

James Cagney was known for his frequent appearances in gangster movies, and to this day they are often shown on Turner Classic Movies on cable. And among the best might be his portrayal of Rocky Sullivan.

The movie begins though when Rocky is just a teenager. Rocky and his buddy Jerry are trying to rob a train car that is carrying fountain pens. The police show up; Jerry being a faster runner gets away, while Rocky is arrested and sent to reform school. Jerry goes on to become a priest; Rocky goes on to a life of crime.

While the story is fictional, the title and movie get at to a very important reality. All of us has the potential to be an angel or a saint, but all of us have a soul that is dirtied by sin and it's effects. A person doesn't just become a criminal or wake up one day and decide to commit a serious sin. Rather, it just happens through a series of events in life.

In real life, a man who also went from a life of sin to a life of grace is the Rev. Willie Holloway. In his case though, he wasn't stealing pens. He was focused on alcohol, drugs and the people who introduced him to that addiction.

Sharing his story, he writes of his old friends:

"Some of them OD'ed on cocaine," remembers Willie. "There was one that got shot and lost his life. Some wind up in prison because of selling drugs. Too many of them was dying."

Some of Willie's Holloway's friends have been gone for decades. Others have died more recently. He could have easily ended up like them.

"Don't be a day go by I don't think about some of them. And sometimes I find myself at the cemetery, even now, just going down and visiting their grave."

Willie grew up in the small town of Neelyville, Missouri. His father was an alcoholic who physically and verbally abused Willie and his siblings.

"I would think to myself, 'Why was I born? You know, why was I born? Was I born to go through this? What, why am I here?' I seen other friends of mine and their fathers seemed like they would take them to, you know, places, out to eat. They would take them to their little ball games. We didn't have that. And I longed for that. My father never could tell me that he loved me. My mother did but my father never could tell me that he loved me."

Willie's mother took him to church, and he accepted Christ as his savior at 11 years old. His pastor taught him about the unconditional love found through Jesus Christ.

Said Willie, "That's what I was searching for. I was searching for love. And searching for this God that I knew that created the universe. And I wanted to know more about Him and I did know—begin to know more about Him."

But it didn't last long. Life at home was hard to cope with, and Willie put aside what happened at church. Alcohol seemed to help him cope.

“Drinking was my way of escaping a lot of this,” he says. “That’s the reason I drank a lot. I was sad all the time. I didn’t talk that much.”

He met Evelyn while in high school, and they got married. They had six children over the next six years, but cocaine and alcohol ruined any chance of Willie being the father he needed to be.

“The abuse that I, that we endured as children, this followed me, it continued to follow—haunt me. And that’s where a lot of my drinking and drugging came. I wanted to do this to try to numb it, to forget about it. But every time I’d wake up the problem is still there.”

He also had a growing sense of shame that drove him further into addiction.

He says: “Every time I would do cocaine, I felt very, very guilty because I know that I wasn’t supposed to be doing this. I had a loving family that cared about me at home. And I’m sitting in a crack house with other addicts.”

Over the next 20 years, Willie racked up six DUIs, and went to prison twice for violating his parole. He OD’ed twice on cocaine, trying to kill himself. After the second attempt, he began to see things more clearly.

He hit a point where he finally surrendered to God, because he knew if he did not, he’d be separated from God forever. And finally he did. He had a vivid dream where he heard a voice he perceived as God giving him a vision of hell, a place he would go to if he did not change. Willie hadn’t been to church in over 20 years, but he went back, and told his pastor about the dream. It was the same pastor he had as a kid.

“He had let me know that, God is trying to get your attention, son. And he let me know that he loved me. And even though I had left the church as a young man, he embraced me.”

Willie prayed with the pastor that day and rededicated his life to Jesus Christ.

“I knew that God had put—wrapped His arms around me, I could feel that. I no longer felt like I was bound by a chain. And so that, that’s when everything began to fall in place for me. I began to see my family, the real love that they showed me. The love that they was trying to show me years ago, I began to see this then.”

That same day he quit using drugs and alcohol. Willie soon became an ordained minister. By then, his dad was in a nursing home, and Willie started visiting him, and telling him about Christ. One time, he found his father in the home’s church.

