

## HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – C

I recently finished reading Mitch Albom's latest book entitled *Have a Little Faith*.

The book is about two people who had a profound impact on his faith life. One of them is a man named Henry Covington, a pastor in Detroit's inner city. Henry grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y. He was the second-youngest of seven children born to Willie and Wilma Covington. They were poor and lived in a small, rat infested apartment. Henry accepted Christ as a young man. But before too long he gave into the temptation of drug dealing as a way out of poverty. Then he became an addict himself, which left him financially destitute. So, to support his habit, he became a thief. And he ended up in prison for several years.

Following this, something happened that changed his life. One day, desperate for drugs, Henry got two friends and went to the drug dealers he used to work for and pulled a gun on them. He ordered them to give him their money, their jewelry and their drugs. He then drove off with his friends, giving them the valuables and keeping the drugs for himself. Later that night he came to his senses and realized what a stupid thing he had done. His victims knew who he was and where he lived and they would definitely be coming for him.

That night Henry got his shotgun, ordered his wife and daughter to turn off the lights and stay inside. Then he went out and hid behind a row of trash cans. He waited. He trembled. And he began to pray. "Will you save me, Jesus?" he whispered. "If I promise to give myself to you, will you save me tonight?" He didn't sleep that night. But somehow those drug dealers he had robbed never found him. The cars that came down his street didn't fire a single bullet. When the sun rose, it was Easter Sunday. He went into the house, put himself through detox, and started out on a new life of service to God. He began by going to prisons with a New York city pastor to give his testimony.

The pastor was impressed by him, trained him, made him a deacon and sent him to Detroit to start up a ministry there. And Henry did just that, eventually becoming the pastor of *I Am Your Brother's Keeper Ministry*. The ministry was headquartered in an old Presbyterian church that had been abandoned. At one time it was a magnificent structure, but now was crumbling. It had a large hole in the roof. The only way Henry could keep his ministry going in that part of the city where the population was mostly comprised of people in desperate situations was to rent out part of the church as living space. And from that ramshackle old church he ministered to drug addicts, alcoholics, and the homeless. He ran a shelter and provided food and clothing for those who were in desperate need. And these were the people who made up his small congregation.

Henry took in desperate people who would have died on the streets without him. He saved their lives and brought them to the Lord. One day, out of curiosity, Mitch came into that church and listened to Henry preach. This is part of what he said, "Amazing grace . . . Amaazing grace . . . I coulda been dead! . . . Shoulda been dead! . . . Woulda been dead!

. . . But his grace! . . . His grace . . . saved a wretch like me . . . I was a crackhead, an alcoholic, I was a heroin addict, a liar, a thief. I was all those things. But then came Jesus . . . I call him the greatest recycler I know!" In response, that small gathering of people off the streets of what appeared to be the most God forsaken part of Detroit began singing "Hallelujah!" along with Henry.

The more Mitch got to know Henry Covington, the more impressed he was by the man's dedication, by his unwavering commitment to serving and saving the people in that destitute neighborhood. So Mitch paid to have the hole in the roof of Henry's church covered and began writing about him in the Detroit Free Press. Before long, donations began coming in. Food and clothing were abundant. Repairs were made to the church. And people started coming for worship from all over the city, having their faith restored by this man who by his own description had been a bad man who had broken every one of the commandments.

Henry's story is basically the same story we heard in each of today's readings. Peter is in a boat with Jesus and witnesses a miraculous catch of fish and realizes that he is in the presence of someone who has a special connection to God. And suddenly he is filled with a sense of his unworthiness. He even

orders Jesus to get out of his boat and as far away from him as he can. But Jesus responds, “Don’t be afraid, from now on you’ll be catching people for the kingdom with me.”

Isaiah is in the temple as he was many times before. But this time he catches a glimpse of the one who lives in this sacred dwelling, the Holy One himself. And suddenly he is terrified, “Woe is me!” he cries because at that moment he is more aware of his sins than ever before. He thinks of all the uncharitable things he has said. He thinks of the times he has used God’s name in vain. And now here God was right in front of him. Isaiah thinks he’s toast. But instead of vaporizing him with a blast of fire, God sends an angel to touch his lips with a burning ember and says, “Don’t worry, man, your lips are clean now. And I want you to speak for me.”

Then, of course there was Paul, our patron. He was the meanest dude of them all – hunting down Christians in order to have them thrown in jail or even killed. But while travelling to Damascus to find new victims, he is met by the risen Jesus. And he’s so shaken that he loses his sight. Suddenly he knows that he’s been serving the dark side and deserves the fate of the damned. But instead, the Lord tells him that he has chosen him to head up his mission to the Gentiles. And so Paul came to understand what Henry Covington did. “Amazing grace,” Paul says. It is by the grace of God that I am what I am and do what I do.”

Whenever a person wakes up and realizes that he or she is in the presence of the Lord, there is an understandable, overwhelming sense of unworthiness and even fear because – well, he knows everything about us. And to our surprise, God’s response is always the same: “Don’t be afraid, I’m with you now, and I’ve got something for you to do. Come on and work with me.” And often we say, “I can’t. I’m not holy like you.” But to our “I can’t’s” God keeps responding, “I know you can’t. But what you can’t do, I can do. I don’t need your goodness. I don’t need your past accomplishments. I just need your yes. And I’ll help you with the rest.”

It’s true, you know. This is the heart of our faith – grace – God’s transforming presence. To have a real sense of the greatness of God not only leads to an awareness of our sinfulness, but also to an awareness of a great goodness – a goodness that is overwhelming, that changes what it touches. Many of us know what it’s like to be changed by being in the presence of some good person who inspired and empowered us to make contributions to life that we wouldn’t have otherwise. Well, this is what happens when we become aware of being in the presence of our good and holy God, who wants nothing more than to give us a share in his life and work. The message we are given in the scriptures today is very clear: There is nothing we have or haven’t done that disqualifies us from doing some good thing now, because the grace of God abounds. And that’s what makes the difference.

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