

Sometime when I was around 9 years old, my mom noticed I'd squint a bit and move closer to the TV to see the program I was watching. And sure enough, an eye exam revealed that I had near sighted vision and had to wear glasses, those glamorous 80s clunky plastic ones. In the years that followed the frames improved, but my vision sure didn't. Finally it leveled off when I was in high school but I'm pretty much blind as a bat without my glasses.

Spiritually, we can be the same way. Our vision is fine when we come into the world, but over time due to life circumstances, or choices we make, or just not knowing about God, it can be easy to lose sight of where we are going in life as our spiritual vision begins to fade.

What we need to remember is that God is always watching over us with love, but He also wants us on our part to fine tune that spiritual vision so we can keep our eyes fixed on the final destination of heaven, and become the kind of people we all have the potential to become.

This past week, our nation lost Colin Powel, former secretary of state for President George W. Bush and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for his

father. He had a remarkable career in the military and as a statesman, but through it all, it required keeping his eyes fixed on where he wanted to go, all the while dealing with the temptations that surrounded him growing up.

In the early 90s, he returned to his old neighborhood in the South Bronx to speak to the students of his old school, Morris High. As he drove down streets where his friend Gene Norman and Colin used to race bicycles, he thought of the pitfalls awaiting the kids living there. The drugs, the temptations, the crime. What could he say to encourage them, he thought.

As they passed the hamburger place that Colin used to haunt, he remembered his growing-up years there, the joys, the sorrows, the choices. Even then kids faced choices, he says. There were drugs in his neighborhood and a youngster could gain easy access to them if tempted. But in his family, Colin said, the decision was simple: You just didn't do it. We knew it was stupid and the most self-destructive thing you could do with the life God had given you.

Colin's dad and mom had moved to America from Jamaica. They both worked hard in the garment district, his dad as a shipping clerk, his mom as

a seamstress. He says his folks gave his sister and him structure, and direction; they made it clear they had high expectations for them. And kids Colin says usually live up to expectations.

Moreover, their guidance was buttressed by an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins all living in the area, keeping an eye on us. Someone was always watching he says. But that "someone" would be far more than just family, he was to learn.

At age 17 Colin found a summer job in a local soft-drink bottling plant at 90 cents an hour. He was thrilled. On his first day of work, having joined the ranks of other newly hired teenagers, he was full of enthusiasm. The bottling machines caught his eye, but only the white boys worked there. Colin was hired as a porter and the foreman handed him a mop.

Colin got to work. He mopped what seemed like acres of sticky, cola-stained floor. Later in life as he talked to young people who may face the same frustrations, he tells a story that mirrors his experience.

It seems, Colin says, there were three men who were ditchdiggers. They'd be out there every day, except that one guy would be leaning on his shovel talking about how one day he was going to own the company. The second guy leaned on his shovel and complained they didn't pay him enough. But the third guy just kept on digging.

Years went by, and the first guy was still leaning on that shovel telling how one of these days he was going to own the company. The second guy was still complaining about the hours and pay. But the third guy was now driving a forklift truck.

More years passed; the first guy, now gray-headed, still leaned on that shovel, saying, "One of these days I'm going to own this company." The second guy had retired on disability after a phony injury. And the third guy? He owned the company.

For Colin, that story, he says has a moral to it. It says that in whatever you do, someone is always watching. Perhaps, he says, he was conscious of that fact as a teenager, for he decided to be the best mop wielder there ever was. Right to left, left to right. One day someone let 50 cases of cola

crash to the cement, and brown sticky foam cascaded across the floor. It was almost more than he could bear. But Colin kept on mopping. Right to left, left to right.

At summer's end the foreman said, "You mop floors pretty good."

"You sure gave me enough opportunity to learn, sir," he said.

Next summer he put Colin to work loading bottles on the filling machine.

The third summer he was deputy foreman.

