

INTRODUCTION

On Sight, Spirituality and Stones

As soon as Safi entered the room, I knew there was something amazing about him. Although he can't see, he perceives more than most people ever will. He grew up in an orphanage in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India. I met him around Christmas when he was eleven years old. A family in the United States had just adopted him, and he was soon leaving for his new home. That night he was saying goodbye to some dear friends.

The first time he heard me speak, he immediately asked in his high, spunky voice, "Who's that?" As if he could see exactly where I stood, he boldly crossed the room and walked right up to me.

Safi made me feel like family. So warm, so friendly, so kind. I was amazed throughout the evening as I watched him interact with the group. He knew everyone in the room, and when someone spoke to him, Safi would walk right over to where the voice was coming from and start up the liveliest conversation.

That night we came together as a community to share a meal. After dinner someone took out a guitar and started playing. Safi loves music and made a beeline to the guitar. He leaned his head against the base of the guitar and started strumming along as my friend played the chords. It was astonishing to watch this little guy play the instrument like a pro. We all sat in awe of his performance.

Later that evening, we dimmed the lights, a few candles were lit, and the fourteen people present gathered in a circle to pray. The room was still until Safi suddenly chirped, “Where’s Chris?” Quietly, I answered, “Over here.” With poise he walked right up to me.

Safi held everyone’s attention as he spoke to us of prayer. His thoughts on prayer were profound, and his confidence that God would answer them humbled me. I believed Safi’s faith could move mountains.

I asked Safi, “What should we pray for? What do you want?”

He didn’t even pause to think. “I want to see.”

In the dim candlelight, every one of us tried to hold back the tears as this child’s faith convicted us. He turned to me and asked, “What do you want?” My heart sank inside me. What could I say? My voice cracked as I softly and slowly replied, “I also want you to see.” Tears rolled down my cheeks.

With that, Safi led us in prayer. “Jesus, give me the eyes!”

BEGGING FOR SIGHT

Mine is the story of a blind man receiving sight. I have the physical eyes that Safi longs for, but I often don’t know how to use them.

My story begins when I was a university student. I had decided to spend the summer between my junior and senior year traveling through Asia, volunteering for organizations that worked among the poor. After making stops in Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Nepal and Bangladesh, I arrived in South India and eventually made my way north to Kolkata, finding my way to the convent where Mother Teresa was living.

I stood outside and apprehensively knocked on the door. A young nun greeted me and welcomed me inside. I explained my desire to volunteer for the next seven weeks, and she graciously put me to work. I was sent to *Nirmal Hriday*, “The Place of the Pure Heart.”

Nirmal Hriday, commonly known as “The House for the Dying,”

was the first home opened by Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. It's a sort of communal hospice, bustling with activity as nuns and volunteers serve side by side to bathe, feed and comfort their guests. Since 1952, *Nirmal Hriday* has welcomed nearly 100,000 men and women, offering them dignity and love as they pass from this life into the next.

A simple building, the House for the Dying shares a wall with the Kali temple, dedicated to the Hindu goddess of death. In this strange corner, death is both worshiped and mourned. In one sacred space, goats are sacrificed on a daily basis (not to mention the rumor that infants are still offered as human sacrifices to Kali). In the other sacred space, death is grieved and poverty considered an insult against the imprint of God's image in humanity.¹

The home is surrounded by the hustle and bustle of Kolkata's crowded streets—streets filled with people begging, looking for spare change and digging through the trash. As I entered the home for the first time, I could never have prepared myself for how my life was about to change.

Before I reached the top of the three small stairs leading to the door of *Nirmal Hriday*, my ears were flooded with soft cries, moans and coughs—a literal cacophony of misery—from those dying just beyond the door. I was immediately overwhelmed before even stepping foot into the home. Once past the threshold, my eyes adjusted from the intense Indian sun to the dimly lit room. The initial images that met me were the most heartbreaking I had ever seen.

The home consists of two wards, one side for the men and the other side for the women, each with fifty beds. Before me were men of all ages, dying bodies barely covering their souls. By their appearance many actually seemed healthy, but many more were emaciated, dehydrated, wasting away and starved. The grievous sight was accompanied by a nameless odor, maybe the smell of death. In this place, the living resembled the dead, many looking like corpses awaiting burial.

The imminence of death, however, was muted by the celebration of life. Many of the men sitting in their beds raised their hands, palms together in the typical gesture of respect to welcome me. The tender touch and love radiated by the nuns reminded me that God is often nearest to those who seem the furthest from God.

I was just a student. Up to this point I had lived a fairly protected and sheltered life. I could not believe my eyes. I could not imagine any other place on earth where one would find such graphic and explicit human suffering complemented with a presence of God's peace and tranquility. The home had a contemplative tone about it, as though the presence of Christ himself filled the space. The golden sunlight pouring through the windows, the quiet, the prayerful way the nuns and volunteers cared for those dying all contributed to a real sense of hope.

I introduced myself to the head of the volunteers, an animated German man named Andy. After a few conciliatory words of welcome, he pointed to four dead bodies stacked beside the door—mere skeletons wrapped in pure white sheets, except one that was drenched through with blood and had attracted a swarm of flies. Time seemed to stop. I stood there blinking—trying to comprehend what I was looking at. Abruptly Andy told me to help carry the bodies outside and place them in an ambulance.

As I carried the stiff and weightless corpses, the blood left a red trail and a stench that was nearly unbearable. The bodies were loaded onto the vehicle and taken to a Hindu temple where they were to be cremated.

During those first seven weeks at the House for the Dying, I attended to nearly fifty dead bodies. Although I have been back many times since my first visit in 1993, I have never become accustomed to the suffering. I have never gotten used to death, no matter how predictable and inevitable it may seem.

One day I came in early to help wash the dishes from afternoon

tea. I was the only volunteer present as two men brought an older man to the home on a stretcher. They had found him at the train station in awful shape. He was a Muslim, maybe in his sixties, and very sick.

I brought him to the washroom at the back of the home and began giving him a bath. He was so malnourished and weak that he could not sit up properly, so I leaned him against the corner of the bathroom and began washing his hair. It was matted and full of lice. I had to shave his head and his long beard. As I washed his face, I noticed he was blind. His eye sockets were full of thick mucus, and every time I tried to wash them he cried out in agony.

