SEEING
— THE —
UNSEEN

BEYOND PREJUDICES, PARADIGMS, AND PARTY LINES

MARK M. BECKWITH

FOREWORD BY SHANE CLAIBORNE

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To Henri Nouwen (1932–1996)—teacher and mentor,
and to the Rev. Canon Ed Rodman—mentor and colleague.

Each of whom, at different times and in different ways,
helped me see the unseen.

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FOREWORD

There is something more important than having new ideas, and that is having new eyes.

That's why I am so excited about this book by my friend Mark Beckwith. This book is all about having new eyes.

Years ago I had the opportunity to work with Mother Teresa in India, where I spent some time in a village of folks who had leprosy. In the caste system, they were literally "outcasts"—not allowed in stores or restaurants . . . pushed to the margins of society, untouchable, invisible. But Mother Teresa knew better. She knew they were children of God, made in the image of God . . . and if Jesus is right that the last will be first, these folks certainly had a special place in the family of God. So she started this little village outside Calcutta where about 150 families lived. They grew their own food, made their own clothes, ran their own school. While I was there, my job was to take piles of their homegrown cotton and roll cotton balls for the clinic, which was by the railroad tracks. The doctors in the clinic were all survivors of leprosy and were now providing treatment for others still infected by the disease. One day, after I had been there a while, one of the doctors had to leave early, and he asked me to take his place.

I came forward, sat in the doctor's seat, and began staring intently, deeply into the next patient's eyes. I didn't speak Hindi, and he didn't

know much English, but we connected, and I tried to ensure his trust with a gentle smile. I began carefully dressing the man's wound. He stared at me with such intensity that it felt like he was looking into my soul. Every once in a while, he would slowly close his eyes.

When I was finished wrapping his wound, he smiled as he looked into my eyes and said this word: "Namaste." One of the men in the clinic that day explained to me the profound meaning of the word. He said that we don't have a good English translation that captures the full power of the word, but it essentially means "I see you. I love you. I recognize the image of God in you." In his words: "The Spirit of God in me loves the Spirit of God that I see in you."

I will never forget getting lost in that man's eyes as we sat in the clinic there on the railroad tracks. I knew that I had not just looked into the eyes of some pitiful leper in Calcutta but that I had gazed into the eyes of Jesus, and he had not seen just some rich, do-gooder white kid from America but the image of God in me. I had seen Jesus in him, and he in me. I saw a clearer glimpse of Jesus in this leper's eyes than I have ever seen in any stained-glass window or religious icon.

Looking into the eyes of another person may be the clearest glimpse of God many of us get in this world.

At the heart of this wonderful book is an invitation to see people differently and to see the world differently. Mark draws on his own experiences and some of the giants of compassion over the centuries. He does a deep dive into scripture and takes his cues from Jesus.

This book reminds me of the works of Martin Buber. In *I and Thou*, the brilliant European thinker speaks of how we can see a person as simply a material object, something you look at, an "it"—or we can look into

a person and enter the sacredness of their humanity so that they become a "Thou." (And as a Jewish philosopher who immigrated to Palestine to advocate for Arab-Jewish cooperation, Buber knew all too well how easily we objectify and demonize others.)

All the time, we look *at* people—celebrities, rock stars, migrant workers, homeless folks. We see Black, white, Asian. We see male, female, gay, straight. But over time, we can develop new eyes and look *into* people. We can enter the Holiest of Holies through their eyes. They can become a "Thou." This book is a training manual for how to see the world differently, and how to see people differently.

In the murderers, we see our own capacity to harm. In the addicts, we see our own addictions. In the saints, we catch glimpses of our own holiness. We can see our own brokenness, our own violence, our own ability to destroy, and we can see our own sacredness, our own capacity to love and forgive. When we realize that we are both wretched and beautiful, we are freed up to see others the same way.

We are all made of the same dust. We cry the same tears.

I saw this happen when the man whispered that sacred Hindi word *namaste.* And I saw it in Iraq, when people put their hands over their hearts as a sign of respect and recognition. In South Africa, I also learned about *ubuntu*, which is a similar idea. It means, "I cannot be all that I am meant to be until you are everything you are meant to be." We do not live in isolation. An injury to one is an injury to all. And until all of us are free, none of us are free.

