

062010 THE OLD MAN

(My father's decision to go into his own business is part of our family's lore and our family's experience of the transforming power of Christ in faith.)

I picked up my suit from the cleaner's yesterday. I go to Phil's Tailor at the bottom of Hendricks Street. Phil doesn't run the business any more but subleases it to a Korean family. But he was out back trimming back some bushes when I arrived and I went over to say hell. You see, back in the 1950's Phil Sabella was one of my dad's earliest accounts as he worked hard to create a business of his own, a small bookkeeping and accounting firm. The circumstances behind that decision are part of our family's lore—who we are and where we came from. When I saw Phil yesterday we spoke briefly about my dad who has been dead for twenty-nine years. As I drove away I had my dad on my mind and then, of course, today is Father's day.

The year was 1950 and my dad was married and by the end of the year he had four kids. He was 33 years old and he was out of work. He had worked with his older brother after the Big War down on Dock Street but over time that didn't work out so well and there came a point in time when my dad made the decision to go out on his own. It must have been a pretty scary time. There were no such things as credit cards back then. No income meant no way to live.

My dad had no clients of his own. He had to go out and drum up business. He decided that he would make at least ten cold calls every day, fifty in a week's time. Initially he would get a good sleep and by the time he had breakfast, read the paper and the kids were up and fed it would be ten o'clock before he was out on the road to make calls. That, he found out, was much too late in the day because people in mom and pop grocery stores or gas stations or shoe repairmen or tailors were busy by then. He began to realize he had to get up early and get out early before their days began. He decided that he would get up and go to the 6:30 Mass and pray for success that day. That also enabled him to get out onto the street by eight o'clock and he began to have more success in gaining access to people and signing them up. There was a lot of rejection but eventually enough acceptance that he could start to make a living. He would ask each store to put their week's receipts in a brown envelope along with a one dollar bill. He charged them a dollar a week for financial statements.

My dad went from being an unemployed husband and father of four with minimal prospects to running his own small business that still exists today sixty years later and which takes out an ad on the parish bulletin each week. (I believe that if I am praying for the success of the family business then at least they should advertise in The Paduan.) My dad's story is a story of transformation. But it was a hard transformation. He and my mom spared us, the kids, what was really going on. Just like so many of you today who have been shielding your own kids from the effect of the recession on your families since some have lost jobs or had hours cut back or lost income from portfolios or retirement. My parents loved us and they endured the sufferings that came with trying to do the right thing. They suffered for love of each other and for their kids—and there was real transformation.

What Jesus knew and what Jesus revealed is that the only real and lasting transformative power in this life comes from embracing and enduring suffering—out of love. Jesus did that himself and it is only in his suffering that his true identity is revealed.

He is never more human than in the Garden of Gethsemane when he lies on the ground asking his Father to take the cup of suffering away from him but acquiescing to the Father's will. Nor is he more divine than when he hangs upon the cross and speaks: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Or "I thirst." Jesus knows the transformative power in a love that is willing to suffer.

His suffering and death transform life. Despair is transformed into hope. Hatred into love. Enemies into friends. Death into everlasting life. Ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Suffering isn't necessary by God's design but suffering is what love looks like when it confronts the reality of sin in this world, when it comes face to face with self-interest, hedonistic opportunism, manipulation, deceit, infidelity and fundamental lack of trust.

Jesus said, before his death on the cross and before anyone had an inkling that he himself would one day die on a cross, that we could not be his follower unless we picked up our own cross and carried it. Jesus must have seen any number of crucifixions in Israel in his day. He must have seen other men forced to carry their own cross to the place of execution. He may well have taken note that it was one thing to be put to death so cruelly and another to be forced to carry the instrument of torture yourself. But then did not Isaac carry the wood for sacrifice for his father Abraham? Jesus had resolved, long ago, that when it was his turn he would know precisely what to do and how he would do it. And he is now telling those closest to him that there is no other way. Carry the cross—but do it because you love.

Jesus knew that everything would be demanded of him and he is telling his closest disciples and us that the same would be demanded of us so we might as well set our minds to it. He would embrace that suffering—in love. We are to do the same. So that all would be made new. It is for us to trust him and to go to that most fundamental of all transformations—Eucharist—where the most ordinary bread and wine become the most extraordinary of gifts, the bread of life.