

Removing the Dirt from Our Hearts

In the summer of 2015 when I was still a seminarian, I had the opportunity to tour the Holy Land. My seminary, Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, was part of an international archeology consortium, and we participated in a dig at Bethsaida, Israel, as well as traveling throughout the country visiting the holy sites. Bethsaida was a home base for Jesus, and the hometown of the Apostles Peter, Andrew, and Phillip. This was an amazing experience! We arrived at the dig site at dawn, working until noon. The hot desert sun would beat down, and we had to set up tarps overhead to work under prior to digging. We discovered all kinds of artifacts, including bullets from recent wars, lamps, pottery and coins from many centuries ago, and even a human body. In the afternoon we visited holy sites and attended lectures in the evening, earning three Bible classes' worth of seminary credits in three weeks! After arriving in Tel Aviv we drove to Jerusalem, and our first day was spent at the Temple Mount, City of David, Jerusalem Archeological Park, the Temple, and the famous Dome of the Rock. During our City of David stop, I was asked to read the Gospel of John 9:1-41 while we gathered at the Pool of Siloam. This passage highlights Jesus' healing of a blind man.

It was surreal to read this Gospel passage at the place where it happened, and I wondered what it was like to be healed of lifelong blindness by Jesus. What did the man who was born blind do next? After years of not working, he would now have to get a job! When we encounter Jesus, at least three things happen: we meet him, we are changed, and we go forth into the rest of our lives changed. This last point is emphasized by the name Siloam, which means "sent." What is Jesus sending us into? – The rest of our lives, for which we are responsible in a new way. This means we have to *do* things, to take responsibility for ourselves. Sometimes we think

that being ministers means we won't have to work very hard. On the contrary, ministry is often exhausting, and it can be very difficult to remain motivated unless we are grounded in prayer.

Encountering Jesus can be shocking, especially when we see *how* he heals us. By spitting on the ground, making clay out of the moistened dirt and then rubbing it on the man's eyes, he committed an act that would normally block vision. In this instance, however, blockage met blockage and when they had cancelled one another out, the man's sight was restored. What blocks us from receiving healing from Jesus? Are we also blind from birth to the healing power of God?

Before going to the Holy Land, I realized there was something from which I needed to be healed. This is what happened – I had met with my superiors for an annual review. Normally these evaluations should present no surprises. But I was shocked to discover that they thought I was studying too hard and was too intense, and that they wanted me to spend a year focusing on developing a “pastoral heart.” The way that they wanted me to do this was to take a year off seminary and receive extensive training as a chaplain. It felt like I was being punished for doing a good job, and I did not appreciate it. Then, the day before leaving for Israel, I was assisting at a friend's priestly ordination. During the homily, the bishop talked about how, at some point, everyone in formation receives a cross. When a cross comes to you it arrives without warning, is unjust, and one must make a choice whether to carry it or not.

When we take up our cross, it is because we are bearing a burden on behalf of someone else. When we take up other people's burdens in this way, we get outside of ourselves, and God works on our hearts and minds, healing our souls of the attachments that block us from him. The bishop's message made sense to me, and I prepared myself to take up my cross. I would do this

for all the people I would serve in the future, and would receive the healing of exchanging my hardness of heart for a pastoral heart. This was the blindness of which I needed to be healed.

In order to allow the trip to be a healing experience, I realized that I would have to dig deep *literally*, and treat it as a living form of *lectio divina*. This is a type of contemplative prayer, consisting of four steps: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. Normally when we engage in this practice, we select a brief scripture passage and read it slowly (*lectio*). After re-reading and reflecting on it (*meditatio*), we begin to pray the passage (*oratio*). We take these steps in the hope that we will have an encounter with God (*contemplatio*). In my case, however, I engaged in an adapted form of the practice, treating the Holy Land itself as a living Bible. The more I dug in the dirt, the more God moved *my* dirt. When discovering valuable artifacts in my interior life, I washed them off and kept them safe. Upon discovering items that were not valuable, I discarded and forgot about them.

So it is with what permits or blocks us from having pastoral hearts. We ask God to use our resistance as a means of expanding the heart and perfecting our spiritual discernment, so that he may be better known and loved, and that others may also know and love God all the more. Let us not be afraid to dig in the dirt that covers our hardened hearts, and let us trust God to remove it so that we can have pastoral hearts. We can trust him to safeguard the artifacts of our innermost selves, and heal us from the blindness of unbelief. Let us open our eyes to behold Jesus, our gentle healer, who will guide us in faith all the days of our lives.