someone had told her what lust was, not just "this is wrong and don't do it." Now, she could face the temptation and recognize it for what it was: the devil's cheap counterfeit of that which is truly good. Formation gave fullness to her resolve.

And so armed with that formation, she told her story and started helping people, each time getting emails, and comments on Facebook and messages from young women from the age of 13 to 18, "I thought I was the only one who battled this until I heard you talk."

What Audrey has done though through her work is to fight the Devil; to fight the lie that people cannot talk about their private sin without shaming the people they loved. Instead, Audrey is now the link to lead people to the knowledge of a merciful God, a God who uses her to help people break free from sin.

Like Audrey, all of us are on a journey, and we all have our sins we battle. Some we think about as these big horrible things that surely no one else must go through and we can't talk about. Others we've become addicted to and aren't even aware of our addiction. And sin comes in so many forms. Some think of sins of the flesh like she struggled with, but others are addicted to alcohol; some are addicted to pride; or control or gossip. But what all of these things have in common is they can make us feel good for a time. But they also enslave us too in that they prevent us from becoming the person we want to become. The question is what then are we going to do about it to truly overcome them?

This week in our first reading, we hear how the Israelites are not happy. They have left Egypt and it's been a while and they are still in the desert. We are told in Exodus that the whole Israelite community grumbled, and they want to go back to Egypt. In their own words, "would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!" How quickly they forgot how miserable they were, and of what God did for them in coming to their rescue. God though does not abandon them; instead, we are told that he sends down quail or manna to give them food for the journey, and it strengthens them. As Catholics we make the link to the Eucharistic bread that comes from the Lord, His very Body and Blood. He says in the Gospel this week: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

There's so much in that statement, but when I read it, I think of it as a two way street. God loving us and coming to us, but us making the journey to God. God comes to us, quite literally in the Son, in the Spirit, and also in the Eucharist, but we also make the step to the Lord. So the question is how can one come to the Lord, and make that transition that Audrey made, from seeing God not as a God who is watching every step we make and out to get us, but rather a God of mercy and love who we want to grow closer to by overcoming our sins and struggles and being transformed into a saint?

The first step I think is to have an honest assessment with ourselves of where we are at. It's how we start Mass each week by calling to mind our sins; it's what we do as we prepare for confession by doing an examination of conscience. This is so we have a better understanding of what we need to work on. Sometimes as in Audrey's case we are aware of something we are battling but don't know how to battle it; other times a sin becomes so engrained in someone's life that they don't even think much of it or maybe don't consider it a sin. Remember what Pope Francis said when he first became pope and asked who he was. His reply? "A sinner" to the reporter. All of us have struggles, the challenge is not to just keep them hidden and try to avoid them on our own due to the presence of shame like Audrey did at first, but to open our eyes to their reality, and more importantly to the antidote.

The antidote is of course God's love and mercy. It's a topic Pope Francis has spoken of so often. A few years ago in 2016 at one of his Wednesday audiences with people, he spoke of Exodus where God defines himself as the God of mercy. In his words, God is "steadfast in love and faithfulness" and love "makes the first step, doesn't depend on human merits but gives an immense gratuity," adding that "nothing can stop divine solicitude not even sin because it knows how to go beyond sin, overcoming evil and forgiving it." Sometimes we can feel like we have to appear perfect like Audrey did, with all this pressure she put on herself thinking no one else was going through what she was battling. But inside, we are all broken and need God's love. So it's so important to trust in that mercy. That no matter what our sins might be, God's love is there, and we open ourselves to receiving it by remembering that the Eucharist is there for this very reason, to help us overcome our sins and grow in grace. Of course it's life-long and gradual too; we may fall again, or have some new sin crop up. The fight never ends, but

neither does God's mercy. That's why we receive Communion again and again, and also why we go to confession, because God's love is always there.

The thing of it is though is God is in the ring with us, but we never can throw in the towel. And that's where it can be tough. I looked up "fleshpots" in the dictionary, and here's what it was defined as: "places providing luxurious or hedonistic living." It probably refers to the pots where meat was cooked. The point is it's a good image to sit with because we should ask ourselves what is our fleshpot, and do we return to it? Sometimes sins like Audrey battled can become sins of habit and can overtake us, but notice what she did: she kept fighting it, and eventually she got the formation by studying her faith more which led her to know more about her temptations but also about God's mercy and the Catholic faith. As we battle sins no matter what form they take, like the Israelites we might be tempted to just give up, to want to go back to old ways of behavior and make excuses that we just can't beat the temptation, that it's no big deal or is minor, or it's just too tough so don't worry about it. Well on the one hand God's love is always there, but we want to grow in grace, so we also don't want to minimize sin. When we are freed from sin through the sacraments, we want to learn from our mistakes, we want to gradually become a better person. And being sin can bring us pleasure, we can sometimes forget that it in fact enslaves us. So when tempted to fall back into old habits, or when bringing sins to confession, look back on them and ask yourself what was I doing, how I did I end up doing that, what was the situation nor the context or the people I was with that may have contributed to that, and what can be a plan of action so I can try to avoid this in the future?

Lastly, we must never forget we are in the journey together. The Israelites go as a people to the Promised Land; Jesus has a group of apostles and disciples who evangelize and spread the faith. Audrey understood this which is why she found help from others by opening up about her own struggles, and then used her battle to become the wounded healer. On our journey through life, it's important to find good people that we can talk to about what is in our heart, and also to be there for others who come to us for advice, counsel or forgiveness. If we truly want to grow in holiness, we can't just talk about the things that would constitute "Minnesota nice," but rather need to talk about the difficult things too. Sometimes our very weaknesses end up making us stronger in the long run, and also can help others in their own battles as was the case with Audrey. Unfortunately while sometimes other people can cause shame, at the same time other people can do much to help us be liberated from shame - so make sure to seek them out, and strive to be a bridge to others to help them experience God's mercy.

We must never forget that God created the world and all of us, and inside all of us is so much good. We are precious to God and loved by Him forever. Free will is a gift; and sometimes through the effects of original sin we get caught up in all kinds of sin, thinking it will make us happy or bring joy when actually it just brings enslavement, pain and remorse. Jesus is the one who parts the Red Sea for us so we can journey to God. Now though is the time of the journey. Jesus did not say it would be easy, but He promised us that He would be with us always - something we are about to call to mind as we receive His sacred body. As we come forth to do that, may we strive daily to

respond to the love that Jesus gives us, not longing for the past like the Israelites do thinking that our former way of life was somehow better, but looking forward to the heavenly kingdom remembering that while it might be a long journey and difficult to grow in grace, longing for our fleshpots of Egypt isn't the solution. Rather journeying forward with the knowledge that yes, we are sinners but yes, we are also loved is - so together with God's love and helping one another, may we journey on the long road to redemption with the knowledge that we never do so alone.