

As I look back on my life so far, one of the things that has been a constant in my life is change. Now change wasn't something I always sought out. Indeed if you were to go back and ask me something 10 or 20 years ago, at the time I might have said there is no way this would change, because my mind is made up.

Now there are some things that I know I'll never change, such as favorite foods, my allegiance to a certain football team that wears purple, or how important family is to me. But if I am going to achieve true spiritual growth, and learn what God wants me to do, I have to be sure to listen to Him, but then also be open to taking the steps to become a better person.

Nancy Anderson, originally from Winona, Minnesota and now a Florida resident, came to see this in her marriage.

She shares how one day her brother Dan who had been staying with she and her husband came to her and said he had had it, and was going home, as the bickering between Nancy and her husband was constant, and driving him crazy.

Nancy though didn't see anything wrong at first. She defended their behavior. "Hey, it's not like we disagree about everything. Ron and I agree on all the major issues. We hardly ever fight about 'big stuff' like where we go to church, how to raise a Nick, or the fact that I'm a better driver than he is. We just disagree about 'little stuff.'"

He signed and said, "Well I'm sick of hearing you go to war over where to put the towel rack, which TV shows to watch or who did or didn't use a coaster. It's all dumb stuff. None of it will matter a year from now. I can tell that Ron is really mad by the way he stomped up the stairs. Why did you have to criticize the way he mowed the lawn? I know it wasn't perfect, but couldn't you just let it go?"

"No," she replied. "We are having company tomorrow, and I want the yard to be perfect. So I told him to fix it. Big deal. Anyway I won, because he removed it."

Dan shook his head and said "If you keep this up, you may win the arguments but lose your husband."

She slugged his arm and said stop being so melodramatic.

The next evening, Ron and Nancy went out to dinner with some friends they hadn't seen in several years. They remembered Carl as being funny and outgoing, but when Nancy saw him that night, he seemed rather quiet and looked exhausted. His wife, Beth, did most of the talking. She told them about her fabulous accomplishments and then endlessly bragged about her brilliant, Mensa-bound children. She only mentioned Carl to criticize him.

After they ordered dinner, she said "Carl, I saw you flirting with that waitress!" even though he wasn't.

“Carl” she wined, “can’t you do anything right? You are holding your fork like a little kid.”

When he mispronounced an item on the dessert menu, she said, “No under you flunked out of college, you can’t read.” She laughed so hard that she snorted but she was the only one laughing.

Carl didn’t even respond. He just looked over at Ron and Nancy with an empty face and a blank stare. Then he shrugged his sad shoulders. The rest of the evening was oppressive as she continued to harangue and harass him about almost everything he said or did. Nancy thought to herself, “I wonder if this is how my brother feels when I criticize Ron?”

They said good-bye to Beth and Carl and left the restaurant in silence. When they got in the car, Nancy spoke first. “Do I sound like her?”

“You’re not that bad.”

“How bad am I?”

“Pretty bad” Ron half whispered.

The next morning, as Nancy poured water into the coffee pot, she looked over at her “Devotions for Wives” calendar.

The Bible verse read “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.” To it, Nancy thought she’d add “or with her own mouth.”

A nagging wife annoys like a constant dripping she thought to herself. So how could she stop this horrible pattern.

“Put a guard over my mouth that I may not sin with it,” she prayed. “Oh Lord, show me how!”

She carefully spooked the vanilla nut decaf into the pot as she remembered the ay she forgot the filter. The coffee was bitter and full of undrinkable grounds. She had to throw it out.

She thought “The coffee, without filtering, is like my coarse and bitter speech.”

She prayed, “Oh please, Lord, install a filter between my brain and my mouth. Help me to choose my words carefully and speak with smooth and mellow tones. Thank you for teaching me the parable of the coffee filter. I won’t forget it.

An hour later, Ron timidly asked, “What do you think about moving the couch over by the window? We’ll be able to see the TV better.”

Her first thought was to tell him why that was a dumb idea. The couch will fade if you put it in the sunlight and besides you already watch too much TV was her instinct. But instead of her usual hasty reply, she let the coarse thoughts drip through her newly installed filter and calmly said, "That might be a good deal. Let's try it for a few days and see if we like it. I'll help you move it."

He lifted his end of the sofa in stunned silence. Once they had it in place, he asked Nancy if she had a headache and was okay.

She said she was just fine and never better, and got her husband a cup of coffee.

Not too long after that they celebrated their 25th anniversary, and Nancy said her filter has been in place ever since, though it may occasionally spring a leak. She's also expanded that filter principle beyond her marriage and found that it's especially useful when speaking to telemarketers, traffic cops and teenagers.

