

5th Sunday of Easter, 2018
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Br. Jim is dead. He passed away in 2011.

I first met Br. Jim in 1987, when I lived with the Capuchin Franciscans in Washington DC.

Among the friars who lived there was a man named Br. Jim. He had created an amazing ministry in prisons, and he worked with those recently released from jail.

He spoke in a way that changed their lives.

One Saturday, Br. Jim hosted a program for at-risk teens and their families at the friary. By the end of the day, one mom was telling everyone how Br. Jim's teaching had made a powerful impact on her son.

She asked, "How did Br. Jim learn how to connect with criminals?"

One of the friars answered, "Maybe it's because he spent 20 years in prison. Br. Jim murdered his wife in 1947...."

Br. Jim spent much of his youth in reform schools, and he married at the age of 19. In a drunken rage he shot his wife in their kitchen.

In prison, Jim met a priest whose preaching changed his life. Over a 20 year period, Jim experienced a *conversion* that changed everything about him. After being paroled, he got a job and eventually was admitted to the Franciscans, where he ministered for the rest of his life.

That grateful mother was not sure how to react to this story. She *had* been rejoicing that Br. Jim had helped her son. Now she *struggled* to figure out how this man with a violent past could be the instrument of God's grace.

If Br. Jim were still alive and came to speak at St. Mary's, would *you* struggle?

In today's first reading, the early Christians were having a similar struggle. Someone with a violent past was claiming to be an instrument of God's grace.

Saul – who is later known as SAINT Paul – was a faithful Jewish man. He loved his tradition.

And when fishermen like Peter, James and John came along, claiming that Jesus was risen, Paul understood how dangerous their message was.

Paul *knew* that God wanted him to suppress these Christians. When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death by an angry mob, Paul was there, applauding the violence.

Paul was given authority to search homes. He grabbed Christians and dragged them to prison.

How many Christians died because of Paul?

Then, one day, as Paul heads out to arrest more Christians, he encounters the Risen Lord. He comes to understand that this Jesus really is risen, he really is the savior!

Through this *conversion*, the Paul who had been *murdering* Christians starts *preaching* to Christians.

And some Christians... *struggled* with that. How could someone with such a violent past now become an instrument of God's grace?

The first sentence of the first reading says it all: "When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he *tried* to join the disciples, *but they were all afraid of him.*"

Think of it this way: if an Isis member was arrested and imprisoned for killing Christians and Jews, how would you react if I hired him to become the youth minister after his release from prison? Would any of you be afraid (or write to the bishop)?

This struggle raises a fundamental question – do we really believe that Christ can radically change lives? Do we really believe that the Risen Lord has the power to take sinners, and make them saints?

And if we ever encounter someone who *claims* that Christ changed their lives, are we filled with gratitude? Or are we like the Christians in today's first reading – *afraid*, full of questions?

Christian history is full of stories about people whose lives had spiraled out of control. God takes hold of them. God heals their hearts, and sets them on a new path.

That sounds great when the sinner is named 'Saul,' and he lived 20 centuries ago. But what happens when the sinner is named Br. Jim, who killed his wife in their kitchen? I lived under the same roof with Br. Jim for 2 years. He cooked in the friary's kitchen... do we trust his conversion?

We *might* be skeptical about these conversion stories because we know how hard it is to change ourselves. How often have you said to yourself, “I need to change,” and then you can’t?

We *try* to change our lives, and we see how *hard* it is.

I’ve been trying to change my eating patterns since Herbert Hoover was president. I know how hard change is!

Some of us have tried to change our spending habits, our drinking habits, our exercise habits.

Some of us try to change our attitudes – I want to stop being angry, I want to stop being selfish, I want to stop holding old grudges. We *try* to change. It’s too hard.

Some of us try to change our behaviors – I’ll be more generous, I’ll share my time and talent with others. I’ll make a difference in the community. We *try*. Change is very hard.

Sometimes we do manage to make changes in our lives, or in our communities. But most of us have a litany of examples where we’ve tried to change, and we just *can’t*.

Perhaps that’s why folks were frightened by a guy like Saul, who claimed to have changed. Or a guy like Br. Jim, who claims to have changed.

Knowing how hard change is, e keeping asking: Can such change *really* happen in someone? And if such change can happen in *them*, can it happen in *me*?

What I know is this: if I keep thinking about all the ways I’ve failed to change my life, I might dismiss Br. Jim’s story of God’s life-changing love.

GOD’S life changing love.

Maybe **THAT’S** the key!

Did you notice? In all of those examples I used a moment ago, I kept talking about the ways **I’ve** attempted to change my life. **I** try. **I** fail.

But that’s the problem. I think I can do it. I think I have the strength to change me, and change my world.

But in today’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. You cannot bear fruit

unless you remain in me. *Without me you can do nothing.*”

Without Christ, I can't do anything good. With Christ, my life changes. Not because I am suddenly stronger, but because Christ is alive in me! His strength starts to do things in me that I could never dream of.

Saint Paul did not wake up and say, “I think I'll change my life today!” Paul didn't change his life – Christ did! When Christ is alive in us, HE does things that we can't do on our own.

Br. Jim did not wake up in prison and say, “I think I'll change my life today.” Jim couldn't change his life – Christ changed his life! Christ was alive in Jim and did things that Jim could never do on his own.

Christ is still in the business of changing lives. But we doubt that, because *we've* been trying to make changes in our lives and our world, *by our own strength.*

That doesn't work.

The invitation from Jesus is clear in today's Gospel. Remain in me. Pray to me. Listen to my word. Keep my commandments.

Understand that, as baptized believers, Christ is already alive in you. You can't change your life on your own – Christ will. You don't have to change things in isolation – you are *one* branch on the vine. Your brothers and sisters are here to help and inspire you, to share your burden through the Holy Spirit.

You are not defined by your past failures – you are set free by God's love in the present and God's plan for your future.

Our world is not doomed to an endless cycle of tragedy. One person at a time, one branch at a time, God is giving us a new beginning in a new creation.

God took hold of Saul, and made him a saint. God took hold of Br. Jim, and made him a preacher. *That* God has not retired! He's right here, in word, sacrament, community and Spirit. Are you ready for some change?