

For a few years of my life, I spent some time in jail. (That got your attention, didn't it?) It wasn't for any crime I committed. I actually wanted to be there. For eight years I worked with three dedicated Catholic laypeople who faithfully taught bible study to inmates in the jail each week. They also shared with the inmates the virtues of programs like A.A. and the blessing of living a sober life. Once a month, I joined those faithful Catholics and celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation as well as Mass for the inmates. It was a blessed experience all around.

During that time, I met a man who was jailed because he had several traffic tickets he never paid. He was a blue collar worker, barely able to eke out enough money doing odd jobs to pay his rent and buy a few groceries. He couldn't afford to pay the fines and he wasn't able to take time off from work to attend to this matter. If he did, he would get even further behind with his bills. While maybe not the best decision, it was understandable given his circumstances. One day, on his way to work, he was pulled over for not making a full stop when turning right on red. The officer checked his record which revealed the unpaid tickets and subsequent suspended license and arrested him.

With no money and no family in the area, he stayed in jail for a number of months. Once released, he tried rebuilding his life. I remember him being released in November. That's the time of year we had our parish fall festival – a huge event that would draw tens of thousands of people from all over Hillsborough County. The man came up to me during that festival. I quickly realized that he wasn't attending the festival. He was working it.

During that time, he spent five days cleaning tables and hauling trash to the dumpster. He wasn't paid. But he said he wanted to do this in appreciation for what our team of four did for him. He said we helped him rediscover his faith. He also said we treated him with dignity, when everyone else seemed to be suspicious or condescending to him. When the festival ended, the man thanked me for the opportunity and left. I never saw him again. Most importantly, I didn't see him in jail and I'm hoping he got his life back on track again, despite his struggles.

That man was filled with hope. Despite his circumstances, despite how hard life was for him, he lived with the hope that life would get better and that he would be better. And he wanted to share that hope by making a gesture of appreciation to our parish community by serving in a simple and loving way.

In today's first reading, the apostles Paul and Barnabas share the hope of Christ with gentiles. The gentiles were not mainstream people, according to the religious leaders of the time. Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas felt called to minister to them because they understood that not just the religious elite, but all people were created in the image and likeness of God. Paul and Barnabas were ridiculed and persecuted by the supposed religious faithful for taking care of these people. They considered such treatment as confirmation that they were doing the right thing. They remained ambassadors of hope despite how they were treated.

When the Book of Revelation was written (which is the source for our second reading today), religious persecution of Christians was widespread. The author of the book, presumed to

be St. John or one of his disciples, spoke of hope despite the circumstances of persecution that this group of Christians experienced. Despite being persecuted, John called upon these believers to remain faithful to the risen Christ, since he knew the risen Christ would see them through such dire consequences.

The short gospel passage we heard today comes from Jesus' discourse to the disciples at the Last Supper. While he acknowledged that his CFO, Judas, had just left to betray him and while he knew he was about to be abandoned by his best friends, Jesus carried on in and with hope. Knowing that he was about to be crucified in a plot devised by the supposed religious leaders and political leaders of the day, Jesus stayed true to his calling. And he elevated his calling. Despite facing betrayal, threats, and potential punishment, Jesus admonished all to love one another. And he lived out that love by sacrificing himself on the cross for us – not seeking revenge or retribution.

On the morning of the day he died, Pope Francis proclaimed similar sentiments. I believe he knew his death was imminent. But instead of focusing on himself or his physical struggles, he proclaimed a gospel message about living in hope and trusting in the resurrected Christ. In his address on that Easter day just a few weeks ago, he reminded us that the resurrection of Jesus is the basis of our hope. Because of the resurrection of Jesus and our participation in this new life he offers, love has triumphed over hatred. And when we live out that love, God's light triumphs over darkness and his truth reigns over falsehood (Urbi et Orbi, 2025).

The apostles Paul and Barnabus proclaimed hope in the resurrected Christ as they faced the hardship of harassment and persecution. The faithful who were the audience of the Book of Revelation were called upon to act in a similar fashion. Jesus was certainly the epitome of living out this message, especially as he offered his life on the cross for us.

Living a vocation and a life marked by hope and love isn't something that only Jesus was called to do. It isn't the vocation and life that only great saints and sainted popes are called to live. Every Christian is called to live a vocation and life of hope and love which started on the day we were baptized. We are especially called to share that love with those who are different from us, with the vulnerable in hospitals as well as those who were sentenced to jails, with those who are down on their luck as well as with those who cause their own bad luck. Living with love is the most difficult, most exasperating, most confounding, yet most rewarding way to live. It is also the way that leads to heaven. Today, when we leave this place, let us live out that hope and that love for others as Christ did for us.

Amen? Amen!