

Whenever my twin brother Michael and I get together we always seem to find some way to compete with one another. In fact, whenever he comes to visit, we often play a variety of different kinds of games, and as we do so it often makes me think about how much people enjoy competition. In fact, not only do we participate in sports, or play board games, card games, and video games, we also enjoy watching them too. Just look at all the television shows we love that involve competition. America's Got Talent, So you think you can Dance, The Voice, Mariner's Games, Seahawk Games.

So why do we like competition so much? One reason could be that we live in a world where it appears that only the best are successful, only the strong survive. Another reason could be that from an early age we learn to compete for grades, friends, and if we have brothers and sisters, we may feel like we have to compete for our parents' attention. Perhaps we like competition because it provides us with a purpose and helps us realize that we do have value in this world.

We want to be successful, we want to make a difference, but how do we define success beyond the earthly understanding, or the popular adage that the person who dies with the most toys wins? How about we define success by the impact we make on the people around us, by the way we touch their lives. Well, what if we measured our triumphs and victories by actually living out God's Word in our lives, and by seeking to do his will daily? Consider the following story...A bit of warning, it may be a drastic and dramatic example, but it ties in very well with our Gospel for today, which is also quite drastic, gruesome, and extreme!

At first glance, 74-year-old nun Dorothy Stang didn't look like the typical kind of person who would have a contract out on her life. She was short with grandmotherly gray hair and glasses that slipped down her nose in the heat. She didn't carry a weapon. She read her Bible faithfully. She was known as "Sister

Dorothy" or "Dot" to her many friends. No, Dorothy didn't look like the kind of person who would be a threat to anyone -- that is, until she spoke.

Sister Dorothy was from Dayton, Ohio, and as a young woman she joined an order of nuns whose mission is "to take a stand with poor people, especially women and children, in the most abandoned places." Dorothy soon found herself in one of the most abandoned and remote places in the world, 30 miles out in the jungle away from the closest small town in the Para region of northern Brazil. It was there that she worked out her call to ministry, spending more than 30 years with the landless peasants who eked out a living by farming in the rainforest.

But people with no land, and no voice in centers of government are vulnerable to exploitation, and nowhere was that truer than in that region of Brazil. Illegal loggers and ranchers were cutting around 20 percent of the region's 1.6 million acres of rainforest. The destruction of the wilderness meant the destruction of a way of life for the poorest of the poor, who were being driven off the land by threats, intimidation, and even violence.

Sister Dorothy refused to be silent in the midst of such injustice. She continued to teach the local peasants how to farm the land without deforestation while simultaneously mounting a vocal campaign against illegal land grabbing. She lobbied the Brazilian government and named those who were exploiting the people and the land she was called to protect and serve. As a result, this small, elderly nun became a threat to the loggers and was marked for death.

One day Dorothy was walking to a meeting in the Boa Esperanca settlement where she was to discuss a new settlement that had been granted to the peasants by the Brazilian government but was in a proposed tract of land valued by illegal loggers. As she walked to the meeting along with two peasants from a nearby village, two gunmen emerged from the bushes astride the path. They asked her if she had any weapons. She said all she had was her Bible, which she opened and

began to read. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers," she read. A second later, one of the men opened fire, shooting her once in the abdomen. As Dorothy fell to the forest floor, the gunman fired another round that ended her life.

Dorothy had spoken the truth to power, and like many prophets who came before her, she paid the price in persecution, hardship, and martyrdom. In many ways she was like John the Baptist, living out in the remote wilderness and enduring severe hardship, but working out of a deep sense of call and commission to speak the truth to self-proclaimed kings and criminals, regardless of the cost.

Our Gospel for today tells the story of John the Baptist's fate as a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus. Before our narrative begins Jesus had just sent his disciples out on a mission that featured a proclamation of repentance, the casting out of demons, and a healing of the sick. Jesus' growing reputation brings him to the attention of Herod Antipas, who immediately begins to wonder if Jesus is John the Baptizer raised from the dead, because Jesus preaches like John and yet has even more power.

As we continue to explore our Gospel message, we may get the impression that Mark's author implies that Herod had a reason to fear Jesus for the same reason he feared John -- both were unafraid to speak and act as the prophets of old. The writer then flashes back to the confrontation between Herod and John. Herod had divorced his own wife and married his brother's wife while his brother was still alive. While that sounds more like a bad soap opera than a major problem, John the Baptizer confronted Herod about what he had done, because it was a matter of morality and also a matter of God's law. The king had taken something that was not rightfully his, something that did not belong to him.