“He goes, ‘I’ve turned my life over to God.’ He said, ‘I know that I’m not going to be here too much more longer.’ And I mean, it brought tears to my eyes to see this could happen. So it was a blessing to see my dad turn to God.”

Willie was with his father when he died.

He says: "I forgave him right then and there. I gave him a hug and told him that I was happy that he was my father. He held my hand and just squeezed my hand. And just smiled. And I knew what he meant. I knew what he meant."

Today, Willie and Evelyn enjoy spending time with their twelve grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Willie closes his story by saying: "The Bible speaks about those that have their mind stayed on Him. And so that's the way it is today. When I wake up, God wakes me up on mornings. He's the first thing I'm thinking about when I'm awake. I no longer think about that drug no more. That drug used to be my god. But now God has replaced that and He came in and took over. He stepped into my life."

Every Advent, we sing the words to that familiar hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, that ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear." An invitation for God to step into our lives.

The hymn is a cry of the heart. In the ancient world, a common thing to happen was kidnapping. Travel was dangerous; especially for those who may be wealthy. A person could be taken and held for ransom, and all they could do would be to wait for the ransom to be paid or help to arrive.

Sin does the same thing to us. It took over the life of Willie's father; then it took over the life of Willie. But when Willie returned to the church of his youth, and looked at where he was going, he realized he needed to surrender. As we hear in the first reading: "You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever." Isaiah then speaks of how God is angry because we are sinful, and even the best deeds we do on our own are like polluted rags for all of us have become "like unclean people."

Now this isn't to depress us. But it is meant to open up our eyes as the season of Advent begins by reminding us of our need for God. Because God changes everything. As Paul says in the opening part to his first letter to the Corinthians, "He will keep you firm to the end... God is faithful." This season of Advent is meant to give us hope. To open up our eyes about why Jesus came: to redeem us.

The problem is it's easy to lose sight of the effects of sin in our lives. For Willie, it happened gradually. And he couldn't admit for years that he was an addict. But he realized that only God could pull him out of it. And we have to have that same realization too.

So what to do to make the most of the season? I'd suggest three things.

The first is to begin by remembering our need for a Savior. God chose to become one of us to respond to the lament of Isaiah; of the people longing and looking for God and for hope in the world, having returned from the Babylonian captivity to see the Temple and their homeland in ruins. Sin does the same thing to our souls. Sometimes it can be seen. Other times it's only through honest soul-searching that we realize the importance of changing. So that first step is to

acknowledge the fact that we are broken. We do this by taking a look in the mirror, and asking ourselves what are our addictions? Is it chronic sin? A need for praise? A need to be in control or to have power? To please others? A battle with alcohol? Pornography or sins of the flesh? It can be so easy to ignore problems or to minimize them. But the more we do that, the more they tear us apart.

We then get to the point that Willie did, and surrender to God. Isaiah goes on to say: “There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you.” We need to remember God will see us through the storm. His love for us is infinite. But we have to surrender ourselves to Him. He gives us peace as Paul says. So let Him in. Get that peace you are looking for. We have a confession service tomorrow (Monday) night - consider coming. We also have it every Saturday afternoon, adding an extra hour the last two Saturdays of Lent, and you can go any weekday in downtown Saint Paul at Saint Louis King of France or Assumption parishes. Make time for prayer. Continue coming to Mass. Let God into your daily life.

And lastly, think of the final words from our first reading: “Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.” We surrender to God once we realize our need for Him, but the transformation is not instant. Clay takes time to be formed. We will sin again, and sometimes again and again with the same things. Or we may try to overcome something, and find the struggle is hard. We may even find that as we are growing in virtue and holiness, it’s difficult to change our ways due to stubbornness, pride, or in part to a desire to cling to sin and bad habits. Formation takes time. We need to be open to that happening; to let God guide us on that path to holiness. To be open to the advice of others who are there to help us. The danger with ego and pride is we can lose sight of the fact that we aren’t saints yet, and every day on our life journey need God and others to help us become even better.

Little by little, sin can take over a person’s life. Sometimes we see it and think we will be held captive by it forever. Sometimes we are held captive and don’t even know it. But it affects us all. Jesus though comes as our savior, and we who are held captive by sin are set free because of Him. Let’s use this season to look at what holds us captive, and realize that with His love and grace, we truly can be set free.