

WORD ALIVE
By DEACON GARY

Twenty-nine years ago, my youngest daughter was barely hanging on to life in the hospital. A doctor inserted a long needle into her body and gave her medicine that could be the difference between life and death. Julia did not understand the medical procedure; she just looked at me and wondered why you are allowing this pain. We look at God that way, especially when our crosses become impossible to endure.

For about 22 years I have been serving what my wife and kids call a "life sentence of Sundays in jail." Not only did I have to learn to forgive in ways I never thought possible, I also had to become a channel of God's grace so the inmates had a chance to learn God's language. As Christians we are asked to think, speak, and act in ways that often cause us trouble. We often resist. But there is something that gets us beyond rebellion to acceptance and perseverance.

The things I learned in childhood push me beyond my comfort zone. I am defined by people that raised me. I could not raise myself. Even orphans are raised by others. From my earliest memories, I learned languages without me putting in much effort. Our family spoke Polish, Italian, English andCatholic..... Catholic was by far the hardest language to learn, because it demanded more than just the ability to speak and understand; it demanded a lifestyle that was contrary to most of society. It is not easy to be the only one on the block or in school or workplace trying to live the Catholic lifestyle. Most people do not go to church every weekend. Why should I? Most people support capital punishments Why Shouldn't I? Most people feel that living together before marriage is Ok. Why shouldn't I? Most people believe in abortion. Why shouldn't I? But St Paul answers these questions: "Be transformed by renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect?"

The length of time God's language is heard and used is a crucial factor in its acquisition by children. If children have never grown up in a home where the language of God is spoken, it is more difficult for them to learn it later in life. It is very difficult to teach God's language to high school students if they have never heard it spoken in their home when they were young children. Many of the people I have in jail have never learned to speak God's language at home. Amazingly, many inmates begin to learn God's language in the endless time, silence, and loneliness of jail's suppressed freedoms. Time is abundant in jails and prisons; unlike the lack of time in our busy lives of endless freedom.....

I recently asked a group of male inmates to make a list of what money can't buy. I wrote each word or words on a piece of paper. When it came time for Sunday services, I had the female inmates pick from the pile of papers with hidden words. Then I asked them what they picked and if the word had meaning in their life:

Manners	Morals	Character
Respect	Love	Joy
Integrity	Trust	Hope
Patience	Time	Forgiveness
Dignity	Status	Common sense

After all the females had a chance to explain their answer, TJ just hugged her legs, rocked back and forth on the chair, and cried. She said I picked "time" and forgiveness. I asked TJ if she wanted to explain what the words meant to her. She stuck out both of her arms revealing giant tattoos of syringes on each arm. I am called TJ because I am a Total Junky, I have run out of time because of the drugs, and I am now a "Message in a bottle that will never be read." I'm so ugly, deformed, and scarred by my lifestyle, that no one would care to read the message I have inside. No one is willing to give me the time I need to find God. Why is God allowing me this much pain? I said for one thing, you are now able to stay off drugs. God saved your life for a reason in this season. He has given you time to get to know Him.

TJ said: the word Forgiveness is impossible for me. My parents were drug dealers along with most of their family and friends. She said: Do you see these round scars throughout the syringe tattoos? My mother used to jam the burning end of cigarettes into both my arms when I did not do what she wanted. I watched my father get shot and killed at age 9, and I saw my two brothers get killed at age 11.

After my father and brothers were killed, my mother made my sister and I do unbelievable things; robbing people on the streets of Las Angeles, breaking into homes, and shoplifting. As we got older, the physical abuse she allowed became unbearable. Because of this, we became addicted to drugs and all we cared about was getting our next fix. At 13, my sister and I were involved in a bad drug deal; she was shot and killed. My mom got cancer at about the same time, but I hated her for what she did to me. My hate for my mom dominates my life. I stopped completely in believing in God and I went back to the streets. and that is why I am here today.

I gave her a little card I had in my pocket which said: "People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used." Dali Llama. I said if you want to be healed you must forgive yourself and your mom. Ask Christ to help you with your cross.....

For most of us, we do not know what our cross is; is it illness, hatred, worry, fear, anxiety, addictions, illness, loneliness, loss of a job, death of a loved one, or rejection? Satan blinds us to realizing carrying our cross is mostly through time and our devotion to prayer. Convincing us: We have enough time before we will be hurt or killed, is the best of Satan's plan. In fact we have no time left to be out of time! Look at the recent hurricane in the East Coast. There were thousands of people that thought, "We have enough time, to prepare," we have enough time to escape; we have enough time to prevent destruction of our home. God wants us to pick up our cross today before time runs out.

At the following Sunday jail service TJ said I have a new nickname: TJ, I said that is still the same. She said no! now it means "Trusting Jesus," some of the girls were around the phone when I called my mom to forgive her. I am now at peace and have such joy, so they now call me TJ Trusting Jesus.

My most important mission in jail ministry is to have the inmates realize that the time they have left is what God needs from them to use to save their soul and to help save others. I think the single biggest obstacle to our relationship with God (after sin, of course) is "no time". Yet we all know from experience that when we give God time, we are happy. When we cheat God, we cheat ourselves. We know this from thousands of repeated experiments. And yet we keep running away from God, from communion with God, from prayer, as if it were bitter medicine. We are so afraid of silence and solitude, which are necessary for private prayer, that we give it to our most desperate criminals as the most horrible torture our mind can conceive—"solitary confinement!"



The most precious part of love we can give to others is time. We need to give time to those that have run out or lost all track of time. I need people for my jail ministry to give time in the form of prayer, letter writing, visiting, and mentoring.

Our Lord repeatedly taught us that unless we took up our cross and followed him, we could not be his disciples. This can mean some terrible and difficult things; but one of the simple and easy things it means is to sacrifice our time to God. For time is life—"life-time."

The point is very simple: in order to create time to pray, we must destroy time to do something else. We must stop doing something, refuse something, say no to something.

Pray that the crosses of thousands of people on the East coast can be carried and understood in a way that allows God's wisdom, love, and hope to comfort hearts full of worry, fear, and anxiety.

Think about the words above that describe what money can't buy in your mind and share an example. Have you been able to forgive someone who has deeply hurt you? What is the cross that you are carrying? Are you willing to give this pain to Jesus today? If so, begin now and pray that Jesus takes this burden from you and the Holy Spirit would heal your mind, body, and soul.