

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B-2024

The song "I Can Only Imagine" by Mercy Me is the all-time best-selling Christian single. The movie, by the same name, provides us with deep insight into the life and person of Bart Millard, a member of the band who wrote the song. Bart had a tough family life. His father Arthur was verbally and physically abusive toward him and his mother. As a way of dealing with and processing his thoughts and feelings, Bart would write and draw in a notebook. Since the abuse began as a child, Bart would draw pictures of his father as a huge, mean monster, and himself as a small, frightened, and powerless little boy.

As Bart got older, he began to stand up to his father, but he still saw his dad as a monster. Their relationship seemed broken beyond repair until his father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. As Arthur came face to face with his own mortality, he began to open his heart and life to Jesus Christ. The extreme anger and despair that dominated his life was healed and transformed, and he became a loving and caring person. Bart eventually forgave his father, and the two of them became best friends who cherished their remaining time together. In an interview, Bart stated that his father went from being a horrible monster to the best Christian that he ever knew.

Such is the power of God's amazing grace. Nothing is impossible with God, if we generously give our hearts to Him. As our second reading from Ephesians states: "In Christ Jesus you who were once far off have become near by the blood of Christ." Through His cross and resurrection, Jesus's love, grace, mercy, and salvation flows anew into our hearts and lives. Every day provides the opportunity for a new beginning. Every day is a day of salvation, if we listen and respond to the voice of God. The extraordinary journey of Arthur Millard reveals there is hope for us all, regardless of our past or present.

In the religious movie "Risen," there is a scene where Jesus reaches out to a leper that a small crowd tried to run off. He approaches him, looks upon him with great love, and tenderly embraces him. The leper looked at him with utter shock and amazement and said, "No one ever touches me." In that sacred encounter, Jesus healed him of his leprosy.

I want to bring the movies and images together, because within all of us, there is both a monster and a leper that needs healing and salvation. The monster in us symbolizes our dark side that all of us have in various ways and degrees. At different times, we can be a little monster, a medium size monster, or a big monster. The seven

capital sins of pride, greed, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth are the primary sins of the human heart from which every conceivable form of sin originates. This reveals there are seven unique ways we can be a monster.

Using imagery from the movie "I Can Only Imagine," if we have been a monster toward others through our attitudes, words, and actions, we can approach Jesus in a spirit of humility, trust, and repentance, and He will embrace us with the fullness of His mercy. Jesus will also tame and transform the monster within us. He will touch that place in our hearts where toxic venom comes spewing out and poisons us and everyone and everything around us. From that same place within us, living water will begin to flow, and bless us, and those around us, with God's love, mercy, and grace. As God revealed to the people of Israel, and us, through the prophet Hosea: "I will heal your defections, I will love you freely; or my wrath is turned away from you."

Using imagery from the movie "Risen," if we feel like a leper because of how we have been hurt by a monster or monsters in our lives, Jesus wants to embrace us and lay His healing hand on that deep emotional and spiritual wound and heal the small, frightened, and powerless little child within us. The monsters in our lives may have made us feel worthless and useless, beat us down with their insults and criticisms, abused or neglected us, or

abandoned and betrayed us. It was these types of behaviors that broke our hearts, crushed our spirits, poisoned our souls, and made us feel like an untouchable leper. Jesus does not want the gaping wounds in our hearts to make our souls leprous with a lack of forgiveness, self-hatred, self-doubt, and hopelessness.

It is possible for us to become monsters because of the suffering we feel as lepers. We allow ourselves to become consumed by bitterness and resentment for the hurt and disappointment visited upon us. Arthur became a monster because he had become disillusioned with life after an injury prevented him from following his dream of being a professional football player. Bart, the son, became a monster through a lack of forgiveness that contributed to a pattern moodiness, a quick temper, alienating himself from other people, a fear of letting anyone close to him, and an excessive need to prove himself. In his own unique way, he was becoming his father. It wasn't until he forgave his father for abusing him and his mother for abandoning him, that these wounds in his soul began to heal. Jesus wants to touch our unredeemed pain that torments us, that we are ashamed of, and that we try to deny and suppress. He wants to touch our leprosy of heart so that we can eventually rise to new life, through the power of God's grace. We come to have a new heart and a new

spirit that is freed to more fully love God, others, and ourselves.

All this reflection on monsters and lepers reminds of a reality that Fr. Henri Nouwen so powerfully captured in the following quote: "Our life is full of brokenness: broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God's faithful presence in our lives?" It is by keeping our eyes on Christ and His faithful love in our brokenness, that both the monster and leper within us, is progressively healed and transformed. We experience the joy of salvation that embraces us now and eventually leads to an eternal life, that for the present moment, we can only imagine!