After washing his body, I tried to wash his feet, but one of them was mutilated and covered with decaying skin. It is likely that while the man was lying on the train platform, a dog or some rats nibbled away at his toes, leaving the insides of his flesh exposed. What was left of his foot was full of maggots, eating away at the infection that was festering within his open wound. I did what I could to clean his foot, but picking at the worms with a pair of tweezers was ineffective; it would take several days to get rid of them all.

After his bath I dressed him, carried him to a bed and prepared a bit of lunch so that he could eat. He was so weak that he could not take the food orally, so with the help of the head nun, Sister Luke, we prepared something else and fed him nasally. The nasal-fed patients were generally the weakest in the home and, once admitted, seemed to live only a few days.

After only a week of care, the blind man surprisingly regained enough strength to start eating again. Of course, for a while we still had to help feed him. I spent hours each day with this man. Holding his hands, singing to him, praying for him, trying to talk to him even though I am sure he did not speak English, I hoped that in some miraculous way God was ministering love to him simply through my presence.

Another week passed and he slowly began feeding himself. His foot was also showing signs of healing, and the mucus that had filled his eye sockets had dried up. Sister Luke decided he was healthy enough to be discharged. He would go to a leprosarium, where what was left of his foot would be amputated and he would receive further treatment.

As I carried him to the taxi that would take him away, he clenched my hand, and tears covered both our faces. I never saw that man again.

Later that night, back in the room I was renting from a widow in the city, I opened the Scriptures to Luke 18:35-43. The Gospel passage tells of a time when Jesus was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A crowd had gathered and was following Jesus. A blind man, begging at the side of the road, heard the commotion and asked what was happening. "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by," they replied.

Perhaps having heard the stories of this great healer, the blind man mustered up the courage to cry out to him: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Much like today, the people tried to silence the one who was begging. They scolded and hassled the blind man. The crowd didn't want to bother Jesus with the ranting and raving of one whom society discarded. However, of all the people in the crowd that day, the Gospels indicate that Jesus stopped only for him, asking simply, "What do you want me to do for you?"

It's an awkward situation. Surely it was obvious to Jesus, as well as to the crowd, that the man was blind. But Jesus wanted him to recognize his need. The man said simply, "Lord, I want to see." Luke tells us that Jesus healed him immediately.

I sat on my bed that summer night in Kolkata and made the connections. The blind man begging in the story reminded me of the blind Muslim man I had been caring for over the past few weeks. As

I prayed for understanding, it was as if God was opening my own blind eyes. Suddenly another connection was made—*my* blindness to his. I too was blind.

For all the time I had spent with the Muslim man in the House for the Dying, I had missed seeing what God had been trying to show me: my inability and unwillingness to see God's hand outstretched and awaiting my grasp. The Scriptures filled in the gaps and showed me that *I* was the one begging. My pride, selfishness, lusts, fears, insecurities, my need for significance and acceptance were all begging from those who could never satisfy my hungers. The woundedness in me had blinded my own self-perception.

In my blindness, unable to see my God-given dignity and identity, I perceived myself through false identities. True to my evangelical upbringing, I saw myself as sinful and selfish. I saw myself through my own woundedness and insecurities. I saw myself as mean, uncompassionate, cold-hearted and unresponsive. I was hard on myself; I wouldn't forgive myself and instead, I let shame rule in my heart.

In my inability to see God's nearness I had tried to create a self-sufficient way of living. In the dark, I was trying to find my way to God rather than allowing myself to be discovered by God's love. I became god unto myself, playing the divine role of Creator (by trying to make myself a better person), Judge (by telling myself how bad I was, how unworthy I had become before God) and Redeemer (by trying to earn grace, to be *good enough* for it). I realized that I desperately needed God's eyes to help me see the way to God's heart.

BLINDNESS OR BLIND PEOPLE?

I find it a painfully vulnerable task to introduce my blindness in this book. I am a part of a community called Word Made Flesh, a group of people called and committed to serving Jesus among the most vulnerable of the world's poor. We are covenanted together by

a shared spirituality with missional implications. This process and path of discovery takes us all around the world to slums and sewers, refugee camps and red-light districts. We literally live among the dying as an act of solidarity with our neighbors and our God. We don't assume to have answers, but together in community with and among our friends who are poor² we seek to discover Jesus. And yet I realize, much like the blind man whom Jesus healed at the pool of Bethesda (Mark 8:22-25), that having my eyes opened doesn't mean I am immediately able to understand what I'm seeing. I also must confess that even though Jesus has given me sight, I still like to squint, and sometimes I even prefer not to look.³

A while back I was inspired by the great holiness preacher Dennis Kinlaw to read at least one book by every author who had ever been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.⁴ That's a long list. Either I chose the wrong books or I just don't have a properly developed appreciation for good literature: out of every four or five books I read from that list, I wished I'd only read one.

One of the few memorable reads was the novel *Blindness* by the Portuguese author José Saramago. The story starts out in a traffic jam, as an unsuspecting motorist suddenly loses his vision at a stoplight.

It gets worse.

Throughout the city people are going blind for no apparent reason. It's an outbreak. The authorities panic and quarantine all the victims of this unusual plague. Soon the very soldiers imprisoning this blind population start to lose their vision. There's a power struggle, and people who were actually blind before the outbreak realize that they hold an advantage over a newly blinded population. Those born blind have been forced to learn to live with their blindness, while the newly blinded are struggling to make sense of their new reality. Chaos ensues. It gets really nasty. Things get ugly fast.

Ironically, no one is spared from the pandemic except the wife of an ophthalmologist. She fakes blindness in order to protect herself from becoming the overused eyes for everyone. Toward the end of the story, people suddenly, inexplicably but gloriously begin to recover their eyesight, and the ophthalmologist's wife begins to grapple with the crisis of this experience—she never knew what it was like to be blind and is subsequently disconnected from everyone else's collective rediscovery of vision.

As you can imagine, the book is packed full of symbols and metaphors of light, vision, perception and even faith. Saramago writes, "It used to be said there is no such thing as blindness, only blind people, when the experience of time has taught us nothing other than that there are no blind people, only blindness."⁵ Really, I think he's right. I believe we all have access to sight—the vision of self-reflection, the ability to see God's intentions for each of us, and the possibility of looking into a future smothered in the loving embrace of God—if only we can find it, and only if we're able to receive the grace to accept it.

