

While I was in seminary, I went through a program called Clinical Pastoral Education or “CPE.” The program was designed to help people learn how to help those who were in the hospital, as visits to the sick and the homebound are a part of the ministry of the priest.

One of the things the program encouraged us to do was to let patients guide the conversation, to listen to them, but also, when the opportunity presented itself, to try to help them spiritually. To get past the Minnesota nice kind of greeting, or just talking about the weather or the Twins, and to see if there was anything we could do for them, as their needs were deeper.

Understandably, it wasn’t therapy, and if I were in a hospital bed I wouldn’t want to open up my heart to a twenty-something chaplain intern. But some of the faces and stories I’ll never forget. There was the distraught nurse who had been helping a young woman all night who was losing her battle to an infection. An elderly man who just wanted to get home to be with his dog. And a middle-aged woman who was in the final stages of her cancer battle. My encounter with these people and the others I visited was brief, but I left that summer a changed person, learning a bit about the importance of empathy and listening, and realizing that my future ministry to both those in hospitals but to all the people I’d meet in life as both a priest and a Christian, were opportunities that God was giving me to try to help bring people closer to Him. And that is because whether we are in a hospital bed or not, all of us carry internal struggles, as life can be hard.

Preparing for the homily this week, I came across the story of a woman who came to realize this one day when she had a chance encounter with a man in a diner in a southern town.

Jaye Lewis, an award winning author who lives in southwestern Virginia, writes about a time she found herself in a town stopping looking for a doughnut shop. She wandered into a local burger place where she picked up a Danish and a coffee.

The girl behind the counter asked her if she was new in town, and she replied that she was waiting for an appointment, and the diner was the closest thing she could come to a doughnut shop.

She laughed as she assured her that the Danish was as close as she could get to a doughnut in her town, and Jaye smiled back as she grabbed a newspaper and headed to the back, away from the smoking section.

While she smiled, at this moment in her life, inside, Jay was in fact miserable. She had always been a spiritual person, but she found she could no longer pray. It had been years since she had stepped into a church and, frankly, if there was a God, why was He not answering her? She felt as though she was going out of her mind.

About that time, she noticed a man sitting just inside the nonsmoking section, reading a book, and busily scribbling notes. She guessed him to be about 70-something. Quite handsome, he was an African-American gentleman with white hair. He called out greetings to anyone who spoke to him, and all the young black men treated him with quiet dignity. He seemed to be related to everyone in town.

Between greetings, he went back to his book and his notes, and continued to scribble. Every once in a while, he would read a phrase, and he would smile. It must be a diary, Jaye thought to herself. Maybe it was the writing of some beloved person in his life. Without a word, he conveyed a sense of gentleness. The expression on his face was like nothing Jaye had seen before. She longed for that peace, and needed it.

She was captivated by him. He seemed to be surrounded by angels. He continued with his reading, writing and greetings.

Finally, Jaye got up the nerve to speak to him. "You seem to know everybody," she said. He looked up and smiled. His dark eyes behind his round glasses were kind.

"No," he said. "I've never been here before."

"Really? People you don't know say 'hello' to you?"

"Sometimes." He smiled and went back to his reading.

There was something about the book. Jane tried not to stare, but peripherally she never took her eyes off him. He continued to pore over the words in the book and finally, he moved. He turned to reach for something, and the title of the book became visible: The Holy Bible.

Jaye sat there for what seemed like forever, captured by a man who exuded holiness from every pore. She was really familiar with phonies, and this man was "for real." She could see it on the faces of everyone who walked within 10 feet of him. A kind of hush settled over the little burger joint, and she was enthralled. She realized that this man was totally comfortable with his God. This man was involved in a relationship with God. She wanted what he had, but Jaye wasn't sure how she could get it.

Looking at the time, she realized it was time to go or she would be late for her appointment. She stood and had an incredible impulse to walk over to the man, so she did. She thanked him for just sitting there, reading the Bible, as though he were reading letters from a friend. Her eyes filled with tears. Her voice broke as she tried to convey the power that was released in his simple, unconscious relationship. He took her hand and held it for what seemed like an eternity. One confused white woman, and one kind, elderly black man. Jaye felt an unearthly love for that man, but she just couldn't speak.

She listened as she held his hand, and he told her about his aunt, who was elderly and very ill. He was from Ohio and had just traveled down to check on her. She was being hospitalized and he was only in the burger place waiting for her to be settled into her room. Jaye could feel his goodness steal through her, and she wanted to know who gave him this incredible peace, but she never asked. He let go of her hand, and they said farewell.

Before they left though, he gave her some pamphlets and said, "Whenever you are ready to have your questions answered," as though he had read her thoughts, "read these. In the meantime, I'll

be praying for you.” Jaye wanted to throw her arms around him, but she just said “thank you” and left.

It was a long time before she began her journey to an understanding of God, and Jaye lost those pamphlets somewhere along the way. In the years since that brief encounter, Jaye has come to experience the peace that “transcends all understanding” and the God who gives it. And it all began with an encounter in a small town diner with another stranger who decided to not keep his faith silent, but share it with another, and in the process, helped another woman to find God again.

