



There's this movie on Netflix called *Father Stu*. The main character is played by Mark Wahlberg, one of the most famous actors in the industry, alongside the father, who is played by Mel Gibson. The film is based on the true story of a Catholic priest named Stuart Long. Now, it isn't exactly something I want to show to our children anytime soon with the language used throughout, but it brings up many aspects of our understanding of God that deserve our attention. Just for a bit of background:

*Father Stu, as he was affectionately known, [grew up in Montana and] pursued careers in boxing, acting, teaching, and museum management before [becoming a priest]. [Although he was agnostic, not so sure about the whole God thing for a while, he still attended a Catholic university, mainly for*

*the athletic opportunities. In the academic setting,] he would often argue with the teachers, interrupt class, and ask ignorant questions that didn't relate to the content. [Stuart] later pursued boxing, winning the Montana Golden Gloves championship... Faced with reconstructive jaw surgery after a fight, [he] gave up boxing and moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career. Though he had some success with commercials and work as an extra in the movies, it was not [what he hoped]. [He moved onto management of a museum in Pasadena, and] he would ride his motorcycle, an artifact of his acting spurt, to and from the museum. And one day, [he] was riding home after work, and [he] got hit by a car, and...smashed into [another] in the next lane. [That] accident proved pivotal in Father Stu's conversion, leading him to have what he called a "religious experience" while in the hospital. Upon returning home and discussing marriage with his then-girlfriend, he entered [what would be our version of adult Confirmation, in a sense]. On the day he was baptized, [he had to give up the idea of marriage, because] he knew he was going to be a priest [instead]. [Unfortunately,] during seminary, Father Stu had hip surgery wherein a fist-size tumor was discovered. He was diagnosed with inclusion body myositis, an inflammatory condition in the muscles for which there is no cure. His body was already slowing down when he was ordained to the priesthood.*

And then came this scene in the movie after he officially became a priest, when he gave his first homily. At least, in the film, Father Stu said, *I know my suffering is a gift from God. Now, I know it sounds like bull, but it's coming from a man in a wheelchair, so you got to entertain it...This life, no matter how long it lasts, is a momentary affliction preparing us for eternal glory...The experience of suffering is the fullest expression of God's love. It is a chance to be closer to Christ...To lead you all to find and feel that love is why God is giving me the scenic route to die.*

So, it turns out the language may not be the only reason why I may not show this to our children anytime soon. Granted, I know we can take many parts of Scripture to support exactly what the film puts into Mark Wahlberg's mouth as Father Stu. I know what we heard from Romans this morning can very well lead us to believe that suffering is given by God to make us stronger or whatever else will benefit us for the long run. But I'm not so sure I want the next generation to be under the impression that suffering is a gift from God. Because it isn't just about sports injuries and auto accidents and muscle disorders. I don't want the next generation to be under the impression that God gifts people with violence or abuse of any kind. I cannot go along with a loving and grace-overflowing God operating that way in this world.

And yet, I know it has been preached from many pulpits, Catholic and otherwise, taught in just as many Sunday schools, and put into the mouths of actors on Hollywood film sets.

Actually, the part of the movie that I will whole-heartedly rally behind is what happened on the way for Father Stu to preach his first homily. His dad was driving him since the soon-to-be-priest could no longer do so because of his symptoms. And the truck broke down. So, the father got out the wheelchair from the back of the pickup and pushed him the rest of the way. That is the Gospel of Christ I will whole-heartedly promote to the next generation. Not the God who unleashes hurricanes and global pandemics and gang violence or whatever else in between, but the God who will join us in our suffering and push us with the relentless love and compassion so that we do not lose hope.

As the film concludes, Father Stu must enter a skilled-care facility before his mortality draws to a close, but that doesn't stop people from coming to see him, as a line leads out the front door and onto the sidewalk. As if ministry, as if God's love, can still continue no matter the level of pain and anguish, not just from Father Stu, but from people all over the town and beyond to minister him with love and compassion so that hope will never fade. That is the Gospel I can rally behind. But I know many children of God will cling to the idea that "suffering is a gift from God...[as] a chance to be closer to Christ." It gets even more believable when it's shown on a film screen with orchestral background music and digital perfection with Mark Wahlberg dramatically saying the words. Nevertheless, I cannot bring myself to that understanding of God. I cling to the God of Resurrection, of empowerment, grace, love, and new life, who will join us in whatever our bodies and the world throw at us, so that we do not lose hope. That we will be pushed with the same fervent passion that took our Lord not just to a cross, but out of a tomb to live with us through it all forever. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*[Catholic Actors Mark Wahlberg and Mel Gibson Telling Story of Helena Priest Father Stu in New Movie/ National Catholic Register \(ncregister.com\)](#)*