

St. Ignatius – Portland

Novena of Grace 2023 – Day 8 – Greg Carpinello

So our theme this week for our Novena, “Finding the light that shines in the darkness,” continues today.

I’ll eventually talk about that light, but first I’d like to reflect on the darkness. We often don’t like to dwell on the darkness, but for me, darkness has become the portal through which I have been able to transform in my life.

To be human is to suffer – no matter who you are, or how old you are, or whatever life circumstances you have been born into. Darkness will pass over our path, sooner or later, likely multiple times. This darkness, this suffering, at its root - is our inability to control something in our lives. Darkness is an experience of complete and utter powerlessness. I believe that before we can find the light, we must allow ourselves to be comfortable in the dark. We are invited to understand the darkness, know it, not be afraid of it, maybe even embrace it.

Our first reading today about Queen Esther paints the picture of what enduring this darkness might look like. She is seized with mortal anguish... she’s prostrate on the ground from morning till evening... she seems paralyzed by this darkness she is experiencing. And interestingly, she describes the loneliness that she feels - as if she is an abandoned orphan, EVEN THOUGH the passage says, she was surrounded by others who kept watch with her. All of it is such a universal human experience – encountering darkness, or as St. John of the Cross would call it, a dark night of the soul. An anguish that paralyzes us and consumes our whole life for long stretches. A darkness when we feel totally alone even when we’re surrounded by others.

When it came to darkness, I thought I had seen quite a bit. I had endured childhood hurts and traumas. I had known the darkness of losing a close friend suddenly. I had felt the heartache of dashed hopes and dreams. I had walked through some of those dark paths. But a little over five years ago, in the summer of 2017, a slow-building ocean wave of overwhelm eventually crested and crashed in my life. Nothing sudden or dramatic gave rise to it. Sure there were small stresses in my life... the dream job I had at the time had slowly devolved to something less dreamlike and more arduous. The beautiful family that Maura and I had was messy and difficult, because family life is inherently messy and difficult. No, this time in my life, the darkness didn’t have an element that I could point to, a particular source to it, no bully to fight back against, no death to grieve, no lost dream to reconstruct. No, this cresting wave of anguish came from an unknown source and eventually I found myself in complete, crushing darkness. What it looked like on the outside was episodes of tears at random times, retreating from friends and family, malaise at the job I used to love, no energy for the things I once loved. And life just didn’t come easy, minute to minute, day to day, week to week... it just didn’t come easy. Even daily life felt insurmountable. Some days I felt like I couldn’t even face it, couldn’t endure any more of it. Try as I might, I couldn’t control this darkness, I couldn’t shake it, I couldn’t fix it. No one could actually. Not Maura, not my kids, not my friends, my co-workers. No priest, no counselor. It was a Queen Esther experience, feeling alone even though I was surrounded by wonderful, loving people.

Months went by without relief, until there was a moment, sitting with my family in a pew at our church in Cincinnati when my resistance to the darkness began to crack, and vulnerability welled up in my

prayer. I gave in and I heard God inviting me to surrender. Surrender. Tears welled up and began to stream, but this time they were a welcome release. In the weeks and months that followed, I continued to give into the darkness, to surrender to it, even embrace it. I got to know it. I fumbled my way through it, not frantically in a panic any more, but slowly, tenderly reaching out for meaning and purpose.

I did some deep soul searching through that surrender. I uncovered old hurts not fully healed, I uncovered a broken sense of self, I faced up to feelings of shame and guilt and regret. None of it was easy or comfortable. Much of it was painful to acknowledge and accept. But amidst the pain, my faith offered me something countercultural. Like this Novena, my faith offered me light that shines in the darkness. My faith called me back to hope, even on the darkest nights.

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Ask and it will be given to you;

seek and you will find;

knock and the door will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds;

and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Ask. Seek. Knock. These verbs are carefully chosen. They are countercultural acts. This morning, these words offer us spiritual treasure for our quests to find light in the dark times of our lives.

Maybe you have been in similar dark places in life as the one I have described, though I bet yours is unique. Whatever the circumstances for you, bring to mind a time of struggle you faced or are facing. Now, you may have noticed that the world around us conditions and teaches us to control. Fix what's broken. Avoid what's uncomfortable. Fight back against those who wrong us. Repress feelings of sadness, pain, struggle. Put on a happy face. Our culture often is not one of hope. Our capitalist ego-centric culture doesn't do darkness well.

Ask. Seek. Knock. In the gospel today, Jesus calls us Christians to an active hope... a hope that includes surrender to our sufferings, a hope that includes a humble openness to God's love in our lives.

Jesus says ASK, not demand or take. When we stop trying to control that which renders us powerless, when we surrender finally, then what we ask for changes. No longer are we consumed by what our small selves want or what our petty fleeting desires might be. Rather, what we ask for becomes deeper, it becomes what St. Ignatius calls our heart's deepest desire. What we ask for then, God provides. Not my will, but God's.

Jesus says SEEK, not fix or conquer or quell the darkness in our midst. When we stop trying to control that which renders us powerless, when we surrender finally, then we stop flailing in the darkness, we stop raging against the night, and in that surrender we ultimately allow ourselves to seek God with a humble and open heart. Not my path, but God's.

Jesus says KNOCK, not barge, trample, or trespass. When we stop trying to control that which renders us powerless, when we surrender finally, only then can we find the right door in the darkness upon which to knock. When we surrender, the door in the darkness will be there, and we will finally be able to trust in it – even though we cannot see it. And fully surrendered, all it takes is a simple, gentle knock and God is there, in full and abundant love to fill our broken hearts and to heal our wounds.

Ask. Seek. Knock. Jesus calls us, in our Queen Esther moments of darkness and loneliness, to keep showing up with active hope. Keep getting out of bed. Keep surrendering to that which we can't control. Keep opening ourselves to the possibility that through the darkness we might be transformed.

Finally, I love that this gospel passage ends with Jesus' famous golden rule. "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you." Why? Why does this phrase end this passage? For me its simply this..

When we probe deep down into our hearts' desires, when we seek God's path, when we knock on God's door.... LOVE is really what we want. To be loved radically for who we are. And God often loves us through the people in our lives. So in each of our journeys through the dark moments of our paths, yes we must each individually walk what is uniquely ours, but we never do it alone. The people in our lives can't do the surrendering, asking, seeking, or knocking FOR US, but we can be in solidarity together so the burden isn't so great. So then, Love if love is what you want. Be peaceful, if peace is what you seek. Share abundantly, if abundance is the door you wish to enter. Like Queen Esther, we DO have people keeping watch with us. Open your eyes to them, hold their hands in the darkness, let them love you in your moments of deepest struggle. For me, I came out of 2017 and the darkness that shrouded that year with a renewed commitment to love those around me, because it was love that I ultimately sought.

SO...

To what are you called to surrender today?

What hurt might you release?

What anger might you relinquish your grip upon?

What darkness might you need to embrace?

And Who is there to hold your hand?

Jesus promises us. Ask. Seek. Knock. God is ready to answer. God is already there to be found. God is already waiting beyond that door. This is the light, even on the darkest nights. This is the light.

And if we surrender to it, we just might become greater vessels to both receive and share love on earth.