In many ways, I think it’s easy to relate to Jaye, because so many of us carry burdens in our hearts, but these are things that are hidden. Things that we may choose to ignore or not want to see, or things that others may carry in their hearts that we fail to see because we don’t truly open up our eyes. Life can be hard. And for many, they can suffer in silence.

The leper in the Gospel today has two afflictions. He was not only suffering from physical illness, but he was also cut off from the community. He was completely ostracized; we hear the protocol for leprosy in the first reading “he shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.” On top of this, the leper has to say “unclean” if he’s out of the house so no one comes near him.

All of us can identify with the leper in one way or another, because in our weaknesses in our shame, in our sin, we can be off kilter. Even on our best days, deep down we might feel less than perfect. Many of us present to the world the image of the perfect person, but at various points in life we can feel so alone. And that is where God enters the picture, but challenges us to also enter the picture.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus, we see Him going to the outcast, and those who are broken inside: Zacchaeus the tax collector; Bartimaeus, the man who is blind; the woman at the well ostracized for her reputation; the woman caught in adultery; Saul of Tarsus the persecutor of the Christians. The list goes on and on. And as I’ve said countless times, it’s first and foremost important to remember that, as Saint Paul says, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. No matter where we are at in life, God invites us to open our hearts to Him, and to turn our sins, our pains, our battles, over to Him. And that’s why as I said last week, having that ongoing personal relationship with God and His Church is so important. He loves the Peter who died for the faith, and the Peter who denied Him on Holy Thursday - and He loves you and me through thick and thin. The leper takes the initiative in the Gospel and approaches Jesus, and we need to do that too.

But Jesus also gives us a challenge. And that is to open our eyes, to be like the man Jaye encountered in the diner that day. And I’d suggest that this happens in two ways.

The first is on the home front.

The Grimm Brothers wrote a short fairytale about a man cut off from his family and who was later restored. The story goes: Once upon a time there was a very old man, whose eyes had

become dim, his ears dull of hearing, his knees trembled, and when he sat at table he could hardly hold the spoon, and he spilt the broth upon the tablecloth or let it run out of his mouth. His son and his son's wife were disgusted at this, so the old grandfather at last had to sit in the corner behind the stove, and they gave him his food in an earthenware bowl, and not even enough of it. And he used to look toward the table with his eyes full of tears. Once, too, his trembling hands could not hold the bowl, and it fell to the ground and broke. The young wife scolded him, but he said nothing and only sighed. Then they bought him a wooden bowl for a few halfpence, out of which he had to eat. They were once sitting thus when the little grandson of 4 years old began to gather together some bits of wood upon the ground. "What are you doing there?" asked the father. "I am making a little trough," answered the child, "for father and mother to eat out of when I am big." The man and his wife looked at each other for a while, and presently began to cry. Then they took the old grandfather to the table, and henceforth always let him eat with them, and likewise said nothing if he did spill a little of anything." Families on the one hand are full of love, but all of us know family situations arise too because of neglect, or blindness. An older relative can be forgotten in a nursing home. A child can silently struggle in school or with a bully but feel they can't say anything because they are compared to another sibling who seemingly is the golden child. A person can be in a bad marriage but can't bring themselves to say "I need help." Of course, if there is ever any suspicion of abuse in a family situation, we don't hesitate and go to the authorities. But more often than not, there is the pain a person can feel due to a situation they are in. We need to open our eyes though to see it, and remember that a conversation, a visit, simply listening to others and being there for them can do so much to help them, and it will do far more than anything we could buy with money.

Then, like the man that Jaye met in the story, we look for those in need in the world and help them. Part of that is done through our donations, such as to the Catholic Services Appeal that we commit to each year. Through the generosity of so many, we can meet the needs. This appeal is our way as a diocese of helping meet the needs of the poor through assistance to Catholic Charity; to support ministry to the deaf and hospital and prison chaplaincy; the mission in Venezuela; Camus ministry; evangelization and a number of other ministries that single parishes can't do all on their own. Beyond that though, there are so many opportunities to help others and open our eyes. We need to reach out to people as Jesus reached out to the man with leprosy. Notice Jesus touches the man, becoming ritually unclean himself, and heals Him. As life goes on, we need to always take it up a notch too, asking ourselves what more can I do for people in need. From helping bag meals at Feed My Starving Children, to becoming a Samaritan minister or a catechist, to maybe seeing someone like that man did in that diner and simply saying a few words to put them on the right path, God fills our lives with opportunities to be an evangelist for our faith. So like Jesus and the man Jaye met that day in the cafe, may we too reach out to those in need.

If we want to imitate Christ, it's not enough just to agree with what He said. We have to do what He did. Evangelization is one starving person saying to another where to find bread. And so as we prepare now to receive the bread of eternal life, let's think about how God loves us so much and fills our souls with that love, but never neglect our commission to do what this leper does, and that is to announce to the world who Jesus is. Whether it's a conversation with a stranger or a loved one, a random act of kindness, or just listening to those in our lives who are hurting, so many opportunities fill our lives to fill the souls of one another with the love of God that we are

given. So like that man, may we seize them and give someone the greatest gift they can ever receive - a true and lasting relationship with the God who is love.