

Happy 4th of July Weekend! Welcome to all our visitors. This weekend we celebrate the courage of our forefathers in creating a new republic and a new way of life. Applying this to our spiritual lives, we look at how we, in St. Paul's words, "Become a new creation." I'd like to start with a witness talk, given by a parishioner two weeks ago, in a parish 20 miles south of St. James.

Gary, a man in his late 30s was raised in Texas with no religion in his home. He married a good Catholic woman who brought him to mass on Sundays. He listened, stood up and sat down with the congregation and had a few good take aways from the homilies, but for the most part, the Catholic faith didn't resonate with him.

As time passed, Gary's work life became more and more challenging, and in his words, "Mistakes, grievances, letdowns, and mishaps began to build up on him like barnacles attached to the hull of a ship." His wife gave him the nickname, "Grouchy Gary." He said, "Grouchy Gary would visit often and stay for extended periods of time."

With COVID, things got worse, and Gary really struggled to keep it all together. He wasn't sleeping well, and his wife suggested visiting Adoration Chapel, a place where she went to find peace. So, Gary went, and had his very first conversation with God.

He opened the tabernacle and said to God, "I'm here for the taking," but, nothing happened. Things got worse, and a few days later, he asked the pastor for a blessing in the parking lot. The next day, God replied. In Gary's words, "I received clarity on all the things I heard on Sunday, about love, forgiveness, peace, and empathy. This was a message I wanted to be a part of."

He told the pastor he wanted to become Catholic and while he waited for RCIA classes to begin, he picked up this book by Matthew Kelly called, "I heard God Laugh." Reading this book, he learned how to pray. He created a HABIT of daily prayer based on gratitude, forgiveness, empathy, and love. Gary was baptized at the Easter Vigil and was so inspired that he agreed to talk to the congregation and tell his story at all the masses. Gary said, "Daily prayer is invigorating, it's like going to the gym, it makes me passionate about my day. Over time, I noticed that:

- My confidence was going up and defensiveness was going down.
- Love went up and impatience went down.
- Forgiveness went up and stubbornness went way down.
- Peace went way, way up and anxiety went way, way, way down.

Grouchy Gary" still visits, but much less frequently and he only stays for a short while." Gary closes his witness talk with these words, "My journey in faith and prayer may not

make the things I WANT in life happen, but I do know that it has made ME a different person to face whatever HAPPENS in life. I won't say that I'm back to my OLD self because I've never really known peace like this. I truly feel that I've been given a SECOND chance."

How about that for a definition of "a new creation?" Is there something Gary has that we want in our story? How is he before, during and after his encounter with God? Is it similar or different than your experience? In Gary's testimony, we see a man become a new creation and find what Bishop Barron calls, "a new way of being," that's in Christ. Now, if we had enough time and doughnuts, each of us could come to the ambo and tell our story. We would likely learn that we face similar challenges, but also that we have the same grace from God to keep us moving forward.

In today's gospel, we see Jesus sending out disciples two-by-two to give the surrounding towns and villages the opportunity to encounter God. We see the same discipleship in Gary's pastor and wife as THEY evangelized Gary with wisdom and patience. Jesus says, "Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.' If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him." Despite his circumstances, Gary, over time, let the peace of Christ rest in his heart. How are we doing with letting Christ's peace penetrate our hearts? Are we able to share that peace with others?

One of Gary's tools was Matthew Kelly's book, "I heard God Laugh." In Part 2 of the book, Matthew Kelly's mentor, John, challenges him and encouraged him to pray. The two of them sit in an empty church and read several gospel passages. Kelly is told, "Have a conversation with God about whatever those few lines say to you. Some passages may inspire and encourage you; others may challenge you. Just talk to God about whatever he places in your heart. You'll have to read the book to determine exactly when God laughed, but this mixing of scripture and prayer changed his life and would become a regular habit for Matthew Kelly who's written over 20 books mostly about finding Christ's "new way of being."

Bishop Barron says, "The risen Jesus Christ is an entirely new way of being. He is, in his own person, a new order, a new form of life." We are all being called to become a new creation in Christ. The benefits are a deep sense of peace and hope through our faith in the Father, and a reduction in grouchiness. Each day gives us a new opportunity to grow individually and as a community and to deepen our encounter with God through study [Book], prayer, and service to others. Enjoy your holiday weekend and may you see fireworks in your heart as you strive to become a new creation.