We are living in turbulent times, in an age of deep division and paralyzing polarization. Lots of people are talking at each other but not with each other. It is clear that white Americans and people of color

are experiencing a different America. It can feel impossible to imagine a healthy future together when we aren't even sharing the same narrative about our past. We hear it in the culture wars around critical race theory and we witness it in the tearing down of Confederate statues.

Around the world we encounter crisis after crisis with tragedies and death tolls, and it is easy to get lost and overwhelmed by it all. So where do we start?

In this beautiful book, Mark invites us to start by *seeing*—not just looking *at* people but looking deeply *into* them. He invites us to listen deeply to those who are hurting, even to those with whom we disagree.

I am reminded of how many times Jesus said the words "to those who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear." Mark helps us learn how to see better and listen better. In this book, he helps us develop a special kind of "night vision" that is going to be essential in the dark days ahead. We are going to need to be able to see in the dark.

And we are going to need to be able to see not just with our eyes but also with our hearts, our souls. This book is going to help us navigate this complicated world in the days ahead.

This is not just a book you read with your eyes . . . it is a book you read with your heart.

Shane Claiborne

Coauthor of *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*

SEEING THE UNSEEN

INTRODUCTION

We are trained to think. Going back centuries, our Western educational system has been devoted to enabling people to achieve a level of mastery by expanding their ability to think. The three Rs—reading, (w)riting, and (a)rithmetic—have served as the building blocks for young people to expand their thinking, with the goal of being better able to participate in commerce and community.

And it has worked. Advances in science and technology, mathematics, and medicine have demonstrated that the emphasis on thinking has paid off. We know more. We think better and more clearly.

Yet this trajectory of better thinking has led many to believe that if we are not masters of the universe, then we are at least rapidly approaching the point where we can be effective shepherds of it. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, governments in chaos and collapse, and increasing polarization, we still harbor the hubris that we can manage it all.

Our cultural emphasis on thinking has not been applied to our ability to see. To be sure, our advanced thinking has enabled us to treat our eyes more expertly—from sophisticated eyeglass lenses to effective treatments for cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration to rapid expansion of laser surgery. But we are not trained and truly enabled to see the

world's fullness— its pain and joy, compassion and cruelty. We regularly get glimpses of pain and joy, but they are often limited in such a way so as to reinforce our thinking.

And how we think is part of the problem with how we see. The European Renaissance (roughly between 1300 and 1700) generated remarkable advances in art, science, and mathematics. Thinking became more focused and valued. Philosophical and theological support for this expanded ability to understand the workings of the world was largely provided by René Descartes (1596–1650), widely regarded as the founder of modern Western philosophy. While this book is not a discourse on Western philosophy, Descartes's work has deeply affected how we have been trained to see (or not to see). Descartes summarized his philosophy as *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). This dictum sets up a separation between self and other, not to mention an emphasis on individualism. A subject's ability to think provides the opportunity to master. On one level, Descartes's philosophy has served us well. On another level, it has caused some significant problems.

Psychohistorians have provided a plausible and compelling context for Descartes's mindset. René was fourteen when the king of France, Henry IV, was assassinated in 1610. Known as Henry the Great, the king made a commitment to ensuring that all his subjects had enough food to eat. He was also a champion of religious tolerance, allowing for the establishment of both Catholic and Protestant churches in the country, and supporting both religious expressions. Raised a Protestant, Henry converted to Catholicism and back again several times in his lifetime. His religious openness created enemies, one of whom, a religious fanatic, attacked the king's carriage on the back streets of Paris and stabbed Henry to death.

For many in France, including a young René, hope died with the king. As was the custom of the day, the heart of the king was removed and put on display for three days at Saint Louis Church in Paris so people could come and pay homage. A teenage René joined the line of mourners. According to this thread of psychohistory, when he saw the king's heart, it broke his own, and he made a vow that he would never allow his heart to be that vulnerable again. Ergo, Descartes's despair led to a philosophical construct that created as much distance from the emotional workings of the heart as possible: Thinking would reign. And seeing—at least seeing accompanied by an emotional valence—was either minimized or its emotional import was abandoned altogether. Hence our own problems in seeing the world in its fullness today—and the problems that this lack of seeing creates.

One of the reasons I strongly relate to this interpretation of history is that it helps explain my own inability—and in some cases, my unwillingness—to see the fullness of the world. For fourteen years I served a church in Worcester, Massachusetts. I drove to the church most every day, and it was often the case that my short commute was interrupted by a school bus stopping to pick up a load of students. I saw the bus, occasionally cursed at it for causing me to wait—and was effectively blind to the children waiting to get on board.

