Do you see this prisoner? Meeting with Sing Sing seminarians

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the September 3, 2014 issue

A minister who works with youth has one primary goal: she wants the youth to feel truly seen. If someone is particularly grumpy, the minister will say, “She just wants to be seen in her unhappiness.” If someone has drifted away from the church, she’ll offer this explanation: “I don’t think he felt seen here.” As she says, “You can’t fake truly seeing another person. People know if you really see them or not. When you truly see them you find their note, their vibration, their connection with God, and you dance with them right there.”

But it’s not always easy to see another. Sometimes we can observe someone and still not see him or her. To see someone in the fullest sense requires a receptivity and openness to the other—just who he is, as he is—that often is beyond us.

One day I stood with my friend Lillian Daniel in front of the enormous front door of a big house in a suburb of New York. In some ways it looks like a gracious manor house that has seen better days. From where it is perched, there is a privileged view of the majestic Hudson River, the same river that has inspired so many artists and once drew the Roosevelts, Vanderbilts, and other famous families to build grand mansions on its banks.

Finally, someone dressed in a uniform opened the door and summoned us inside. There in the entranceway, we were asked to sign a book—something like an enormous guest book, with yellowed pages that must have gone back years.

We showed our IDs, were frisked, and walked through the metal detector. Suddenly a woman behind a large desk barked: “Wait! I told you to wait. Pay attention! You are not listening to me. Do it again.” All I could think to say was, “Yes, ma’am.” I didn’t want to do anything to provoke her further.

I was learning that not only is it difficult to get out of Sing Sing prison; it’s difficult to get in as well. Most of the prisoners are from New York City. If you’re found guilty of a violent crime, you are sent “up the river” to this maximum-security facility for prisoners doing hard time. It’s also called the Big House for reasons I could now understand.

I was there at the invitation of Bonnie Rosborough, a chaplain at Sing Sing prison, who teaches a class offered by New York Theological Seminary. It’s the only master’s degree program offered in a prison in this country. The members of the class are studying to be ministers, and this particular course is called Foundations of Ministry. It meets for two and a half hours every Wednesday afternoon.

The students were reading *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, a book I coauthored with Lillian. The book offers personal reflections on the vocation of pastoral ministry. Lillian and I eagerly accepted the invitation; we had taught seminarians before, but not in a prison setting.

I tried not to have too many preconceived notions about the members of the class, but I was not entirely successful in my efforts. I pictured the men in the class as hardened by their experience, guarded, maybe sullen or cynical, and perhaps even scornful of the two suburban ministers coming to meet with them. After all, what would we have to say that would be of interest or relevance to their lives?

Pastor Bonnie looks something like the actress Bea Arthur in her prime and carries herself with some of the same authoritative nonchalance. As we waited for all of the security measures to be completed, I asked her, “What do the men in the class make of our coming today?” She replied, “Oh, they’re really looking forward to it. They have so little interaction with the outside world. They often feel forgotten, invisible, locked up with the key thrown away.”

We were escorted through many doors that all shut behind us with a decisive clang. I did not let on to the security guards that I had smuggled something into the prison with me. I clung to it and was determined to keep it close throughout my time there. I smuggled into Sing Sing a question that Jesus asks at a dinner party at the home of

a Pharisee named Simon.

While they are eating dinner, a woman described only as a sinner crashes the party, falls at Jesus' feet, and bathes his feet with her tears. She also lets down her hair, an intimate gesture that would be taboo for women of the time, and she uses her hair to dry Jesus' feet. Her actions only add to the scandal of her being there in the first place.

Because this woman is known as a sinner, Pharisees and other people of polite company would have nothing to do with her. The conventions were so strong that Simon assumes that Jesus must not recognize that she is a sinner. Simon concludes that Jesus does not see the woman for who she is, because if he did he would treat her as if she were invisible.

But Jesus asks, "Do you see this woman?" In this setting and in this company, it's a probing and challenging question. The woman may be right in front of them, but that does not mean they all see her. Sometimes people choose not to see. There is, after all, a cost to seeing. If you see this woman, you might need to move beyond stereotypes and preconceptions. You might have to stop simply labeling her a sinner and then leaving it at that. You might have to relate to her as a person, as one soul to another soul. You might have to respond to her with compassion.

Simon only sees what sort of woman she is. Jesus does not see a sort of woman; he sees this woman. The question Jesus asks—"Do you see this woman?"—challenges those around him to see her as well.

The room in Sing Sing where the class is taught looked like a basement room in an old church where there is a lot of deferred maintenance—cinder block walls, peeling paint, a leaky steam radiator that hissed like a snake. But I saw that only later. What I saw at first were the prisoners who got up to shake our hands, to thank us for coming, to ask, "Would you like a glass of water or some tea?" I wasn't expecting that.

We sat down. Pastor Bonnie introduced us and asked the prisoners to introduce themselves. The man in the group who has served the least time has been in Sing Sing for 15 years, while at least one man has been there for over 30 years. Some are serving life sentences.

The members of the class had prepared for our visit, and their first question was about the basis of pastoral authority. I have learned that this question often infuses one's early years of ministry, but I found it curious that it was the first question in this setting. Pastor Bonnie asked the members of the class, "What are the signs of authority here?"

"Handcuffs, badges, nightsticks," one man said. "Guns, mace," said another. So what is the source of a pastor's authority when you don't have any of those things?