My spiritual director, Father Larry Gillick, is a Jesuit priest and the director of the Delgman Center for Ignatian Spirituality. He lost his sight when he was four years old. In an article he wrote for St. John's Church on the campus of Creighton University, he noted that "people who are blind from birth, or who received this gift early in their lives, do not know what they look like."⁶ And yet, in the truest sense, do any of us *really* know what we look like? Often it seems I am blind to the goodness of God, to God's leading in my life, to the destiny God has for me. I'm reduced to begging for attention, affection and affirmation in the wrong ways and in the wrong places.

The modern mystic and Cistercian monk Thomas Keating suggests that humanity is born with essential biological needs that lay claim on our lives. Pursuing their fulfillment creates unreasonable

and unrealistic demands on our souls, and the deep unhappiness that results keeps us from discovering our true selves—it is a kind of blindness: “The human condition [is] to be without the true source of happiness, which is the experience of the presence of God.”⁷ Resonating with Saramago, Keating would suggest that there are no blind people, only the spiritual blindness of the human condition.

PLAYING DRESS UP

Sometimes perspective is everything. Sometimes our perspective blinds us in such a way that we can’t properly hear what we can’t see past. Too often we make complicated what really is very simple.

Several years after my first visit to the House for the Dying, in what seemed to be a completely different world, the U.S. Department of State invited me, as a representative of Word Made Flesh, to a conference on combating sex-trafficking.⁸ The thing that stood out most to me in the invitation was that dress was to be formal.

I don’t like to dress up. In fact, I call my flip-flops “work shoes” and wear shorts to the office more than 85 percent of the year (even in Omaha’s subzero winters). I spend a lot of my time around the world with kids who live on the streets, children dying from AIDS, former child soldiers, and women and children forced to prostitute themselves. My friends overseas don’t really care what I wear. So I called the State Department, wondering if I could come as I am.

The State Department *did* care what I wore. I was told that I needed to dress formally.

A couple days later I called them back, this time a little embarrassed. I didn’t even own a suit. They informed me that the vice president of Colombia, a Supreme Court justice from India, the U.S. secretary of state and even the president of the United States would likely be attending, and thus I needed to dress up.

To me all black suits look the same, so I ran off to Sears to buy

the cheapest black suit I could find. At the conference I felt like I blended in perfectly, though I'm sure all the suit-snobbers were wondering, *Why in the world is he wearing that?*

A couple of years later I was invited to speak for the missions conference of a midwestern Christian university. I speak at a lot of colleges, so I filled my backpack with my standard gear: my best pair of pants—some distressed jeans from the Gap, a couple of colored shirts, some really cool (at least I think so) T-shirts, and my trusty old flip-flops.

Moments before I was to speak in the first chapel service, a student approached me, visibly troubled. He reluctantly informed me that I was in violation of their campus dress code for chapel speakers. Unfortunately for me, it wasn't just a rule or two that I was breaking; there were numerous violations. While I was able to take out my earrings, my shoes and pants were still unacceptable. I think I would have been fine speaking barefoot, but I sort of wanted to keep my pants on.

Immediately after the service, the dean of the chapel rushed up on the stage. I could tell he was perturbed, so before he could start the confrontation, I apologized, letting him know that I just realized I had broken their rules and explaining that no one had informed me of this standard. I assured him that I meant no harm or insult to his community, that I had brought my best clothes to speak in. Frustrated, he mentioned that this was not the first such instance of miscommunication and that his secretary would be hearing from him. He walked away, almost in mid-conversation, leaving me wondering what to do.

Later that night I got a call from some students in one of the guys' dorms. They were worried about me and were trying to come up with some clothes my size from guys on their hall. I thanked them and let them know that the dean knew I had brought my best clothes and was understanding.

First thing the next morning I found the dean and mentioned the previous evening's call. I told him I didn't want my clothes to take away from the credibility of what I had come to share. I was actually speaking on submission that morning, and I was willing to submit to their community, so I volunteered to drive into town and buy some clothes that would be acceptable for a chapel speaker. The dean brightened up at the suggestion and asked, "Would you like to do that?"

I looked at him and said, "I wouldn't *like* to do that, but I'm willing to do that." I went on to explain that most of my friends around the world can't "dress up" to be accepted in places of worship, but I would do whatever was necessary for their voices to be heard through the things I came to say.

The dean looked at me and, in sincere humility, thanked me for coming and told me that he was fine with the clothes I had.

DAVID, GOLIATH AND SAUL'S ARMOR

This sort of thing seemed to happen a lot in the history of Israel. In 1 Samuel 17, the Scriptures tell us of one particular instance. The Philistines, a military aristocracy who emerged in Palestine around the same time as Israel, "gathered their forces for war" (verse 1). They were trying to secure trade routes from inland to the sea, so we see throughout the book of Judges the struggle to control the area of Palestine called the Shephelah.

Determined to win, the Philistines sent their champion Goliath, a big boy who stood nearly ten feet tall, to the front of the battle line as their delegate in a representative warfare scenario.⁹ For forty days the giant Goliath taunted the Israelites, challenging them to send a champion for a one-on-one duel to settle the battle. Scripture tells us that "whenever the Israelites *saw* the man, they all fled from him in great fear" (verse 24). The Israelites saw with their eyes, and it blinded their hearts.

Along came David, a shepherd boy delivering grain, bread and cheese to his older brothers who were part of Israel's army. David showed up just about the time of day when Goliath would come out and bump his gums at the Israelites. David was offended. He was also surprised that no one had the courage to face this uncircumcised menace. So he volunteered to fight the giant.

King Saul was worried. None of his warriors had the courage to face Goliath. What made this little boy so confident? David proclaimed his faith, telling stories of how God had saved him from lions and bears. Perhaps in an exhausted act of desperation, Saul conceded and enlisted this young boy to fight the giant.

Saul's first move was to dress David up in the king's armor. Not a good fit. David put the sword and the traditional battle gear aside and simply started picking up little stones from a tiny brook. Then he took a staff, and off he went.

