

Have you ever thought about what it means to be a Christian?

Many of us have been raised in the faith, and gone to Mass our whole lives. But one of the things we have to remember is that our faith is a journey. It's something that is meant to mature as we go through life, and that is where the God encounters us again and again with grace, and, ideally, we respond to that grace. The response is a reordering in our lives, by opening our eyes to where we have been, what we have failed to do, and a looking forward to living a better life as a changed person.

A number of years ago, a future Christian author named Margaret Nava found herself with her friend Susan on the highway. They had just passed through Amarillo on their way to Oklahoma City when they noticed something large and white rising high above the flatlands bordering Interstate 40. At first, they thought it was some type of silo or maybe even gigantic oil rigging. But upon nearing the structure, they realized it was a cross.

Even though she hadn't been to church in several years, Susan suggested stopping as they had been driving for hours, and she suggested they might have a gift shop and loved to browse.

They pulled off the interstate and drove the short distance to the cross. Casting a shadow almost twice its height, the 19-story white cross was surrounded by paved walkways, life-sized bronze sculptures of the Stations of the Cross and the three crosses of Calvary. Fully expecting Susan to make a beeline for the gift shop, Margaret was somewhat surprised when she walked towards the crucifixion scene.

It was late afternoon, and most of the cars on the highway were headed toward home or a place to call home for the night. Possibly noticing they were two of the last visitors remaining at the site, Susan knelt beneath the center cross and bowed her head. Fearing she might be hurt or something, Margaret rushed to her side and asked if she was okay.

"Yes," she whispered. "It's just that I've been so wrong. Ever since college, I've been afraid to show my faith because I thought it would make me look weak and people would ridicule me. I quit going to church, and whoever someone asked me what religion I was, I said I didn't believe in religion. I turned my back on the Lord, but look - He placed this huge cross in my path just to tell me He's still here." She hung her head and cried.

As difficult as it was to watch, Margaret understood what Susan was going through because she had experienced something similar after her dad died. Hoping it might encourage her, she knelt down and told her story.

"My dad had always been a take-charge sort of person. Virtually self-educated, he married Mom when they were both 18. Like many other men his age, he made an adequate living by working on an assembly line. Following a couple of years of service

during World War II, he took a second job, scraped his pennies together and moved our family to a small house in the suburbs. As our family's needs grew larger, Dad's work hours grew longer. Eventually, he started his own business, but he never seemed happy. He spent a lot of time away from home, neglected his health and drank and smoked too much. When he reached retirement age, a time when he could finally relax and enjoy life, he was diagnosed with lung cancer."

Even though it was tough to talk about her father, Margaret continued. "When Dad told us about his cancer, he said, 'I'm gonna fight this.' And he did. He gave up drinking, but not smoking, changed his diet, underwent chemo, radiation and surgery, and tried every herbal, holistic and radical treatment he could find, but nothing worked. Four months after the initial diagnosis, dad lost his battle."

Susan stopped crying and gazed at her friend attentively. "As often happens when one spouse dies, Mom died a couple of years later. Feeling I was totally alone, I blamed God. After all, I had been brought up to believe that God was compassionate and that He answered prayers. Where was the compassion in taking both my parents? Why hadn't He answered my prayers? How could I go on believing in a God that had turned His back on me? I couldn't, so I turned my back on Him."

Taking a deep breath, Margaret raised her eyes to the cross. "Believing that the riches of the world were more valuable than those of the Father, I turned my attention to the pursuit of worldly treasures. Like my dad, wealth became my god. I bought a house, a new car, and more clothes than I could ever wear. I went on cruises and expensive vacations. I even married a man whose quest for wealth was stronger than my own. Together, we accumulated more 'things' than any of our hanger-on friends owned.

She continued: "One day, I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. I had become the feminine equivalent of my father. My hair was perfectly coiffed, my make-up was flawless, the diamonds on my ears sparkles brilliantly, but my eyes were empty and cold. In Matthew 6:22-23 it says 'the eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.' My life was in darkness, and I knew I had to find the light."

The sun was beginning to set, but neither Susan nor Margaret hurried to leave that place. They found peace and serenity there, a feeling of acceptance and safety.

Susan reached for her hand and asked her what she did after she felt that her life was in darkness.

She says she found a church and started going again. That she started praying and reading the Bible. And it didn't take long before her husband noticed a change in her, and didn't like it and said to her she could choose him or choose God. Margaret chose God.

