

In my classroom at Berea Elementary School, I say something every day when I need my students to stop what they are doing and give me their undivided attention.

“Look closely and listen carefully,” I say.

They know at that moment I want them to look with the eyes of the heart and listen with the ears of the heart and learn something amazing.

Whenever I write, which is my favorite thing to do in the whole, wide world, I try to notice beauty in the plain, genius in the simple, wonder in the ordinary and courage in the human.

I try to go slowly and carefully so I do not ignore these things and pass them by.

I asked Charles and our wonderful musicians to sing an obscure song by Bruce Springsteen, the boss and my favorite song writer and rock and roller, “Queen of the Supermarket.”

Have you ever heard it?

It is the fourth track on his album Working On A Dream.

About this song, Springsteen said, “I’m telling you, it’s true! So I came home, said, ‘Wow, the supermarket is fantastic, it’s my new favorite place. And I’m going to write a song about it!’ If there’s a supermarket and all these things are there, well, there has to be a queen. And if you go there, of course there is. There’s millions of them, so it’s kind of a song about finding beauty where it’s ignored or where it’s passed by.”

As we take a walk through the story of blind Bartimaeus in the Gospel of Mark, it is my humble prayer that we do not ignore the beauty that is there, that we do not pass it by, but that we find it.

The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, “Beauty will save the world.”

I hope we find that kind of beauty in this story.

There are three things I would like for us to look closely at and listen carefully to in this story. They are simple things but, I think, they are things we can easily ignore and pass by in the world that we live in.

Could you do a favor for me? After we learn each thing, I’ll say, “I was blind but now I see,” and you echo me.

First, I would like for us to notice that knowing each other's name and knowing each other's stories is vital.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark shows us the way to do this. The writer cements Bartimaeus's name into history by writing it for us, by telling it to us. Bartimaeus is more than a blind beggar.

Think of how many people in Jericho ignored the blind beggar and passed him by.

That is a difficult thing, to not be seen.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark sees him.

Bartimaeus is not an object.

He is a subject.

He is Bartimaeus, a human being with a name and a story. He has human rights.

Knowing people's names and stories is a liberating, beautiful thing.

I was blind but now I see.

Second, I would like for us to notice that listening to each other with curiosity and compassion is vital.

In our story, the crowd does not show us the way to do this.

As theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, "The crowd tries to determine the situation."

They try to silence Bartimaeus.

They try to keep him unseen.

Perhaps to them Bartimaeus is a sinner and that is why he is handicapped and poor.

They 'other' him and do with him whatever they want.

Jesus, however, shows us the way to listen with curiosity and compassion.

Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us, “Today, when we are facing the tragic urgency of the world’s poor, we can easily deceive ourselves into pretending we know what suits them better than they do. In all human relationships, and helping another is a form of relationship, we have to respect other persons and recognize their rights. We have to give what we have, but in order to do that we must also be attentive to what others experience as their needs.”

Instead of saying, “Bartimaeus, I know what is best for you,” he asks the question, “Bartimaeus, what do you want me to do for you?”

Can you see the difference? Can you hear the difference?

I wan blind but now I see.

Third, I would like for us to notice that the ‘other,’ the oppressed one, is often the one who shows us the face of God in our time and place.

Gutierrez continues, “The blind man is not begging for alms. He is asking for health and for life. His request is trusting and quick: “he sprang up and came to Jesus” (v. 50). His request is also affectionate as he calls Jesus, “my teacher” (v. 51). The Lord restores his sight and declares him saved, or, to be more accurate, he tells the man that his faith, his trust in him, is what has given him life, what has made him well (v. 52). Bartimaeus takes his place as a new disciple and, no longer sitting by the roadside, he starts to follow Jesus on the way which will lead him to the cross and the resurrection. In these painful but rich times, many people like Bartimaeus are no longer sitting by the roadside; they are springing up to come to the Lord, the friend of life.”

In a great paradox, the one who is blind is the only one who can see Jesus.

The one who was ‘othered,’ who was doubly oppressed, show us how to follow Jesus.

I was blind but now I see.

At my elementary school in West Greenville, I teach kids who many people call inner-city kids.

But they are more than inner city kids to me.

I know their names and their stories.

We listen to each other with curiosity and compassion.

Let me tell you a story from my classroom.

“Choose 3 words from this character traits list to describe yourself,” I instructed my classroom of 4th graders. “Then tell me why you chose those words. I’d like to know.”

Danny looked silently and thoughtfully at the words.

“Would anyone like to share one of your words?” I asked.

Danny raised his hand.

He has a speech impediment and speaks in a wonderful, beautiful blend of Spanish and English.

I love to see his courage and hear his voice when he speaks.

“I chose the word ‘simple,’” he said, “Because there’s nothing special about me.”

I looked silently and thoughtfully at him.

Sometimes as a teacher, my heart fills with...what? Wonder? Astonishment? Marvel?