Slingshot, staff and a sack of five stones is all David had to fight Goliath. The Scriptures tell us that Goliath was armed and dressed to fight—in fact, just the head of one of his spears weighed fifteen pounds. Face to face they stood. Goliath suddenly had a problem with his vision: “He *looked* David over and saw that he was little more than a boy” (verse 42). Goliath was insulted—apparently he thought pretty highly of himself.

Anyway, if you know the story, David pops old Goliath in the head with a single stone from his slingshot and kills the giant. One shot and the battle was finished.¹⁰

Sometimes I think about David. I don't think he liked dressing up either. Before he became king he was a shepherd, and from what I understand, shepherds don't have strict dress codes. Sometimes I feel the church wants to dress me up in its clothes—clothes that don't fit and clothes that are pretty uncomfortable. David wanted to fight Goliath in his own threads. I like that. It worked for him. Worked real well. It works for me too.

Why does it seem that so many aspects of spirituality have to fit into certain molds? In noble efforts to catch and keep our attention, Christians have gimmicked out the Gospel by offering us formulaic approaches to cultivating our spirituality. Certain prayer practices, evangelical expectations and forms of personal devotions often leave us confused or wanting and needing more. It can get pretty complicated sometimes.

Jesus kept it simple. He actually dressed down—leaving the right hand of God and clothing himself in humanity. Jesus’ teachings were simple too. Even little kids could understand them. He used everyday illustrations to explain the mysteries and secrets of the kingdom of God. But it seems we always complicate that too. Maybe Bono was right when he said, “Religion often gets in the way of God.”¹¹

FIVE SMALL STONES

Once I was in the checkout line at a grocery store in California, the day before leading a retreat for a college group. A headline on one of the tabloids in the checkout aisle caught my attention. I swear it read, “Goliath Was Shot with a .38!”¹²

Now, I was a theology major in college with an ancient biblical languages minor, and I don’t remember anything in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning handguns. I was intrigued. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I bought that tabloid and read the article—twice.

Apparently, some archaeologist examined Goliath’s skull (who knew they found his skull?) and determined that he was shot in the head with a gun—maybe even a semi-automatic rifle. The theory is based on what appears to be an exit wound in the back of the skull. There are even some experts who believe that it was a drive-by shooting: David was in a moving chariot when he fired the weapon. The article concludes with a hint of an ancient conspiracy theory, that maybe there was a second shooter.

I didn't take the article seriously, but it threw me off just enough to look at the David and Goliath story a little bit differently. Goliath was standing in the way of God's people moving into the Promised Land. No one was brave enough to fight him. In a serendipitous twist of events, David showed up and volunteered to take him on. We are told that David took five stones from the Brook of Elah and placed one in a slingshot to slay the giant (1 Samuel 17:49).

It's funny that David took five stones when the story indicates that he used only one of them. Was David that bad of a shot? Was there a mountain lion or something else harassing his flock that he was getting a few extra stones for? Had one of his older brothers played a prank on him, and did David need a stone or two to pop his brother's knee cap in revenge? Assuming all the little details in the Bible are infused with some sort of meaning, why five stones?

Over the years, I've read different biblical scholars' interpretations of the symbolism in the details. For instance, some believe that the five stones represented the pentapolis, or the five cities of Canaan (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza) that David would ultimately conquer. On the other hand, rabbinic tradition speculates that Goliath had four other brothers who were also giants that David would need to fight as they sought vengeance for their slain brother, and the stones were reserved for each of them.¹³

Years ago I lived in Jerusalem to study archaeology and Hebrew. On one of the many field trips, I found myself standing on the dry banks of the same stream that David once stood upon. At that place, I bent down and collected five small, smooth stones and slipped them into my backpack. When I returned from Israel, I put them in my dresser and forgot about them. Years later, as I was reflecting on my struggles to cultivate my spirituality, I took those stones out

of my dresser, set them on my desk, and asked God what giants in my life were blocking my view of what God had in mind for me. I began to name them:

- *Pride and arrogance*
- *Individualism and independence*
- *Intemperance and excess*
- *Power and control*
- *Triumphalism, defiance and resistance*

I asked God to help me fight my giants. God gave me small stones of hope and promise, simple yet profound:

- *Humility* to slay the giant of *pride* and *arrogance*.
- *Community* to slay the giant of *individualism* and *independence*.
- *Simplicity* to slay the giant of *intemperance* and *excess*.
- *Submission* to slay the giant of *power* and *control*.
- *Brokenness* to slay the giant of *triumphalism, defiance* and *resistance*.

These five simple stones are central among the nine core values of Word Made Flesh. We call them our *Lifestyle Celebrations*. As I pray for the grace to live into a spirituality that embodies these simple commitments, I invite you to join me.

Writing on spirituality is a daunting endeavor. It seems to imply a sense of accomplishment. Well, I have a confession to make: I've hardly arrived anywhere. I'm much more a fanatic or activist than I am a contemplative or mystic. My spirituality has been expressed much more in my relationships, active life and cerebral ponderings than in the sacred, tranquil spaces of the heart and soul. Hopefully I'm stumbling forward in all of it, but spirituality is a language that I'm still learning to speak. I've not mastered it. Far from it. Its nuances and rhythms are still a mystery to me. These pages are a confession of that—more questions than answers.

As you read this book, I hope your eyes will be opened to the truth that the spirituality God wishes for us is really quite

simple: that against humility, community, simplicity, submission and even brokenness no giant can stand, but only the God who delivers us from them into the promises found in Scripture.

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1. HUMILITY

As I waited to sit with Mother Teresa for the first time, my mind was churning through a list of questions. I kept thinking that I needed to come up with the one question that no one had ever asked her—I wanted her to notice me and remember me.

As though a gentle breeze brushed my face, she suddenly and quietly appeared. Strength and meekness held in perfect tension, sitting beside me, she tenderly took my hands and set them in her lap.

Before I could even get a question past my lips, she looked straight into my eyes and started asking me about my family, my home, why I was in India. In mere moments she had set my heart at peace and made me feel as if I were the most important person in the world. Somehow in her busy schedule, she had time to sit with a college kid from Omaha, to get inside my head and heart. I felt sincerely loved by her.

