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 Texts: Mark 10:46-52
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Take Heart: Love Comes in at the Eye

For the first couple of weeks after returning from Ireland, I'd open my front door and wonder where the mountains were. I'd open the back door and imagine the other breathtaking view we enjoyed each day of the tide rolling in.

Thanks to a Sabbatical grant as many of you know, my husband and I were able to travel through our favorite places in Europe for my sabbatical. As part of that gift, we rented an Irish Cottage for a month in the West of Ireland known as Connemara. (Connemara, founded by the early Gaelic tribe thousands of years ago, is an extraordinarily rugged landscape on the coast.) This home away from home was a gentle and wild place to let the dust settle and absorb all that we'd seen and heard this far on our pilgrimage.

"Our" rented home was perched on a promontory of ancient rock on an inlet that led to the wild North Atlantic Ocean. Day after day, we'd watch the earth, sky and sea change—often by the minute. Winds and rain often buffeted our stone house ("held fast by the wind" wrote Seamus Heaney) on many days but it never budged... We ate many meals in the sun room, watching clouds paint shapes in the sky and later the sun set long after 10:00 pm. Sometimes we'd be surprised by several of our neighbor's hungry cows stopping by for a visit before they'd come and chase them back up the driveway. Apparently, our wild Irish grass was better!

We'd wave hello to the two fishermen who would regularly visit us at high tide and put in their currach to set/retrieve their crab and lobster traps.

Peering out our upper bedroom window, we'd see the 12 mountains known as the 12 Pins in the distance, rising above the horizon. You need to give up predicting the weather. Every morning was a new story!

After traveling around every few days earlier on our journey, here, our rhythm had slowed way down. Every moment felt like an encounter with beauty. A revelation that all of life was holy and worthy of our attention.

On daily walks along the coast, I'd stop to visit two Connemara ponies seen nuzzling one another in a flowering field. My thoughts are punctuated by the only traffic seen here...bellowing cows and baby lambs rumbling after their mothers.

Unlike my usual life, we had no place we needed to be, no appointments, no schedule, no need for texts or phone calls, only books to read, brown bread with butter and jam to eat, and skies to paint. And maybe a visit to the pub later on... It didn't get dark until 11 pm so there was time enough each day for all of our heart's desires (and a nap).

For company, we read the Irish poets and keepers of Celtic wisdom touching into my own Celtic history and roots. One such voice was the Irish poet and theologian John O'Donohue, who was from this region. O'Donohue wrote that, 'The human soul is hungry for beauty: we seek it everywhere - in landscape, music, art, clothes, furniture, gardening, companionship, love, religion and in ourselves...When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. Some of our most wonderful memories are of beautiful places where we felt immediately at home. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul.'¹

¹ John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*.

In the Celtic imagination, the world is actively an expression of the divine within and around us. There is no separation of worlds, human, animal, or landscape, body and spirit, time and eternity all is woven in the interrelatedness of all of life.” The visible and the invisible moved in and out of each other” ...all is a sacrament. We are invited to awaken to the sacred in all things...and seek beauty as a way to find balance and manage the challenges of the world in which we live.

I found myself calling upon a meditative prayer practice that I learned at the beginning of my sabbatical while on retreat in Assisi, Italy. (The retreat included a lot of pasta and wine but, too, that’s a story I’ll save for another time!). This form of meditative awareness, of prayer, is called visio divina (Latin for divine seeing). A way of seeing and a way to pray with the “eyes” of your heart using images, art, landscapes.²

Our guide would lead us by showing a painting, a Giotto, and asking us two questions, the first, “what do you see?” We were given some time to pay attention to what was before us, the concrete details and what we noticed.

Then, we were asked to go deeper, “What does your heart see?”

What comes up for you, what does it remind you of...how we see things

What does your heart see? (pause)

On today’s bulletin cover, you’ll notice a favorite view from our Connemara cottage.

Take a minute and as you look at it...

“What do you see?” (pause)

Now, look again, as we go deeper...

“What does your heart see?”

Does it remind you of a special place where you find peace, where you might go to in your mind, a childhood favorite landscape or on a daily walk near your home or the woods....?

(Pause)

“What do you see?”

“What does your heart see?”

As the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats wrote, “Love comes in at the eye...”

These questions are helpful guides, too, as we picture the story of Jesus and Bartimeus from the gospel of Mark. One of the things that draws me to the Bartimeus story is how illustrative it is of what happens when we experience the holy in ourselves and one another...and when Jesus comes by.

First of all, in Mark’s version of this narrative, we have Bartimeus’ name. This person in need is not just an anonymous figure on the side of the road. Bartimeus has a name, we know who his family is, his presence is dignified.

It is hard to look away when you know someone’s name...

Secondly, the crowd plays a big role. What are they doing? How is their behavior impacting Bartimeus? Who do they remind you of? What’s at stake here? At what point do they transform from a shushing crowd into a caring community?

As the story continues, Bartimeus is calling for help, in fact, he’s begging for mercy. In the Greek the words are beautiful, have mercy on me translates to” mercy me”.

As the text tells us, Bartimeus can already see what the impatient crowd cannot. Their own blindness is on view. The presence of Jesus, the Son of David, and what his love can do seems apparent only to the person ignored by the rest.

² <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2009/07/praying-with-art-visio-divina>

This marginalized person's cry and conversation with Jesus becomes an opportunity for healing. The healing comes to one and to all who seek mercy and open their hearts.

I'm very moved by the question Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" (18.41) It is a very human and generous question. A life-changing one that reshapes identities and relationships. Jesus probably already sensed what this person needs and wants but in helping the person "verbalize" for himself...something deeper takes place. Rather than assuming, Jesus invites Bartimaeus to verbalize his deepest desire. To see—in whatever way that might mean—in order that he might become whole.

It brings to mind other words of Jesus: Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find. (Matthew 7.7).

Whatever this person's deep needs and hunger were, Bartimaeus gets up at the urgency of the crowd and goes to Jesus. "Take heart", they now say. He even leaves his cloak behind which is an interesting detail- he sheds his old identity, perhaps he no longer needs to be cloaked. In this gospel scene, not only is there a restoration of sight in whatever way, there's a restoration of dignity, of purpose and even of community. The healing is for everyone and Jesus sends Bartimaeus on into his new life.

Consider this for a minute, "How would you answer Jesus' question, "what do you want me to do for you?" What is the healing your heart might be seeking?

Often, our deepest yearnings are buried under many things and yet, articulating them in prayer or to a trusted friend, is an act of healing in itself.

I don't pretend to understand how healing happens or how God's presence works exactly. I do know that in my own life, often the healing I am looking for and praying for may not come the way I expect. And, at the same time, I know it when I see it. Healing in all its forms is often quite miraculous.

As I discovered in Connemara, being immersed in Beauty through all my senses, was a deeply healing experience. Renewal, wholeness, healing whatever you call it...that incubative time helped me to come home to myself... (and also, return to work/ministry!!) hopefully with fresh eyes and heart.

With all that we are juggling in these hot summer days of worry for the world, our families, neighbors and ourselves...may you awaken to the wholeness that can come from resting in beauty.

I can't help reciting a Wendell Berry poem much beloved by our church and Carleen (now headed out on her much needed vacation):

"When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things...
For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.

(Pause)

Amen!