This confrontation between king and prophet echoes a similar one in 1 Kings 21, where Elijah confronts King Ahab over his murderous takeover of a vineyard

belonging to the innocent Naboth. King Ahab acts at the prodding and behest of his evil wife Jezebel, who had backed him into a corner and made him act against his conscience. Naboth is falsely accused at a banquet and murdered -- all because he had spoken out about the truth of maintaining his ancestral land, which was his by law. The parallels in Mark are striking: the prophet, John the Baptist, confronts the king because he took his wife illegally. The king's conniving wife wants to get rid of the prophet, so she backs the king into a corner based on his lusty oath and has the innocent man condemned and murdered during a banquet.

No wonder the gospel writers equate John with Elijah! The Baptizer is killed for speaking the truth and confronting the powers of this world, the rulers of his society. Doesn't something similar to this happen to Jesus? He speaks out against the religious leaders and reminds them that the temple is not theirs, rather it belongs to God. Jesus also reminds them that God's Law didn't belong to them either! Rather it was given to help them live their lives, to guide them; it was not to be a burden or to be used to keep people away from God. Mark reminds us that the same thing that happened to John will happen to Jesus.

Indeed, that's what can happen to people who confront certain powers in this world, or if they challenge the norms of society. Innocent people like Dorothy Stang, John the Baptist, and Jesus, get killed when those powers react violently to prophets -- mostly because the powers fear them. Herod feared John's prophetic authority with the people. The criminal loggers and ranchers feared Sister Dorothy because she pulled back the curtain on their activity. The religious leaders feared Jesus because he called out their hypocrisy and had real power and authority. The powers of this world will do everything they can to remove the ones they fear!

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus warns his disciples of this very thing: Those who speak the truth to power, and those who stand in the gap between the powers and the peasants, will be persecuted. That persecution, however, is actually a form of

blessedness. "Blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account," says Jesus. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Rejoice and be glad? How is that even possible? Well, only the persecuted prophet can really know. They rejoice because they are persecuted for doing something worth persecution! They rejoice because they are walking directly in the footsteps of Jesus, of John, of Dorothy, and so many others throughout history and even today who have paid the price for telling the truth. They rejoice because their prophetic witness and peacemaking, even if it costs them their lives, is making change possible. As E. Stanley Jones once put it, peacemakers and prophets "must get used to the sight of their own blood."

If we take Jesus seriously, if we want to be more than a fan or admirer of him, we must begin to realize that one of the major hindrances to real discipleship is the Christian obsession with being liked and recognized. What passes for persecution among most American Christians is really just a desire for Christianity to be popular again as it was in the "good old days." We think we're being persecuted, for example, if someone leaves out "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, or if a devout Christian actor, singer, or professional athlete, doesn't get the respect he or she deserves. American Christians have a lot of anxiety, and they see culture as the enemy, so they constantly think up ways that the culture is persecuting them.

It's hard to imagine that Jesus cares that much about these types of things. Jesus got persecuted for doing things like speaking the truth to political and religious powers, not courting them. He got persecuted for helping the poor and the outcasts, especially when he operated his health and wellness clinics on the wrong days or holidays. He got persecuted for sitting down at the dinner table with

outcasts, undesirables, with people who had bad reputations. He got persecuted for speaking a message of peace that included love for enemies and not their destruction. He got persecuted for saying that even the most wretched people could be reconciled to God and have their sins forgiven.

Our Christian faith should be more than just knowing about Jesus. It should be more than admiring Jesus. It is more than just gladly hearing the Word. Herod had done all that, but the Word sown in his life did not bear fruit. The cares of this world choked it out.

Christianity is not about knowing who Jesus is, it is about knowing God as revealed in Jesus. Similarly, the Bible, the Word of God, can either be informative, historical stories about God and Jesus; or more importantly they can also be stories that bring God into our lives. Christianity is about knowing and being known by God. It involves our whole lives –not just our heads. The truth is, is that if we're always seeking recognition, respect, or other people's approval, then we're probably not engaged in prophetic peacemaking. If everybody loves us, then we are probably not carrying a cross.

Tertullian, an ancient leader of the church, said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. It's also the seed of change. Now, we may not ever be called to give up our lives violently like Dorothy, or John, or Jesus, but we are all called to stand in the gap for justice and truth. When persecution comes, let us rejoice because we're doing something that deserves it we've been found to be faithful, and perhaps then we will understand what true success really is. Thanks be to God! AMEN