I sat waiting for Mother Teresa in my yearning for significance, hoping to prove that I was different. Mother allowed herself to fade into the background and pressed me forward. Her grace demonstrated the truth that in God we are all beautiful and lovable. But this truth is something ascribed, not earned. Simple, obedient, loving, humble, Mother exposed the pride in me.

What is humility? Where does it come from? How do we find it? Humility is a principle and a virtue that flows from love in its pur-

est form. It may even be the central virtue in Christianity—the true test of our true love. Francois de Salignac de La Mothe Fenelon puts it this way: “All the saints are convinced that sincere humility is the foundation of all virtues. . . . The more we love purely, the more perfect is our humility.”¹

Humility affirms our need for God. It is required to approach God. The Scriptures tell us that when we humble ourselves before the Lord, God will lift us up (James 4:10). Humility produces obedience as a sign and symbol of our love for God. Likewise, humility “is not concerned with one’s own advantage but with that of others.”² It’s an obvious prerequisite for authentic community.

I have kicked myself countless times for starting this book with a chapter on humility. Humility is a hard one for me. As central to our faith, it’s the most daring conversation to enter, lest pride trip you up at any discovery or conclusion. There are plenty of stories in the Scriptures that, if read through the lens of humility, open our eyes to new and simple insights. For example, consider how Jesus’ disciples saw him in John 21:4-7.

The story takes place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee shortly after the resurrection of Christ. “Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus.” Jesus calls out, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” They don’t. The guys have been out all night working and have come up short. They let this stranger on the beach know he’s out of luck too.

Jesus, still unrecognized, tells the guys to put their nets on the other side of the boat. They do and hit the jackpot. It is finally after the miraculous catch of fish that John exclaims, “It is the Lord!”

The disciples spent three years in ministry with Jesus. They were eyewitnesses to some of the most amazing events in history. They saw blind eyes opened, leprosy cured, physical disabilities healed, even the demon-possessed delivered. They saw a meager lunch of fish and bread feed thousands. They saw Jesus walk on water. It

seems a foregone conclusion that if anyone would recognize Jesus, it would be his closest companions. But as the story tells us, after seeing Jesus and even hearing his voice, the disciples still didn't know who Christ was.

This story challenges me to evaluate how well I think I recognize the presence of Christ in my own life. I often convolute the simplicity of seeing Jesus. I'm usually pretty slow in waking up to the reality that Christ is near.

Being slow on the uptake is, in many ways, normal to the human condition. For example, I'm not the best version of myself early in the morning—and by “early in the morning” I mean before 10:00 a.m. It takes me a while to wake up. After twelve years of a beautiful marriage, I can always recognize my sweet wife Phileena in the wee hours of the morning, but recognizing the difference between right and left shoe isn't exactly something I've nailed down just yet. (I've also been known to slip my boxers on backwards—not good.)

In my spiritual awakening I often think I can distinguish the voice of God from the thoughts in my head. I think I recognize the difference between trials as spiritual distractions and trials as divine discipleship providing ongoing opportunity for me to grow. But I miss Jesus when I try to conform him to my image of what I want him to be.

It's humility that opens our eyes to the discovery of God. The self-righteous seem to have the hardest time recognizing God. Story after story in the Gospels illustrates this. The religious leaders and the disciples often misunderstood the identity of Jesus. At one point, the religious leaders accused Jesus of being the devil (Matthew 12:22-24).

The unrighteous, those more naturally in touch with their limitations, often seem to immediately recognize Jesus for who he is. The first recorded words from the man possessed by the legion of demons, for example, are: “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son

of the Most High God?” (Luke 8:28). Something that Jesus’ disciples discovered only gradually and the religious authorities of the day never realized—that Jesus was God in the flesh—was intuitively grasped by this marginalized victim of demonic oppression.

Perhaps those on the margins, the unrighteous and people who live in poverty—those familiar with humiliation—can see purity more clearly through their unpretentious “impurity.” Perhaps they can see God’s love through their own recognized need to receive love. Perhaps they can see Christ’s unconditional acceptance through their experience with rejection. Perhaps we have something to learn from their humility.

When our pride gets in the way, the face of Jesus can be elusive when we expect him to mirror our version of Christianity rather than the kingdom reality he embodies. The challenge is to approach Jesus humbly, to take ownership of our inadequacies, weaknesses and needs. Humility is ultimately an issue of intimacy.

INTIMACY: SEEING GOD

How well do I really know God? I recently picked up a book that I had hoped would provoke my imagination regarding the virtue of humility. Sadly, the authors boiled down the need for humility to three easy motivational formulas. It’s the sort of stuff that reminds me of spells and voodoo, as if one of the great spiritual journeys of all time could be condensed into a few easy steps. The authors suggested that humility must be cultivated first because we’re told to—it’s commanded of us. Second, we’d better be afraid of the consequences of our pride. Third, we will get rewarded if we’re humble because God blesses the humble of heart.³

So it’s that easy? We fulfill a duty so that we can rest assured that the fires of hell aren’t a part of our future and can start counting our blessings early since we’re promised a reward? It doesn’t add up to me. It reminds me of the best of the worst of bumper sticker

theologies. Have you seen the one that reads, “Flatter Jesus or He’ll Torture You in Hell”? Wow. Really? So that’s how he rolls?

Frequently I check myself: If there were no threat of hell and no promise of heaven, would I still serve God? I mean, what’s the motivation if there’s no punishment or reward in the equation? All I have to do to find the answer to this is pop open the Scriptures and start reading about a God who loves people who are poor, provides for them, honors them, seats them with princesses and princes. I *want* to serve and love a God who’s so compassionate and kind, one who so generously loves, one who secures justice for my friends.

I celebrate these traits of God. The God who invites us into fellowship and communion, never imposing on our will but offering us love with an invitation to love back, has moved me from a fear-based faith to a relationship where intimacy is central.

How do we truly celebrate an authentic intimacy with God? For me it started with evaluating my vision of God.

LEARNING TO LOVE GOD

In the classic *Your God Is Too Small*,⁴ J. B. Phillips presents constructive and destructive views of God that are often shaped during our childhood. Among the more popularly accepted destructive views of God are the “Resident Policeman,” the “Parental Hang-over,” the “Grand Old Man,” the “Meek and Mild,” the “Managing Director,” the “Perennial Grievance,” the “Pale Galilean,” and so on. These caricatures of God portray God as vindictive, overly punitive, controlling, detached and distant, reserved, micromanaging or nagging.

