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## You Have Seen Me, and I am Grateful: The Courage of the Poor

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A few years ago, I had the privilege of driving my daughter to high school. It became a special time for me – and, I hope for her. It gave us time to talk about many important teenage topics and led to many interesting discussions.

Because we had to go through downtown Baltimore, Maryland, we often stopped at traffic lights where people would be begging – for food, clothing, shelter, money, possibly a job. These people would walk among the cars with their signs in hand. Rarely would they ever say a word, unless we said something first. My daughter was often upset by the plight of these people and she wondered not only why so many people were poor but could we do anything to help them. After discussing several possibilities, we decided to pack a lunch for them and give it to the people as we stopped at a red light. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a piece of fruit and a couple of cookies became our regular lunch.

After doing this for a while, I began to think about other ways to try and help the poor in our area. I knew there was a place called the Franciscan Center and decided to call and see if I could volunteer to help in some way. After going for an interview, I was shown around the Center and learned that they fed lunch five days a week to over three hundred people each day, distributed clothing, helped people write resumes and look for a job, and helped with emergency financial aid. At the close of the interview process, I told the person that I would like to volunteer to work in the soup kitchen.

The first time I went, I met the kitchen manager and asked him what I could do to help. “Stand here,” he said, as he gave me an apron and a pair of gloves. “Prepare the bread for our guests.” So,

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for about the next two hours, I sliced and buttered more than three hundred rolls. Then a sudden quiet came over the dining room. I looked toward the kitchen and saw a line of volunteers setting out steaming pots. Our kitchen manager came out and nodded. "It's time." He removed the sign that was blocking the entrance way, and people began slowly filing into the room in an orderly single file that would speed the path to lunch. A hand was raised and quiet again settled over the room, followed by a brief prayer of thanksgiving.

For the next two years, I went to the Franciscan Center on most Wednesdays to feed the poor. After several weeks, I noticed that many of the same people came every Wednesday. It gave me a chance to get to know some of them. People of all ages, entire families, children, teenagers, the elderly, all came with grateful hearts to eat what was probably for most of them the best meal of the day. Our guests, the forgotten and the outcasts, came to the dining room not only for a meal, but also to be seen, to be remembered, to be loved as Christ loved. One gentleman came through the line each week constantly talking out loud, as if to keep away an evil spirit. An elderly lady who was very cross-eyed, tried to look directly at me to say thanks. A transgendered person picked up her food quickly and kept moving. One lady's voice was hoarse and her finger nails ragged. She was dressed in very worn out clothes. Another man, probably in his thirties, carried a stuffed animal with him to which he spoke in a language known only to him and to God. As I watched this gentleman, I wondered how many people have looked away from his pain? Somehow, my heart ached for this young man because I could not have a conversation with him. His mind was occupied. So, I smiled, said hello, and whispered a prayer for him.

In that safe and welcoming space, this man could be himself and be seen. Nothing was required. I could try to listen with my heart even though I knew he wouldn't talk to me. I could look at him with reverence and offer a silent prayer that he would be safe when he left the sanctuary of the dining room and returned to a world that is not always friendly to those who are different from what most people consider to be normal.

### HOW JESUS SAW PEOPLE

In the Gospels, we see that Jesus welcomed the poor with reverence and respect. He loved every person who was perceived to be a stranger, an outsider, or someone who might be different. He welcomed Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leading Jew, who came to Him at night because he was afraid to come for a conversation

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during the day (Jn. 3: 1). He stopped to talk with Zacchaeus as he walked through the town of Jericho. Zacchaeus was a senior tax collector and a wealthy man but he was short and couldn't see Jesus because of the crowd. So, he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Him. When Jesus saw him up in the tree, He greeted him and told him to come down because He was going to go to his house that day (Luke 19: 1-6). It must have taken both of these men a great deal of courage to break with their Jewish and societal traditions and their roles as a leading Jew and a despised tax collector. Furthermore, Jesus always seemed to have a soft spot for the marginal people in life, those who were considered to be the outcasts of society. He saw them with his eyes but loved them with his heart. He touched, healed and blessed them. In fact, He spoke highly of a beggar named Lazarus who lay under a rich man's table, begging for crumbs (Luke 16: 19-31). We are meant to do the same, because it is through our encounters with other people, some of whom are very different from us, that our hearts expand and we can fulfill the greatest command: to love one another. In the soup kitchen, this love was not abstract. It was concrete. Right there in front of us. I tried to love this person standing in front of me. I tried to physically show my love with a smile and a warm meal.