Someone far more important was also watching, Colin learned. The Powells faithfully attended St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in the Bronx, where Dad was senior warden. Colin says he never forgets the day when he was confirmed, the bishop laying his hands on his head and intoning, "Defend, O Lord, this Thy child with Thy heavenly grace; that he may continue Thine forever; and daily increase in Thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he comes unto Thy everlasting kingdom. Amen."

Those words gave Colin says gave him a deep assurance, and every year thereafter when he heard this supplication, that feeling of God watching over me was reaffirmed. Along with it was a sense of needing to live up to God's expectations, and his family made it clear this involved getting all the education he could. His dad had never finished high school. "I want you to do better than I have," he emphasized.

Though he was in the "slow" class as a fourth-grader at P.S. 39 and a C student in high school, Colin managed to squeeze into City College of New York. Its main attraction was the tuition, \$10 a year. His grades he says weren't the best, but he did well in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. In fact, had it not been for ROTC, he says he might not have had the grades to graduate.

The Army felt right to him, and when he graduated he was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Some folks in his family wondered: "Cousin Johnny went into law, cousin Cecilia is studying medicine, and here Colin, of all things, is going into the Army. He isn't in trouble or anything?" But Dad and Mom gave him their blessing.

Within four years of his 1958 graduation from college, he was assigned to Vietnam, where he began to find the truth in the adage that even when necessary, war is a terrible thing.

In 1963 he went to Fort Benning, Georgia, followed by further studies at the Army Command and General Staff College located at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. There he became interested in opportunities for an advanced degree in graduate school. This became a shining goal, and he decided he would apply despite only average college grades.

He says he'd come to recognize the value of striving to learn as much in and about life as he could. In fact, by that time he says he clearly recognized that one had to work especially hard for the things that were of value and importance. Out of a graduating class of 1,244 at Command and General State College, Colin ranked second. Upon graduation in 1968, he was sent back to Vietnam.

Not long afterward, the Army Times ran an article about the staff college's top five students. Again someone was watching. When his division

commander in Vietnam saw the story, he pulled him in from the field to be his operations chief.

In 1969 his opportunity for graduate school finally came. He entered George Washington University, where he earned a master's degree in business administration.

In the 20 years that followed he held many military commands and served in the Pentagon and at the White House. In 1989 President Bush appointed him Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

As his car rolled on that day returning to the Bronx for the speech, his driver's voice broke his reverie. "We're here, General." Colin looked up at my old school; it hadn't changed much. As he walked up its familiar stone steps he remembered racing up them to beat the bell. The setting for his talk to the student body was the gymnasium.

"I remember this place," he told the students. "I remember it all. I remember running through Van Cortlandt Park with the track team, the route I used to take each day from my home on Kelly Street to school.

"I also remember, upon occasion, experiencing the feeling 'You can't make it,'" he continued. "But you can. When I was coming up, opportunities were limited. But now the opportunities are there to be anything you want to be. But wanting to be isn't enough, dreaming about it isn't enough. You've got to study for it, work for it, fight for it with all your heart, energy and soul, so that nothing will be denied you."

Colin says he wanted them to make the right choices, to work hard and not lose sight of a dream. And he wanted them to know that someone is always watching.

God is truly watching us, and as I said he loves us so much. And for us all, the opportunity is there for sainthood. The question is, are we going to fight for it with all our heart? Are we going to respond to the grace that God gives us?

In our Gospel, we meet Bartimaeus. And as his story unfolds, we can see this journey he makes towards our Lord, his response, and it's effects - but at a deeper level it shows us the journey spiritually from darkness into light.

For one, he's sitting by the wall of Jericho. You might remember Jericho from the Old Testament when the Joshua blows the horn and the Israelites march in as the walls come tumbling down. Jericho symbolizes sin and dysfunction. These are the things that cause blindness. To use the story from Colin Powell's old neighborhood, he was living in a sort of Jericho but we all do; for him it was the temptations of drugs, alcohol, bad people in the neighborhood that he had to watch out for. In our culture, because the world is so blind to what matters most and morality and has this warped view of what freedom is and how all is relative, it's easy for us at an early age, being born into this world, to become blind. As such, we need to be attentive to the blind areas in our lives and ask ourselves how clearly we see truth. Various sins, be it of the flesh, of gossip, of a changing personality that becomes cold or mean or expectant, or apathy or sloth or angry/wrathful or making poor life choices, these are things that just gradually creep in and cause us to become blind.