Yes, I’m often filled with all three of these things as I stand in the middle of my classroom, in the middle of the lives of my 9 and 10 year olds, in the middle of life.

After a moment, I spoke.

“Oh, Danny,” I said, “Simple is one of my favorite words!

People who are simple are salt of the earth people.

They give flavor to the world.

One of my favorite people, Albert Einstein, said, ‘If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.’

Simple is a special word.

And you are a salt of the earth, Albert Einsteiny, special kind of person!”

Suddenly, students started raising their hands all around the classroom.

Cintia raised her hand.

“Danny, you’re on the morning news team. You have a lot of courage. You do a great job. You are a special person.”

Garrett raised his hand.

“Danny, I couldn’t ask for a more loyal friend than you. You are a special person.”

Jayden raised her hand.

“Danny, when I dropped my pencil box in the hallway, you stopped, bent down, and helped me pick it up. You are a special person.”

And as I looked into Danny’s earthy brown eyes, I saw his heart filling with...what?

Wonder.

Astonishment.

Marvel.

All in a simple day in public school.

These beautiful students show me the face of God.

They show me how to follow Jesus.

Here at Triune Mercy Center, I have the honor of providing pastoral care to our neighbors around us who do not have a place to live and are struggling with all of the pain that comes from living on the street.

On Wednesday, I sat down beside one of those neighbors.

We shook hands.

“My name is Trevor,” I said.

“My name is James,” he said.

“You can pray me, right?” he asked.

“Of course,” I answered. I would be happy to pray for you.

He told me his story.

“I injured my foot and it just won’t heal.” He showed me the foot on which he hobbled, wrapped in a tattered cloth. “I’m a lonely man. I need a place to live. I stay in a motel until my money runs out, then I’m back on the street again. I have to constantly look over my shoulder, to make sure nobody steals what little I have. I need someone to pray for me.”

I prayed for him.

This was my prayerful him, and will continue to be my prayer for him until he finds a place to live.

Dear
God,
thank you
for being
here and for hearing
blind Bartimaeus and my friend
James, who needs healing for his foot and a place to live,

who is lonely and afraid, and needs to know I am his friend, and you are his friend, true.

James, you have a place in my heart and in God’s heart, too.
James, may you find a place to live
here. And God, who hears
is with you
and so

am

I*

This beautiful neighbor shows me the face of God.

He shows me how to follow Jesus.

I have a vital question for us.

Who are the Bartimaeus's around us in our time and in our place.

Is Bartimaeus a migrant on the border of Mexico and the United States asking for asylum?

Is Bartimaeus a family with a trans child asking for health care?

Is Bartimaeus a person sitting beside you?

Yes, I believe so.

They are Bartimaeuses.

Robin and I went to the movie theater to see the movie Sight.

Have you heard of it?

It is based on the book From Darkness to Light by Ming Wang, who fled an uprising in his town in China to study at MIT and Harvard Medical School and become an eye surgeon who became known as a miracle worker for his ability to bring sight to the blind.

In the movie, Dr. Wang tries with all of his might to give sight to a little girl from the slums of Calcutta named Kajal, whose step mother poured sulfuric acid in her eyes so she could get more pity and more money as a blind beggar on the street.

I wonder how many people ignored her and passed her by.

An old nun learned her name and her story.

At that moment, the little blind beggar was a human being with a name and a story.

Kajal.

The nun flies with Kajal to Nashville, TN to meet Dr. Wang and be treated by him.

A beautiful moment in this story is when Kajal hands Dr. Wang a rosary she made for him and whispers, "I'm praying for you."

It was then, at that moment, that Dr. Wang learned something amazing, something that changed his life. He learned that even if we cannot see with our eyes, we can look with the eyes of our hearts. We see with our eyes because light comes in. When we see with the eyes of our hearts, light shines out.

Like my inner city kids. Like James. Like migrants at the border. Like families with trans children. Like the people beside you. Like Bartimaeus. Like Jesus.

Go now and learn the names and stories of the people around you. Listen to each other with curiosity and compassion. Find the 'other,' and see the face of God.

May mercy, peace and love go with you.

Amen.

*I wrote this prayer as a poem in the Fibonacci form.

Do you know the Fibonacci numbers?

They are numbers in a pattern - 1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21...

Can you see the pattern?

If you graph these numbers, you will see the Fibonacci swirl.

You can find this swirl in many places in nature, like in the face of a sunflower or in the shape of the universe.

Some people call it God's blueprint.

I think it is beautiful.

Benediction:

There is a lot of hate out there. Let's go out and sow love.

There's a lot of injury out there. Let's go out and sow pardon.

There's a lot of fear out there. Let's go out and so faith.

There's a lot of despair out there. Let's go out and sow hope.

There's a lot of darkness out there. Let's go out and sow light.

There's a lot of sadness out there. Let's go out and sow joy.

I was blind but now I see!

Amen.