

When one of our kids struggled a little in elementary school, she told us she did better when she was assigned as seat in the front of the class. It turns out, she needed glasses, but she didn't know that other kids saw the world more clearly than her. When she got her first pair, you could say, all things were new! She could sit anywhere in the class and see things she had never seen before. Our reading from Revelation contains the words, "Behold, I make all things new." God offers us a belief system, a set of prescription lenses through which we see the world like never before, both this world and the next.

For people questioning their belief system, for example, the people in the ancient Mediterranean, whether Gentiles worshiping pagan gods or the Jews waiting 700 years for a Messiah, the coming of Christ made all things new, and was literally a life-changing experience, because it offered the prospect of eternal life.

You can think of Paul and Barnabas in Acts, as two highly motivated optometrists wanting to share Christ's belief system with as many eager Jews and Gentiles as possible in spite of the hardships involved. Starting last Sunday, we've read about their very first Missionary Journey which is both highly successful, yet very dangerous for Paul and Barnabas.

In Antioch of Pisidia, they opened the doors of the Church to the Gentiles and the Gentiles responded with delight and glorified the Lord. We are told, "All who were destined for eternal life, [eager for a new belief system] came to believe and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region." However, the Jews in control, persecuted Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from the city.

In Iconium they preached in the Jewish synagogue, and a great number of both Jews and Greeks came to believe. But Paul and Barnabas had to escape the city to avoid religious leaders who concocted a plan to stone them.

Finally, In Lystra, Paul healed a man lame from birth and the people wanted to make them into gods, but Paul and Barnabas explained that they were only human. In this city, Paul was stoned, taken out, and left for dead. But, when the disciples gathered around him, he got up and returned to the city.

After traveling over 600 miles in a 5-to-6-month period, being threatened and physically abused, they had the option to travel a short distance to safety in Paul's hometown, yet they chose to return to the same cities and minister to eager souls, even though they met with hostility from the religious leaders. As they strengthened the spirits of the disciples, they explained that there would be many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. And before they left, they appointed elders to lead the new churches. Setting up new "optometry offices" to continue the work of giving spiritual sight to the lost and making all things new.

So, how is the work of sharing our belief system relevant in today's world of ubiquitous information where we can pick up our phones and get answers to all of life's questions?

Jenifer Fulwiler, in her book, "Something Other Than God," tells her story of growing up as an atheist and how her journey for happiness led her to the Catholic Church.

Jennifer grew up in Texas, believing, as most atheists do, that she was nothing more than a set of chemical reactions and that when she died, she would, "Disappear like a mirage in the desert." In the 5th grade, she discovered an emptiness that could only be filled by chasing moments of short-lived happiness. This belief system evolved over the next 15 years into a whirlwind lifestyle of travel and parties. During that time, she married a Christian man who was not active in his faith, and they had their first child.

Her emptiness surfaced again as she considered the fate of her son's life through the atheistic lens. It was then that she started to research another explanation for life, an alternate belief system. At this turning point, Jennifer said her first primitive prayer telling, "Whatever or whoever might be out there, she was open to knowing it, if it did exist." She read Christian books, including "A Case for Christ," by Lee Stroble, an investigative reporter who interviewed experts to validate Christianity. She started her own blog and invited Christians to answer her questions about faith. Over time she realized all her followers were Catholic! Feeling left out, her husband started engaging in his own quest to validate the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Jennifer began to ask for God's help when she developed a rare medical condition during her second pregnancy and God answered her prayers. Giving up her previous beliefs was agonizing at times. As St. Paul says, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." She and her husband decided to join RCIA, and she experienced her first sacrament of reconciliation. She said, "I wasn't sure what just happened; the only thing I knew was that my life would never be the same again. Never, ever could I have imagined what it would do for my soul to hear the words [from the priest], 'My child, you are forgiven.'"

God makes ALL things new. Near the end of the book Jennifer says, "For the first time in my life, I was aware without any question that I was in the presence of God. I had been looking for him for so long, but my sins were like a black smoke that fills the air and blots out the sun, obscuring it so completely that you sometimes wonder if it still exists. Now, the smoke has blown away. The air is clear. And finally, I can see." I recommend you check out this book and compare it to your own spiritual journey.

How do we carry on the ministry of spiritual optometry passed down from Paul and Barnabas? It starts with Jesus' new commandment in today's gospel, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another." Loving like Christ requires the complete acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and savior. This is also the pathway to peace that opens our hearts to the will of God. And following his will, we may be called to answer a blog post or take a walk with a nephew or a grandchild and talk about our faith. Our work is a mix of welcoming the eager and defending our belief system to the naysayer. Someone in our lives needs a new pair of lenses, our job is to look for the signs and be ready to accompany them.