Like Nancy, at any given point we might be oblivious to the need for change in our lives. Perhaps it something about our behavior that needs to change or we need to become more thoughtful of others like Nancy, or maybe we're just stubborn about something and have tunnel vision that we aren't aware that maybe we can't do something anymore, or that God is calling us elsewhere. Change though is something all of us have to be open to, which means listening to God and others, and then focusing on what we need to do when we discern what God is calling us to do.

The Gospel this week is a little disturbing if you take it out of context. Jesus is approached by a woman for help. But Jesus doesn't help her. At first. First He is silent. Then when she won't pipe down, the disciples come to Jesus to tell her to go away. When she keeps up she is told that Jesus only came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then when she keeps persisting Jesus says it isn't right to take the children's food and give it to the dogs, probably a harsh translation into English but still a term used by Jews towards Canaanites. But still, she keeps on and challenges Jesus saying even the dogs eat the scraps from the table. And in the end, her persistence and faith win the day. Here is a woman with a single focus - and because of it her request is finally answered.

Two things stand out in the Gospel.

One is the silence of Jesus. Silence isn't anything new in the Gospels. Jesus is silent when he writes in the ground when the mob accuses the woman caught in adultery. He is silent before Pilate. He is silent during much of the Passion. So what of the silence of Jesus towards the woman at first?

He is not being mean or ignoring her. Rather, Jesus is silent because He is listening to this woman. And when He does speak, it may come across as a rebuke, but really it is a test. This woman listens to Jesus, but also to her heart, which tells her that God will ultimately come through for her.

For Nancy and her friend Beth, both were doing a lot of talking at first. But they weren't doing a lot of listening. It was only when Nancy finally listened to her brother and saw how Beth was treating her husband that she began to think more deeply about herself. For us, we spend a lot of time talking and communicating. But it's worth asking ourselves, can we be like Jesus and listen? With God, sometimes we need to be silent and just let Him speak to us. We also need to remember that just because we do not get an answer right away, this does not mean that God does not care. As William Yeats wrote in his poem "Long-Legged Fly," "With no more sound than the mice make His hand moves to and fro. Like a long-legged fly upon the stream His mind moves upon silence." To help me in preparing this homily, I used Bing and the Internet and got a lot of material quickly. God doesn't work like that though. When we are silent, we can hear more deeply God and His word. We can also like Nancy hear what others are really trying to say to us. So many who have spent time alone with God on a retreat, in nature, or in the church before the Blessed Sacrament, have heard God. But just like last week in the tiny whispering sound, we have to be patient to hear God and remember silence does not mean indifference, but the exact opposite. When we are silent, we can also truly listen to others. Carl didn't tell Beth she was being demeaning or that he felt stressed by her because she didn't bother to listen to him, or hear what was not being said. We also need to resist the urge to fix others, or to be a know-it-all, and truly read between the lines so we can truly help one another.

But with that, we also help ourselves. When we are silent, it gives us the chance to be introspective, to look at ourselves, to question, and to change. It's clear when we look at the New Testament Jesus came for all. We see that in the visit of the Magi from the East at Jesus' birth; and we see it in Jesus calling Paul after He ascends to heaven to minister to the Gentiles. But what I love with this story is that it almost like a turning point for Jesus. He's not making an exception for the Canaanite woman. Rather Jesus is turning not away from the Jews, but rather He's now turning to the Gentiles too. At the center of all of this is silence. Almost as if Jesus is thinking about this woman and His mission as it enters a new phase. A pitfall in the path to spiritual greatness is stubbornness or being blind to the need for change. It's all well and fine to be stubborn about your sports team, or the foods you like. But to grow in life we need to change. Like Nancy, we need to realize when there are behaviors in our life that need reform. We need to listen to God and to others for when we do, so many good things can happen because of change. Our relationships can improve. Our happiness can increase. New doors can open. We find new talents we never knew we have. Just as Jesus seems to change His mission here in the Gospel and expand it, we need to listen to Him and to others and discern what in our life needs to change, for change is ongoing. When we do, we can find the path to spiritual greatness.

I'm not much for coffee, but even I know that the filter helps to bring out the taste, and without it it certainly won't taste well. God has given us all a filter too - and when we talk less, listen more, and let the advice we've been given filter through us and also filter what we are about to say, we'll be amazed at the results. There's nothing wrong with having a plan or giving advice to others. But let's also never forget all of us are on a spiritual journey, and to get to our final destination, it's important to listen to the

directions we are given. We might find that along the way we are told to take an alternate route (or two, or three) but we've got something much greater than a GPS guiding us - we have God Himself, and listening to Him we'll never be led down the wrong road.