When Susan asked her what she would have done if God had not taken her back, Margaret remained her of the words from Timothy, which says if we are faithless, God still remains faithful, for He cannot disown himself.”

As they looked across the horizon with the setting sun casting an amber glow on the cross, Susan reflected “God works in mysterious ways, doesn’t He? He knew there would be thousands of people passing this spot every day and that many of them needed His help, so He had someone build this cross just to remind them that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He always has and always will be here...all we have to do is look for Him.”

Rising from her knees, Susan smiled and said to her friend “I’m glad we stopped here. This was exactly what I needed. Now I’m ready for the rest of the journey.” And so was Margaret.

While we not be on a road trip here at Mass in a car, all of us are on a trip called life. The problem is sometimes we forget that our final destination is meant to be heaven. Just like Margaret, her father and Susan, we can become people focused on worldly things, and lose sight of what matters most. And that is where God keeps trying to come into our lives. The challenge for us is to let Him in, and to open our eyes to the reality of where we are at, and then continue on the journey a changed person.

This week we have the resurrected Christ appearing to two disciples. And like Margaret and Susan, they are a bit lost. In their case, they had been dejected when Jesus appeared to them, at first as an unknown stranger, not realizing at first who He was. Jesus though comes to them in the darkness, and now our reading picks up with the two disciples going to Jerusalem where the 11 are, and Jesus again appearing to them when they least expect it. It’s how grace operates. So our starting point is that like Susan and Margaret, we have to look for the Cross. For them it was on the side of a highway. For us, it is in a special way at Mass. As I reflected on during Holy Week and Passiontide when we covered the cross, sometimes we forget its meaning. But that’s also true with other aspects of our faith. We prepare so much as kids for our First Communion, but sometimes we forget the significance of receiving our Lord into our hearts and souls, for the Eucharist is food for the journey that brings us closer to God and removes us from sin. And sometimes we forget to pray too because we become too busy. None of the people in Margaret and Susan’s story were necessarily bad or evil people, but little by little they drifted and lost sight of where they were going in life. When we open our eyes and look for the God who is always looking for us, we will grow closer to Him.

But here again is the thing, not to be negative, but opening our eyes also entails some pain. Notice again what Jesus does, just as He did last week when He appeared - He shows His hands and side. And this is because of the reality of sin. We have lost sight of that in many ways in our culture. It’s not fun to take responsibility for our actions, so we can play the blame game and make ourselves out to be victims instead. Whether it’s someone losing their temper and saying “look what you made me do,” a person blaming

their parents for how they turned out, or blaming their job or life situation for an addiction, or whatever it may be. It is true others impact others or can lead them to sin, but it is also true we have free will. And we have to own up to that. Margaret looked in the mirror and realized she did not like who she had become. That's so important for us too. God comes to us, but we also have to see the wounds that we have caused in ourselves and in the lives of others, and acknowledge that and learn how to become a better person. That is what the Church is there for too. The Church is there given to us by Jesus as a hospital of sorts, to welcome us without judgment, and to fill us up spiritually with grace. But again, we have to cooperate with it, and realize our need for it.

And then lastly there is the change. We've been seeing this throughout our Easter Season readings; Jesus appears, and then has an impact on the people who have seen Him. No longer are they afraid and in the dark they are out there making God's love known. Margaret and Susan own up to the reality that they needed to change in their lives, and so they do that too. So as we pray and encounter God, it's important to also let grace operate. Learning from our mistakes, but also discerning what God is telling us to do next. God calls us to use grace to bring His love beyond Sunday Mass. To continually grow closer to Him, and also to live out our faith through works of charity. What happened with the apostles and with Susan and Margaret is also a blueprint for how we too evangelize. We start with the positive, stressing to people how much they are loved by God, and then we challenge them, and then we journey with them patiently. That's a key to remember, as sometimes a person can start with the negative (such as in a parent or spouse always starting with what a person did wrong first). Just telling someone they are a bad person or did something wrong is going to make them defensive and we won't get through; we also won't if we are impatient and give up because we see them seemingly not making much spiritual progress. But when we learn from the Master, who journeys with the disciples to Emmaus and then the others with patient love, we will see amazing results in ourselves and in one another.

Grace is indeed amazing, and as I've said time and time again, God always looks at us with love and mercy, because He sees our potential. Hopefully we do too by opening up our eyes and looking for God in our life, coming to know Him at a deeper level, and then bringing his love into the world. Jesus is with us every day, let's open up our eyes, hearts and souls to see Him and welcome Him in so we can truly be changed from sinners into saints.