

Mad Max—1979. *Lethal Weapon*—1987. *Braveheart*—1995. *The Patriot*—2000. *The Passion of the Christ*—2004. *Hacksaw Ridge*—2016. Over the past almost fifty years, actor Mel Gibson has performed in almost seventy-five movies and TV shows who combined earnings total over \$2.5 billion in the United States alone. He has won two Oscars and a host of other awards around the globe. If that were all you knew, you might be puzzled that there was a five-year gap, from 2005 to 2010, in which Gibson did no work whatsoever. But if you know about his personal life, that five-year hiatus makes perfect sense. On and off over his early career, Gibson had earned a reputation of struggling with alcohol, anger management, and saying appalling things. On July 28, 2006, at 3:10 AM, Gibson was pulled over for speeding on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. He was traveling at 80 MPH on a road with a speed limit of 45 MPH. A field sobriety test revealed that his blood alcohol content was twice the legal limit. As the officers attempted to take Gibson into custody, he resisted arrest and launched into a long, angry, anti-Semitic and lewd tirade—recorded by the officers—which later was released to the public. When all was said and done, Gibson was blacklisted in Hollywood. Even after he entered rehab and met with local Jewish leaders to apologize and atone for what he said, nobody wanted to work with him, and nobody wanted him to work at all. Five years later, on October 14, 2011, Robert Downey, Jr.—no stranger to addiction and recovery—was chosen to receive the American Cinematheque award. Custom allowed the recipient to invite whomever he wanted to present the award. Imagine the shock of the crowd when, carrying the award onto the stage, out walked Mel Gibson. It turns out that eight years earlier, when Downey’s life and career were spiraling downward due to a drug addiction, Gibson was the one who saved his life by encouraging him to enter treatment and get clean. In his acceptance speech, Downey explained his choice.

When I couldn't get sober, [Mel] told me not to give up hope, and he urged me to find my faith [...] I couldn't get hired, so he cast me as the lead in a movie that was actually

developed for him. He kept a roof over my head, and he kept food on the table. And most importantly, he said if I accepted responsibility for my wrongdoings and if I embraced that part of my soul that was ugly— “hugging the cactus,” he calls it—he said that if I “hugged the cactus” long enough, I’d become a man of some humility and that my life would take on a new meaning. And I did, and it worked. All he asked in return was that someday I help the next guy in some small way. It’s reasonable to assume that at the time he didn’t imagine that the next guy would be him or that someday was tonight.

Downey concluded by asking the audience to join him in forgiving his friend his trespasses the way they had forgiven Downey’s. He said, “He’s hugged the cactus long enough.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls out to the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24).” The word translated here as “cross” is the Greek word *stauros*. The *stauros* was used in crucifixions. It was the crossbeam, the horizontal piece of wood to which criminal’s hands would be nailed and then attached to an upright wooden beam, making the shape of a cross. Before the iron spikes pierced his hands, the victim would lift and carry his heavy *stauros* to the place where he would be crucified. In other words, the victim had to embrace the very thing that would eventually kill him. This is what Jesus did on His *Via Dolorosa*—He carried His cross through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha. We are not likely to be physically crucified; when Jesus says that to follow Him we must pick up and carry our *stauros*, what does He mean?

Like Jesus embracing the Cross, like Robert Downey, Jr., Mel Gibson, and every person in recovery embracing the hard truth about themselves, we have to “hug the cactus.” We must acknowledge the parts of our souls and our lives that are ugly—the parts of ourselves that are killing us—sometimes figuratively, but other times literally. Only after we confront not only our occasional failures but also our chronic, endemic, and destructive spiritual and psychological self-absorbed brokenness can we recognize how desperately we

need a savior and how thoroughly we must surrender everything to Him. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:31-32).” For us to start to become well, we must first admit that we are sick; we have to hug the cactus.

Some of us are unaware of the cactus; some of us refuse to believe in the cactus. Certainly, nobody wants to hug the cactus. Our society and civilization are fractured partially because we universally refuse to accept the fact that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).” All means all. Men and Women. Wealthy and poor. Black and White. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. In our energetic avoidance of our interior ugliness, we become so frantic to prove to ourselves and to others that we are wise and good that we condemn everyone who is not like us as stupid or wicked. The divisions created and inflamed by the political-entertainment complex do not help. Regardless of the differences these ethnic, sexual, economic, or ideological distinctions make in the secular world—and in the world those differences are real and consequential—spiritually speaking they are so secondary that they are almost irrelevant. In his 1973 work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Russian dissident and survivor of the Soviet Gulags Alexandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, “[T]he line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.” If we do not accept this, if we do not admit the fact that we, like everyone else, are fundamentally self-interested and self-absorbed, if we refuse individually or corporately to hug the cactus, then we have no choice but to conclude that we will never need grace, never ask for forgiveness, and never turn to a Savior. In so doing we lock ourselves out of the Kingdom of Heaven even when its doors remain wide open eternally.

What is your cactus? Every one of us is being killed by something; everyone has something that makes them feel like they are dying inside. We have already mentioned

addictions and other unhealthy coping mechanisms. But what about fear? Fear of loneliness, fear of running out of money, fear of change, fear that nothing will change, fear that our secrets will be found out. What about regret? Regret for things done or never done, regret for things said or never said and now it's too late, regret over a broken relationship, regret that we are not, never have been, and never will be the person we always wanted to be. What about attachments? Attachments to our family roles, attachments to our jobs and careers, attachments to our public place and reputation, attachments to our past accomplishments, our future expectations, or our present performances of perfection. Those things are killing us. The only thing we can do is to acknowledge them, own them, and accept that we are transfixed by them as deeply and fatally as the iron nails that pierced crucified criminals in Rome. And then we turn to God, we admit our powerlessness to fight much less fix these knots in our souls, and we entrust ourselves to the One Who embraced the sin of the world on the wood of the Cross, died under its crushing weight, and rose from the dead to bring all of us out of death into His Resurrected life.

In embracing His *stauros* on the Cross, Christ hugged the cactus in every human heart. When we follow Him, we are swept up into His embrace. At His Death, every cactus died; at His Resurrection, we were implanted by the seed of the Tree of Life that will never die and eternally bears the fruit of forgiveness, freedom, and love. But first we hug the cactus.