Several years into my tenure at the church, for reasons that I cannot explain, there was a day when I was finally able to shift my view from the bus to the kids who were waiting for it. And there were a lot of them—I was surprised to see the number of them because I couldn't imagine that there were that many kids living in that neighborhood, which was economically challenged. I could readily see the physical degradation of the neighborhood that surrounded the urban church I served, but I didn't

want to *think* that vulnerable children lived there. There wasn't enough space for them to live, I thought, and what space there was seemed woefully inadequate. My mind didn't want me to see the young people in that place, so I didn't. Until, of course, I did—and my commute became more difficult because I could now see, in greater relief, the economic injustice that enveloped the neighborhood where I spent so much of my time.

I would like to think that my heart has never been cauterized. It has always reached out to others. I have readily empathized with other people's pain. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to help ease that pain. A noble trait, I believe, one that many others share, but that day I learned that my empathy had been limited by what I had been trained to see, and what my thinking allowed me to see.

After my junior year in college, our glee club went on a singing tour of several countries in Africa. One of our stops was in southern Zambia. We sang near the source of Victoria Falls, one of the most spectacular places I have ever seen. The day after the concert, our bus dropped us off at one end of a very high bridge that spanned the Zambezi River, which forms the boundary between Zambia and what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). We walked out to the middle of the bridge to get a better view of the river far below. Coming to us from the Rhodesia side was a small but steady stream of people, which included a young, presumably Rhodesian, mother with her two young children. They were carrying several large suitcases. My heart went out to them, and I walked over and offered to help. Without receiving a reply, I picked up the largest suitcases and accompanied them to the Zambian side. I then gave the luggage back to the mother, and while there wasn't a verbal acknowledgment of my assistance, I could tell she was relieved. I took it as gratitude.

It wasn't until a long time later that I realized that she was more likely hiding her fear—she probably initially regarded my help as an aggressive act by a white man who was taking her luggage, her children, and herself to a place of danger. When I returned her luggage, no doubt she was relieved—not for my help, but because I had not committed yet another one of the racist acts that were standard practice in the country she was coming from. I hadn't seen that.

I have spent much of my life since then trying to open my eyes and my heart to injustice and blessing—to be able to see the broader context of a young family crossing a bridge from Rhodesia to Zambia—but my ambition, arrogance, and Cartesian-trained manner of thinking have often gotten in the way. The combination of finely honed thinking and cultural (not to mention male) arrogance has taught me to see things in a certain way. Several years ago, some colleagues and I watched a compelling video featuring Joel Barker, a futurist and business consultant. The video was drawn from Barker's book *Discovering the Future: The Business of Paradigms*, and it featured several examples of how established paradigms influence, if not control, how we see. At one point the video presented a series of playing cards in quick succession. Everything looked normal. The video then slowed down the presentation of the same cards, and Barker pointed out that all the spade and club cards were red and the heart and diamond cards were black. Rarely, he said, did a viewer pick up the switch, primarily because the paradigm of spades and clubs being black and hearts and diamonds being red is so ingrained in us that we can't see otherwise.

It is often the case, in our Cartesian-influenced Western world, that how we think shapes how we see, and how we see reinforces how we

think. Thinking comes first—except when it doesn't. There are moments when our vision transcends boundaries and paradigms, and we are then able to see with our hearts—and our minds can follow by offering some context. During my first year of seminary, I read Thomas Merton's autobiographical trilogy: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and *The Sign of Jonas*. I am among many who consider Thomas Merton to be the most influential Christian spiritual writer of the twentieth century. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton describes an unexpected vision he received during a visit to a doctor in Kentucky:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .
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> This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.
>
> Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor de-

> sire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift. (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*)

"If only we could see." Thank God that Merton did see in this moment of epiphany and was able to write it down, as this record has had a profound influence on millions of pilgrims, and even prompted the city of Louisville to put up a commemorative plaque at that site. I made a pilgrimage to that same intersection decades after Merton had his experience—and I waited for something to happen, for my eyes and heart to be opened in a similar way.

Nothing.

But Merton's ability to see—along with so many others like him (though perhaps not as articulate)—has given me a level of confidence and faith that seeing beyond thinking is possible, that a different vantage point can open us up to seeing injustice more clearly and experiencing blessing in new and unexpected ways.