Any preconceived notions I had disappeared almost instantly. We were warmly welcomed. The men were eager to engage with the book and with us. Several of them were so articulate that if you closed your eyes, you might think you were in a seminary classroom at Yale or Princeton. When Pastor Bonnie asked the class, "What is your definition of evil?" one student gave a definition that was so brilliantly phrased that Pastor Bonnie asked, "George, did you get that answer from a catechism or something?" He said, "No, I got it from my head."

At one point one of the men said, "Martin, in your book you wrote about your wife. How is she? And did she ever go back to that room where she made the banners for worship?" (he was referring to a story I told in the book). Another man asked Lillian, "How is your son with diabetes?"

We learned that the prisoners had raised over $6,000 for a local food pantry from the 22 cents an hour they received for doing menial work and that they provide back-to-school kits for each child who visits the prison. One of the members of the class challenged us, "What are you or your church doing to guide the youth? I think there is a crisis among the youth today." He was respectful but firm in following up on my rather lame answer to his question. Here, on the inside, he was challenging us to tend to those on the outside. He was concerned about justice, and not merely criminal justice.

Referring to a sinner before him, Jesus asked, "Do you see this woman?" That is the question that whispered in my ear as we met with the men in the class: "Do you see this man?" Can you clear away the stereotypes and the preconceived notions and the condemnations long enough to see this man? After all, the thick and towering walls of the prison are not the only thing preventing you from seeing these men.

As the time approached for the class to end, one of the students spoke up and said, "I'm sorry, Pastor Bonnie, but we have only 15 minutes to go. I want to make sure

we get our books signed. Then, if we've got some time, we can come back to this discussion." At that they all stood up and formed a line.

I signed each book with each man's name and these words, "With every good wish and best blessing, Martin." And unlike other times when I've signed books, I stood up from the table to shake each man's hand. I wanted to be able to look each one in the eyes and, as best as I could, to be able to answer Jesus' question: "Do you see this man?"

As we were heading out the door, George made a beeline for me and said, "Pastor Copenhaver, at some point I would like to talk with you about Yale Divinity School." (He had read that I went to seminary at Yale.) I said, "Sure, George, give me a call when you get out," although I thought it unlikely that I would ever hear from him.

Then, about 18 months later, I got a phone call: "Pastor Copenhaver, this is George. I've just been released from Sing Sing. I'm back home in Albany working with a street ministry here, but I wondered if we can talk some about divinity school." I suggested that the next time I was heading to Yale, I would give him a call so he might meet me there for a tour and perhaps an interview.

A couple of months later, I called him back: "George, I'm going to Yale a week from Friday. Might that work for you?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful, Pastor. The only thing is, I have to get approval from my parole officer to cross state lines, and he needs a little more time than that." Such a requirement had never occurred to me. Clearly, I was new at this.

The next time I gave George more notice: "Could you meet me there four weeks from now?"

"Absolutely, Pastor."

We met outside the chapel of the divinity school. George wore a blue silk tie and a neatly ironed shirt; in other words, he looked like what he was—a student dressed for an interview.

We sat together at the chapel service, and then he went off to visit a class, tour the campus and meet the person who would interview him. Later he said that it had been a good day and that he was definitely going to apply. I wished him well.

A few weeks later I got a call from the dean of the divinity school: “Martin, we have an application that is a little unusual for us. Since you are a reference, I thought I would call you. It’s about George. On the one hand, he is a convicted felon, and we have the rest of the YDS community to consider. On the other hand, we are a divinity school and, obviously, we believe in redemption. What can you tell me about him?”

So I told the dean how I knew George and what I knew about him. He replied, “Well, that’s all I need.”

The next day I got a call from George: “Pastor, I just got a call from Yale Divinity School. They admitted me.” And a month later: “Pastor! They’ve given me a full scholarship!”

Several months later I was preaching at the national gathering of the United Church of Christ. I preached on the passage where Jesus is at dinner with polite company and looks at a sinner, asking, “Do you see this woman?” I told about my visit to Sing Sing and my eagerness to see—really see—the men I encountered there.

The next day George sent me a text message: “Hi, Pastor Copenhaver. Just listened to your sermon from the UCC Synod. It moved me in a very emotional way. Thank you for seeing me. May I now see people, too. I went to Sing Sing a few weeks ago, and I hope the men felt I saw them too. I start at Yale in August. May we all see as Jesus does. What a difference we can make. Just look at my life.”

“Do you see this woman?” That question unsettles us, and not just when we’re visiting unfamiliar places like a maximum-security prison. It’s expected, after all, that socially aware Christians would feel some guilt about how we ignore the poor and oppressed and how we fail to see the marginalized.

The question comes even closer when I ask it of myself: Do I really see this man? Of course, the answer is both yes and no. I know myself well enough to know that there is much about myself I choose not to see. To see myself clearly, without illusion, would be overwhelming.

It’s a lacerating question, but also a reassuring one, for behind it is an answer: Jesus sees. Jesus sees my formerly incarcerated friend as he really is. And Jesus sees me as I really am. Knowing that can be disquieting. But when I’m able to be quiet—and see Jesus for who he is—the knowledge is deeply comforting. Jesus sees fully and yet

loves completely. That assurance is the gift in his question.

This article is excerpted from Martin Copenhaver's book Jesus Is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the Three He Answered, *to be published in September by Abingdon Press. Used by permission of the publisher.*