After I had been at the Center for several months, I was assigned to serve desserts. I enjoyed this very much, not only because I like desserts, but because we always had three or four desserts to choose from and it was so nice to see our guest's faces light up as they tried to decide which one to choose. Some people even asked if they could have more than one! One gentleman paused for a few moments looking like he was having trouble deciding and so I asked him, "what would you like?" He looked up at me and raised two fingers, implying that he would like two of them. "Sure, I said," as he smiled with delight. Another woman shook her head, waved a hand as if to brush aside me and the desserts, and perhaps the entire dining room. Another person asked for an extra dessert for her friend who was sitting in a wheelchair at the end of the table.

During the years that I worked at the Franciscan Center, I must admit that I sometimes asked myself why I was doing this. In the long run, what difference is this going to make for so many poor people who suffer every day with overwhelming sorrows and challenges? Then I remembered two things. The *first* is what Jesus told his disciples in Matthew's Gospel: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me. . . . I tell

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you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Matt 25: 35-40).

The *second* thing I remembered was a story about a starfish. It seems as though there was an elderly man who used to walk along the beach at low tide, picking up starfish drying in the sun and gently throwing them back into the ocean. He had been doing this for some time when a jogger overtook him and asked him what he was doing. The old man explained that the starfish would die in the sun, and so he was throwing them back into the ocean. Astounded, the younger man began to laugh. “Why, old fellow, don’t waste your time. Can’t you see there are hundreds and hundreds of starfish on this beach? And thousands of beaches in this world? And another low tide tomorrow? What makes you think you can make a difference?” Still laughing, he ran on down the beach.

The old man watched him for a long time. Then he walked on and before long he passed another starfish. Stooping, he picked it up, looked at it thoughtfully and smiled. Then, gently, he threw it back into the ocean. “Made a difference to that one,” he said to himself.

Sometimes, we can become so caught up in and overwhelmed by the problems in our world, our society and our communities that we don’t remember that our work is not about changing society – a world we cannot completely change by ourselves. Rather, it’s about touching the lives that touch mine in a way that makes a difference. The Dalai Lama has said that “compassion occurs only between equals.” For those who have compassion, woundedness is not a place of judgment but a place of genuine meeting.

## SEEING OTHERS WITH OUR HEARTS

We have moved away from the Baltimore area, so I no longer have the opportunity to volunteer at the Franciscan Center. I miss that. I miss the opportunity of not only serving the poor but also learning from them as well. I must admit that before my experience of volunteering at the Franciscan Center, I did not think very much about the courage of the poor. However, as I reflect on my time there, I remember listening to the stories of men and women that exemplified a tremendously courageous spirit. The courage that was needed on some days for them just to get out of bed. The many stories of others talking about the courage and perseverance it took to navigate the various agencies that are supposed to help them in some way. The courage of Joan, a single mom, trying to raise her two small children by working two jobs and finding it hard to make ends meet. The courage of Joe, who was fighting an alcohol addiction each minute of every day and trying now to go

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to at least two AA meetings every day. The courage of an elderly couple trying to learn the maze of paperwork to apply for disability benefits. The courage of Sam, a teenager, who was being parented by a single dad who was addicted to heroin, and determined to do whatever it took to stay in high school and make something of himself. These stories, and so many others, gave me new insight into the courage of the poor.

What I learned from our guests at the Franciscan Center is that everyone wants to be *seen*, to be noticed and accepted for who they are. Besides food or money, this is what the people at the traffic lights also want. Rather than turn away from them and pretend they are not there, they want to be looked at, to be seen with our eyes and loved with our hearts. As one gay man told me, “you have seen me and I am grateful.” Sometimes, simply being accepted as you are and cared about by another can affect a person in very profound ways.

In the soup kitchen and dining room of the Franciscan Center, I began to understand what Sara Miles, an Episcopal pastor in San Francisco, described in her book, *Jesus Freak*, when she talked about our call to be healers. “Jesus calls his disciples, giving us authority to heal and sending us out. . . . He doesn’t show us how to make a blind man see, dry every tear, or even drive out all kinds of demons. But he shows us how to enter into a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love, and given meaning.”<sup>1</sup> For me, after my experience in the soup kitchen, her framing of discipleship in this way makes complete sense.

In the dining room of the Franciscan Center, a new understanding of the healing work of Jesus began to grow in me. As Sara Miles writes, “I knew to the extent that new life was real, in any of us, it had sprung, just as Jesus promised, from actual feeding, healing, and forgiving. It didn’t come from the sky, but from plates of enchiladas, the bruises of strangers, frustration and tears.” It flourishes in the freedom of knowing we do not have to hide our wounds. In the dining room, we became one body, repairing one another’s torn hearts, sometimes with a hot meal, a sandwich, and a cup of coffee, sometimes with a kind word, always with our *presence*.

1 Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2010, 105.