Growing up in an evangelical Christian home, I was introduced to a very familiar, very informal God. I was culturally conditioned to perceive God as “on demand” and at my beck and call. Songs like “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” only aggravated this comforting view of Christ. But even with a “friend” or “brother” in Jesus, I

lived in mortal fear of missing the rapture. I can remember having to climb up on the counters to get the peanut butter jar down from the kitchen cabinets (I was a scrawny little kid). I worried that if I was left behind in the rapture I'd live life one slip away from breaking my neck every time I needed to eat. But worse than that, cooking for me meant dropping a couple Pop-Tarts in the toaster. If I ever got left behind, I was afraid I'd starve to death.

Hell was a completely different fear altogether. I've got to be honest, I didn't want to burn forever and ever. Sure, worms eating away at my soul is a pretty terrifying thought, but I'm funny about smells and the thought of smelling burnt hair just sets me off.

So eventually I caved into my fear and "got saved" from hell and from the possibility of scavenging for boxes of Pop-Tarts and jars of peanut butter.

It took me years to realize that "getting saved" out of fear isn't really salvation. I opened the Scriptures and stopped reading them as a threat and started finding Someone beautiful hidden in their pages. Suddenly there was this God who cares for those in need—I mean, really cares for them. Sure, the familial reading of God expressed in my Christian tradition loved me plenty, but God also deeply loved those who are poor. This God protected the vulnerable and defended the defenseless. I discovered a heavenly Father who gives good gifts to the children.

Pretty soon I was falling in love with a God that I had formerly domesticated and turned into my servant. I was scandalized by a caring Master tenderly valuing the servants.

As I learned to love God, my love was not motivated by fear or the threat of hell (not even by the promise of paradise), but rather by the character of the One who is by nature lovable. Christ was irresistible to me. I couldn't help but love Jesus the more I discovered who he was. The deeper I fell in love with God, the more I wanted to demonstrate that love.

As I became less familiar with God and more awed by God, intimacy naturally led me to obedience. That's what the Scriptures tell us. If we love God, then we'll obey God. Pretty simple.

To learn to love God, I first had to unlearn how I perceived God, to break down the corners I had mentally backed God into. This journey continues today. My friends and I at Word Made Flesh continue to ask the questions, "How can we really see Jesus?" and "How can we selflessly learn to love Christ?"

It is in our intimate relationships with people who are poor, or more accurately our friends *who happen to be poor*, that our tainted views of God are transformed. It is our intimate relationships with our friends on the streets or in red-light districts that open our blinded eyes to really see Jesus for who he is. Through their desperation and forced vulnerability, they help us see what intimacy with God looks like. We are compelled to follow our friends who are poor to God's heart.

CHRIST WITH A COST

The closer we get to Christ, however, the more "dangerous" he becomes—dangerous to our attempts to control him or to limit his influence in our daily lives or even to domesticate him in the destructive prototypes that J. B. Phillips so articulately details for us.

A few years ago, Phileena and I visited the oldest bull ring in the world, in Seville, Spain. We bought tickets and sat in the summer sun taking in all the pageantry of the event. The matadors, splendidly dressed, pranced throughout the ring, enticing the bulls to spar.⁵ I'm sure the bull fights were very controlled and I'm sure the real danger to the matadors was limited by a number of safety-mechanisms built in to protect the bull fighters; still it felt like a dangerous situation. Any contrived theatrics to elevate the adrenalin level of the spectators worked, and we watched in anticipation for the outcome of each fight.

I wonder if there is a correlation here to our spirituality. Do we act out a theatrical fight with God? Is it possible that we control the degree to which we seek intimacy with Christ by offering just enough of our personal will and freedoms to pacify God's desire to know us intimately? Do we really allow ourselves to draw close to the consuming nature of divine Lordship? Or are we practicing self-deception, acting out spiritual intimacy while keeping Jesus at a safe distance?

How intimate is our relationship with Christ? Intimate enough that all our programs for emotional happiness or preconceived perceptions of his identity or even our limited engagement with his control over us could be redeemed in us? That our love could be pure and selfless? That we would allow God to be God on God's terms?

BOWING OUR LIVES TO FIND GOD

There's a church in Bethlehem that was built to commemorate the birthplace of Christ. Since Bethlehem is only six miles south of Jerusalem, I visited the Church of the Nativity several times while I lived and studied there. They say that this gigantic, ornate church covers the stable where Jesus was born. It's a little unsettling to see what we have done to the simplicity of Jesus' life.

Anyway, it's believed that the actual spot of Christ's birth is in the basement of the church. It's covered in marble with a golden star in the center of the floor. To visit this spot you have to enter through this tiny little door. I'm not exactly tall (I like to think of myself as "fun size"), but it's pretty small even for me. It was intentionally designed so that to pass through it you must bow down. Visitors are forced to approach God in a posture of humility.

Humility is not a means to an end. Rather humility is the door through which we must enter to be welcomed into God's presence.

COMING UP SHORT

What can we really know about humility? I imagine any sensible person would agree that humility is elusive to us all. Humility is like the slipperiest fish in the tank: once you think you finally get your hands on it, you've lost it. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that

humility is not pretending you don't have gifts. Sometimes we confuse humility with a false modesty that gives little glory to the One who has given us the gifts. Humility is the recognition that who you are is a gift from God and so helps you to sit reasonably loosely to this gift. This lessens the likelihood of arrogance because the recognition that our abilities and talents are gifts and reminds us that they are not wholly ours and can be taken away. If we truly exulted in our gifts, we would also celebrate the gifts of other people and the diversity of talents that God has given all of us.⁶

I've often mistaken humility for modesty and even forms of self-disgust. False pride is another deformation of humility that has tricked me more than once. For a long time I even thought of humility in terms of humiliation—something that resembled humility at a distance, but smelled of pride the closer I got to understanding it.

I think for most of my faith journey, I've not known how to relate to humility because I've not known how to relate to God. My pride clouds my vision of God and ultimately myself.

This has been the struggle from before the beginning of time. We're told that pride was the potion that turned the angel Lucifer into the devil, Satan. He was beautiful. That's not bad—even the self-awareness of it. However, ambition (which isn't always a bad thing) pressed Lucifer to challenge his view of God, view of self and, in the end, his view of others.

