

This week, I came across a Native American story about a young brave who found an eagle's egg. He took it and placed it into the nest of a prairie chicken. The eaglet hatched with the brood of prairie chicks and grew up with them. All its life, the misplaced eagle thought it was a prairie chicken and did only what the prairie chickens did. It scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. And it flew no more than a few feet off the ground with a thrashing of its wings like other prairie chickens. Years passed and the unfortunate eagle grew very old. One day, it saw a magnificent bird high above in the cloudless sky. Hanging with majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared gracefully on its strong wings. "What a beautiful bird!" said the unfortunate eagle to its neighbor. "That's an eagle, the chief of the birds," the neighbor replied, "But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him." So the poor eagle never gave it a second thought and it died thinking it was a prairie chicken.

It's a sad thought to think that this magnificent eagle spent its whole life believing it was just an ordinary prairie chicken. The eagle became conditioned by its surroundings so it never realized its full potential. It listened to the naysayers so it never soared through the skies. It never experienced the life God intended for it.

Does this sound familiar? It should. All too often, we live our lives as prairie chickens instead of eagles. We relegate ourselves to the ordinary even though we are destined for the extraordinary. We let our surroundings condition the way we see ourselves. We listen to our naysayers and stay tethered to the ground. We fail to experience life as God intended.

We have the solution to our predicament in today's Gospel. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are branches." We, as human beings, are like vine branches. We need a vine on which to graft ourselves. The vine onto which we are grafted affects the way we see ourselves and the expectations we have of ourselves. However, these vines come in many forms. Sometimes we

choose to graft ourselves to a vine of capitalism. We let our pursuit of wealth define who we are. Sometimes we graft ourselves to a vine of power. We let our pursuit of control and influence define who we are. Sometimes we graft ourselves to a vine of pleasure. We let our pursuit of gratification define who we are. These false vines keep us from our destiny and our full potential as children of God. In turn, we either bear no fruit at all or fruit that is irrelevant to what truly matters in life.

It's only when we graft ourselves to the right vine that we experience life as God intended. Jesus is the true vine. He's not a vine that is flawed, imperfect, or false. He's a vine that is real, authentic, and valid. Grafted to him, we can bear much fruit. Without Him, we can do nothing. It's only when we encounter the Risen Christ and align our lives to His that we can stop living like prairie chickens and start living like eagles.

Christ is always calling us to transform our lives into what they are meant to be. We have to look no further than our first reading for a great example of someone leaving behind a false vine and grafting himself to the true vine. The reading picks up in the aftermath of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul had been a Pharisee and one of the chief persecutors of the early Church. He had approved the stoning of Stephen and now he was claiming to be a Christian. He wanted them to believe that he was one of them. I don't blame the disciples for being skeptical. For all they knew, it might be a trap.

But Saul had encountered the Risen Christ and his life could never be the same. He was called to be more. He was called to his true destiny. Saul accepted his calling and became one of the biggest promoters of the faith. We now know him better as Saint Paul, the apostle. He was the most prolific writer in the New Testament and went on four missionary trips that spanned over 10,000 miles. He built up the faith and started numerous churches even though it came at a

personal cost. He endured persecutions and imprisonments like the ones he had once inflicted on others. His transformation ended in Rome with his beheading for the defense of a faith that he once condemned. At the end of his life, he was no longer a prairie chicken. He soared like an eagle.

You might be thinking that you could never be like Saint Paul. After all, he was a saint. After all, he saw the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. If God can transform one of the greatest enemies of the Church into one of her greatest champions, He can absolutely transform us into what we are destined to be. We only need the grace that comes from being grafted onto the true vine.

This time of year, there are a lot of liturgical celebrations in the Church. We get to see firsthand the outpouring of God's grace through the sacraments of His Church. At the beginning of this month, Father Jacek baptized two men at the Easter Vigil. The water poured on their heads transformed them into children of God. The same goes for the kids that Father Peter and I baptize on a regular basis. Just yesterday, over eighty of our young people received their first Holy Communion. They encountered the Risen Christ in the special and unique way that the rest of us do every time we come to Mass. Their lives can never be the same because they have been fed by the Lord. Tomorrow night, our bishop will be in our midst to confirm our 8<sup>th</sup> graders. They will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit that they will need to go out into the world and join us as soldiers for Christ.

Being grafted to a false vine is easy. It requires no effort on our part. We just have to keep the status quo and listen to what the culture tells us we should be. We just have to keep listening to the naysayers. We just have to keep being content with being tethered to the ground and living life as prairie chickens.

Brothers and sisters, it's hard to stay grafted to the true vine. It requires sacrifice and self-denial. It requires turning away from the trappings of our culture. It requires drowning out the naysayers. It requires us to continually say "yes" to our calling to be more - to say "yes" to our destiny to live our lives as God intended. With God's grace, all things are possible. Then, and only then, can we can soar like eagles.

It's true that, just like Saint Paul, our conversion might come at a personal cost. We might lose some long-time friends. People might look at us differently. As our Gospel tells us, Jesus will prune us and give us the opportunity to bear much fruit for the Kingdom. All of us become pruned during our lives. Each of us is on our own personal faith journey and will be pruned in different ways and at different times. Pruning involves some type of suffering, be it physical, mental, or spiritual. But each pruning is an opportunity to draw closer to Christ. God is working on each one of our lives, even when we are totally unaware of Him doing so.

God has a calling for each of us. We are not currently the version of ourselves that God intended us to be. We are called to be more. We can either ignore our calling and live our lives as ordinary prairie chickens or answer this calling and live our lives as the magnificent eagles God intended us to be. Which is it going to be for you?