Many years after my school bus epiphany, I became a bishop, and for several years I joined a growing cohort of Episcopalians from across the country who offered "Ashes to Go" on Ash Wednesday. My colleague and I would position ourselves at strategic points at Penn Station in Newark, New Jersey. Another colleague would hold up a large sign that announced our presence and explained what we were offering—to apply

ashes on the commuters' foreheads. People came forward, many more than we expected. As I reflected on the interactions, I came away with the realization that people wanted not only to observe this ancient ritual, but also to be blessed.

And so I went back to Newark's Penn Station at other times of the year to offer blessings, which a surprising number of people were willing to receive. I made it a point of showing up to offer "Blessings to Go" every September 11, which felt like a day of profound vulnerability, given that the World Trade Center had been easy to see from many points in Newark (some ten miles away) and many people commuted to lower Manhattan. I expected that the presence of police officers with AR-15s draped over their shoulders and the well-trained but fierce-looking police dogs accompanying them heightened that vulnerability.

Yet, during one of these visits, I noticed that most people didn't seem to be paying much attention to the beefed-up security. They were too busy trying to catch a train or a bus—or zeroing in on their cellphones. In the midst of the chaos and cacophony, the first verses of Revelation 21 seeped into my heart and brain: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:1–2). And then the passage filtered up to my eyes, because that is what I saw—the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, in the bowels of Newark's Penn Station. In that strange moment, the commuting crowd became walking images of God's blessing, and we were all somehow uniquely related to one another. And as soon as I saw this vision, my brain kicked in with immediate pushback: New Jerusalem? In Newark? On 9/11? In all this confusion? I don't think so. You can't see that. Expunge the vision and the idea that spawned it.

But I held on to that vision. It was a vision of blessing as I set about the task of blessing others. And I found myself occasionally talking about my experience, sheepishly at first, because I thought people would think me too bizarre, or worse. But the more I talked about it, the more confidence I had that there was a holy presence there, in what the world would otherwise regard as an unholy place on an unholy day. Like Thomas Merton in Louisville, I felt a deep kinship with the crush of humanity that was going about its business on that September 11 morning. And I felt that we were all blessed.

* * *

This book is an invitation to see what we don't see. To see beyond our prejudices, paradigms, and hidebound thinking, all of which can shroud us from, if not blind us to, injustice. And to see moments when those veils of prejudice, paradigms, and thinking are mysteriously and wonderfully taken away and we can feel the blessing. Which then prompts us to share the blessing with others.

I continue to struggle to keep my eyes fully opened to see injustice and blessing. I take some comfort in the fact that our spiritual ancestors had similar difficulties, and I will talk about that (Luke 24). I have discovered that where we locate God—up in heaven, down here on earth, or no place at all (because for some it is a supreme challenge to imagine that God even exists in the first place)—has considerable bearing on how we see (or do not see) one another. I will talk about the categories we put people in, the confining arenas we put God in—and the language we use to reinforce our blindness and prejudice. I will draw on the wisdom of scripture, the challenges our spiritual ancestors faced, and the brilliance that Jesus and the prophets offered.

I will introduce the *mandorla*, the Italian word for almond, which is the visual representation of the intersection of two competing circles of ideas, positions, or movements. (Think of a Venn diagram from sixth-grade math.) Engaging the mandorla can free us from the paralysis of polarity and the myopia it generates. I will give examples of individuals and movements that have invited people into the mandorla space—where reconciliation and redemption can take place. There are traditions and practices that we have long engaged in that, if reconfigured, or shifted even a little bit, can deepen our commitment to justice and open us up to blessing.

One of the gifts I received in seminary was to have Henri Nouwen as a teacher, mentor, and friend. More than anyone else in my life, Henri—whose wisdom, insights, and heart were clearly manifested in his lectures and many books (thirty-nine in all, plus countless articles)—helped open my eyes and heart to a deeper appreciation of God's blessing and the compelling need for justice. Henri began nearly every lecture by suggesting that his audience not pay so much attention to what he said (or wrote) but to how his words stirred ideas and insights in the hearts and souls of those who were listening. Pay attention to that, Henri said.

Similarly, these insights and stories are offered to rouse insights and stories within you that are unique to you, and to help you see the unseen and experience anew the urgency for justice and an openness to blessing.