It's scary to think that pride could be so powerful, so destructive. If an angel in God's presence had a hard time with pride,

then what makes me think I can overcome it?

In the Gospels there's a story where all the guys are gathered talking about who will be the greatest (Matthew 18:1-5). If you stop and think about it, what they are really talking about is who is the most insecure. I mean, if you have to talk about how great you are, then aren't you really concerned that people don't have an accurate view of who you think you are? If you have to push yourself forward, isn't there a certain amount of fear that someone might be better than you in whatever it is you're trying to gain ground in?

Fear drives us to these places. Sometimes our real and deep needs to be accepted, esteemed, honored or loved makes us want to promote ourselves.

I wonder what Christ must have been thinking as he listened to the guys talk about how great they are. It must have been some conversation. And you've got to love how Jesus handled it. I'm sure Jesus knew exactly what was in their hearts and minds. I wonder how long Christ let the conversation go on before he called a little kid over.

The story goes that as the disciples were talking themselves up, the Master centered a child and said, "Whoever wants to be the greatest needs to humble himself like this child." Classic.

I wish there was some back story on that kid. Did any of the disciples know him? Had he T.P.'ed any of their houses or broken any of their windows with antiquity's equivalent of a baseball? Had he dated any of their daughters and broken any of their hearts? Whoever this boy was, his prophetic presence silenced the men.

What I find funny about that story is that Jesus centered the child, not himself. Really. Jesus could have pointed to himself as the model of humility, but he chose a kid. Makes sense. Jesus put someone else forward.

This is how we find Christ—in the sincere desire to be completely surrendered to God in such a way that no emotional or mental

safety mechanisms prevent God from showing us the divine character. This is the path to humility, to really love God, know God and be known by God.

UNIMPRESSING GOD

Several years ago Phileena and I were visiting some friends for dinner. They are a generous family that has often made great sacrifices to give to those in need. While we were on our way to their home, the family gathered the children for orientation on who Phileena and I were and what we did. As our friend explained to his children that Phileena and Chris “help feed the poor,” their buzzed-hair and barrel-chested three-year-old son responded, “So! Do they feed the animals?”

That kid has the insight of a future spiritual director if I’ve ever met one. That boy wasn’t impressed with what we do. In his world, animals needed help too, and if these so-called compassionate dinner guests were going to earn favor in his eyes, then we had better be pouring milk for cats and shoveling hay for elephants. Seriously. Like I said, the insight of a future spiritual director.

When I heard about the question he asked, it all came together. There is nothing we can be proud about in our obedience if it is truly a sign of our love for our heavenly Father. Whether it is serving among friends on the margins or feeding the animals, as long as what we do finds its basis in our love for God, then all the glory goes to God. Paul validates this when speaking of love: “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). An ancient mystic put it this way: “The truly humble [are] perfectly obedient, because [they have] renounced [their] own will.”⁷

For myself, obedience brought me to India. I moved to the edge of a slum and tried my best to be a good neighbor. I helped open a home for children with AIDS. It was an incredible time in my life.

But soon enough I fell back into the role of being my own personal redeemer, thinking that my efforts and noble deeds would earn me eternal extra-credit points.

It's God who asked that my love be a response to God's love for me. There's no way pride can enter the relationship unless what I presume to be acts of love are actually self-justifying, misguided efforts to save myself or to impress God. And guess what? God's not impressed, any more than my three-year-old friend. It wasn't that he had anything against me personally; he wasn't being a punk. He was onto the truth that God sees us as God's own, that we are "enough" just being ourselves before God. God's love is not like the world's version of love, which is predicated on resumes and awards and even benevolent actions; God sees our humility as a response to God's invitation to intimacy.

God's love makes it safe to approach God with humility. I bow my head, chin against my chest, back bent forward, and I affirm my need for a Creator, a Savior and a Redeemer. I also let myself imagine how much God must love me.

COMING FACE TO FACE

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he," or at least that's how the song goes. If you don't know the tune, count yourself blessed. Because of that song and its annoying ability to relentlessly embed itself in my mind, I never really took Zacchaeus very seriously. I mean, seeing the badly drawn flannel-graphs of this wee little man peeking out of a tree should have been enough to make me never forget his tale, but that goofy song . . .

I recently rediscovered Zacchaeus. In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus entered Jericho; Zacchaeus wanted to see him. But this guy was short. So up a tree he went to get a better view. Jesus looked up, saw Zacchaeus and not only asked him to get out of the tree but invited himself to Zacchaeus's home.

Something happened. Zacchaeus was transformed and promised to give half of everything he owned to his neighbors in need. He pledged that he would make amends and repay all those he had cheated. Jesus proclaimed, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

It’s a simple story, actually pretty good material for a song. There was an arrival—Jesus showed up. There was a perspective—Zacchaeus climbed the tree. There was an invitation—they met face to face. There was a response—Zacchaeus was transformed. Jesus disarmed Zacchaeus’s pride and wrapped that wee little man up in humility.

It’s counterintuitive. You would think that Zacchaeus would be more familiar with humiliation than pride—I mean, after all, he was short, despised (he worked for “the man” as a tax collector) and singled out for being up in a tree. But it’s his pride that brought him there. The imagery is easy to pick on. Zacchaeus was trying to get an angle on Christ, but he didn’t walk up to Jesus like a normal person. He climbed high up in a tree, assuming a position of leverage.

Being fun-sized, I know what it is like to have to climb on something to get a better view. Fire hydrants, fences, park benches, trees—you name it, I’ve climbed it. If there is something happening and a crowd has gathered, then it is likely I am going to miss out on the action unless there is something nearby to stand on.

I have something else in common with Zacchaeus. I want to see Jesus. I want to figure out who he is. I try to get an “angle” on Christ. I look for different points of view from where I can figure out who Jesus is. I do things, go places, surround myself with the *right* people or try and read the *right* books so I can be in a better position to see Jesus—I climb my own sorts of trees. The things I use to try to get a better view of Jesus always leave me frustrated and empty.

Zacchaeus must have had a great view of Christ from that tree,

but it wasn't the right view. It was a view that Zacchaeus controlled. To see Jesus, to really get a good look at him, we have to come face to face with him. It is the times when I come to Christ vulnerable that he really shows himself to me.