But where is the cure? Bartimaeus knows someone is watching, God. He knows God is in the world. And Bartimaeus is watching too. He realizes that he can't save himself. He needs Jesus. Colin Powell needed God too which is why he went to church and knew God in his life. Once we recognize our

spiritual vision is off kilter without God, we can reach out to Him and He will always look for us out of love.

Third, we have to ask ourselves are the people around us helping us to see or become more blind? Colin Powell had he said people watching him - loving family, good friends, a good group of people. Unfortunately as we all know there are people who do the exact opposite. I'm not talking about that good friend you get into trouble with as a kid or a teenager - we all have stories and make mistakes. I'm talking about the kind of people who cause us to make repeated bad decisions. Note the obstacles in the Gospel. They try to prevent Bartimaeus from calling out and tell him to pipe down. In a sense, they block or try to block the road to the Lord. It's worth looking at the people in our lives and if there are people who cause us to be more prone to sin or do things we don't want to do, we have to evaluate those relationships.

Fourth, note Bartimaeus is persistent. Colin Powell didn't complain that he didn't have the better job in the bottling factory because he was a young black man or new. He didn't give up when he had setbacks in school or things didn't come easy. He kept going, going, going. He knew he was

called to something greater in life, but he had to achieve this. It wasn't going to come to him. Bartimaeus keeps calling out and refuses to go with the crowd. He seeks, knocks and asks. As we try to grow in grace, it's easy to fall back into sin. And the temptation can be to give up. Or to think well I'm doing enough as a part of this family, I'm getting by at my job, I'm just going to coast and take my foot off the gas. We aren't called to be average or mediocre, we are called to sainthood and greatness - God wants us to grow in virtue, and to use the gifts that we have been given. So on our part, even when we have setbacks or this is hard, we need to keep going to become the person we can become when we respond to that grace. Note Bartimaeus now responds. He comes to our Lord. He is called, and he takes off his cloak; it's what we do at a baptism when we put the white garment on. In the early church a person would be fully immersed and wear a white cloak for a period, symbolizing this new reality. He has this joy in responding to Christ, but it's going to take work because coming to Jesus is one thing, keeping up the journey is another.

Lastly, he becomes a disciple. He follows Jesus on the way. And odds are he kept it up. Note we know his name, which is a little unique; often you don't know the name of the person Jesus is talking to like the woman at the

well, or the man possessed by a demon. Perhaps Bartimaeus was still alive when Mark wrote this Gospel and told the story to Mark. But what does a disciple do? They evangelize and talk about their faith. Colin Powell was doing that going back to his old high school. But as I've said a million times, evangelization is serious business. It starts at home talking about our faith to the kids, helping them to learn right from wrong, knowing what's going on in their lives. It continues as people age in families, not being afraid to talk about our faith with that grown up sibling who maybe left the Church or no longer goes to Mass. It continues into our workplaces and schools through how we lead our lives and through being engaged with others on matters of faith and morals. Again, as we do this, what will the response be of the world, or even among some family and friends? The same to Bartimaeus, "many rebuked him, telling him to be silent." But if we want others to see and if we truly love others, we'll not fear speaking and living out our faith. Hopefully we are always watching out for one another.

It is a crazy world we live in, where people are so blind to what matters most and to what true happiness is, where people have sometimes given up or lost hope, or can't see God. Sometimes that happens to us too. But, God is indeed always watching over us. On our part, may we truly want to

see Him one day and see Him now in our world, and let His grace help us to truly see and respond to that grace by helping the world to see too.