Because I know that God sees everything, I often pride myself in my own transparency before God. But transparency isn't vulnerability. I do a pretty good job of protecting myself in relationships. I'm open enough that I can get by without having to *need* anything from anyone. I would be humiliated by such weakness. But I'm finding that's a form of pride—and not even a deformed version of pride, just regular old pride.

It was recently pointed out to me that the word *vulnerable* comes from the Latin word for “wound.” Therefore, to be *vulnerable* means to be capable of being wounded. So the trees I climb (missions experiences, conferences and retreats, books and relationships with the *right* people), and the tree Zacchaeus climbed, expose the real (and often hidden) need and desire to see God. And really, it's just another attempt to try and save ourselves.

I wonder if Jesus laughed a little bit seeing a short guy hanging on some branches. What must it have been like when their eyes met? I can imagine Jesus thinking, *Zacchaeus, that's my tree, not yours. And the time hasn't come, but I will climb it to save you.*

In the story, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's home. A meal is implied; no good host in Zacchaeus's culture would allow a guest to get away without eating something. It's still like that in most places today. A meal isn't like the distant, impersonal connection (more like observation) that Zacchaeus was willing to settle for. A meal is much more intimate and personal. Christ humbled himself by sitting at the table. Face to face, he confronted the pride in a man who thought he could figure out Jesus from a distance. Christ pursued the wee little fun-size man. Christ ascribed dignity and validated his identity.

Once they were together, face to face, Zacchaeus was trans-

formed. This newfound intimacy with Christ led to a newfound obedience, and before you know it Zacchaeus was settling debts and offering his wealth to those in need. The story ends with restoration and reconciliation.

Zacchaeus was not the donor but the receptor. Zacchaeus wanted to see God, to know God. Jesus wanted to know Zacchaeus, to love him. Zacchaeus embraced that acceptance and began to understand God's love for the world, for his own neighbors in need. Admitting that he had done wrong and humbling himself before God, Zacchaeus no longer needed to put forward a false self.

All this foreshadows the cross, really. I try to see Jesus in so many ways, but it's only when I come face to face with him that I'm transformed. The things I try to climb up to see Christ are false crosses that I make for myself, hoping they'll save me. Jesus calls me down. From his cross, I learn to see his love for me. At his table he gives me the eyes to see his love for the world.

SEEING MY NEIGHBOR

In my free time while studying in Israel, I would wander around the Old City exploring the tiny passageways and the intricacies of ancient Jerusalem.

On one sunny afternoon, I found myself in the area of St. Stephen's gate, near the modern day site of the *Via Dolorosa*, the "path of suffering" where Jesus is thought to have carried his cross. At the end of the *Via Dolorosa* stood a Palestinian man. He had a long black beard and dirty hair that fell below his shoulders. His eyes were kind. He was barefoot. He had no pants. The only thing keeping him from being completely naked was the open rag of a shirt that he wore, torn and dirty, loosely hanging off his shoulders. It caught me off guard. He obviously was not in his right mind. However, this man was gentle. As his dazed eyes drifted into the sparsely clouded sky, I could tell he was harmless.

Various tour groups making their pilgrimages through Jerusalem would walk down this path with tears in their eyes and the typical romanticized holy-land-tour wistfulness. Arriving at the end of the path, the tour groups and pilgrims came face to face with this naked man. Their responses were usually very similar. At first, most were frightened by the man. Many flat out ignored him, walking right past him, acting as though he wasn't there. Some, realizing he was harmless and helpless, would cruelly try to scare him off or send him away.

I sat there most of the afternoon taking it all in, wondering how something so seemingly absurd could still happen in our world today.

I went back to my dorm room that evening and began reading through the Scriptures. I found myself stuck in Matthew 13:44, where a man discovers treasure—real, live hidden treasure—in a field. The passage tells us that “joyfully” he went off to sell all his possessions in order to buy the field. Pretty simple concept, but almost seems a little dishonest, doesn't it? Anyway, I sat at my desk, Bible open, thinking about the meaning of this verse.

That evening in Jerusalem, I felt like it made sense; it seemed simple. At first I thought it meant that I have to give up everything in order to get this kingdom, but I started to understand that there was more.

I was compelled to pray about the passage. Suddenly it was as if the Lord took a hold of my heart, trying to show me that I was the “hidden treasure.” Jesus joyfully went to the cross and sold everything (his own life) so that I could be his. I was overcome with a sense of God's love for me. It broke me. I sat at my desk weeping, drinking in the love that God was lavishing, pouring out on me.

It was a discovery of humility. There was nothing I could do to attain “treasure status.” It is something God ascribes and bestows. Even more than there not being anything I could do to be worthy

of God's love, there also wasn't opportunity for me to beat myself up over it. I couldn't downplay my unworthiness or point out all the mistakes and flaws in my life to tarnish the treasure God saw in me. I was humbled in God's love.

I reflected on the events of that day, remembering the pain and sadness I saw reflected in the face of the naked man. Praying for that man, the Lord opened my eyes to the hidden treasure that had been standing before me. That crazy man, naked and dirty, also was a "hidden treasure" that Jesus loved so much that he gave his all for him. Joyfully, the Master sold everything in order that this man could be a part of the family of God. I was given the eyes to see the dignity in "the other." That demanded a response—of love, obedience.

Ironic that Christ met me that day as a naked man on the same path Jesus carried his own cross. Two thousand years earlier, King Jesus detailed the terms of the fateful day of judgment. The language he used communicated identification with the poor ("I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I needed clothes, I was sick, I was in prison . . ." Matthew 25:31-46). On that day when I found myself in Jerusalem, it was as if the King was there, presenting an opportunity to give to him through the needs of that hidden treasure yet to be discovered. Only discovered in the humility of learning to see Christ.

The King, Christ, surprised me. He wasn't dressed up in ornate robes but stood naked among the poor. Christ validated the divine imprint on humanity by showing me the treasure in that naked and vulnerable Palestinian man. Seeing my own value to God—a treasure hidden in my false self—was a lesson in humility. Seeing that man on the *Via Dolorosa* as a treasure equal in value to myself, waiting to be discovered, was a lesson in community.