

Texts: 2 Cor 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

“The most powerful human forces are found in the meeting of the face and the gaze. Only there do we exist for one another. In the gaze of the other, we become, and in our own gaze others become. It is there, too, that we can be destroyed. Being unseen is devastating, and so is not seeing.”

Those are the words of the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard, writing two weeks ago in *The New Yorker*. He was meditating on the horrific crimes of Anders Breivik who murdered seventy-seven people in 2011, many of them at close range. He wonders how it is possible to look into the face of another human being and not see life and value, and, if I may add, the divine.

Two weeks from now, I'll be heading for Aspen to study memoir writing with Andre Dubus III. Dubus wrote a book called *Townie*, which is about being bullied as a child and learning how to box and taking revenge upon those he viewed as cruel. It is also about how that revenge became a murderous cycle, how writing fiction became a way for him to learn compassion, and how he came to think about the life of the spirit.

As I re-read the book, I am reminded of the kids for whom my classmates and I had contempt when we were growing up. There was another girl in my elementary school named Janet. She was small and had very pale skin through which her veins gleamed. Her movements were crabbed, as if her spine and her joints were stiff and painful. It is obvious to me now that she was not healthy, and I think about the agony of her parents, who must have loved her and who sent her to school, hoping to give her the best life that they could, hoping that the other children would be kind. But when I was young, the other Janet seemed weird. She made me nervous because she couldn't take charge of herself and act like everyone else. One day my best friend called the other Janet a “blue baby,” behind her back and laughed. I knew that it was a joke that crossed boundaries of decency and charity. But I laughed at it because my best friend was beautiful and intelligent and funny, and I wanted to be powerful, the way that I thought that she was.

There was a boy named Mike at my elementary school. He had floppy brown hair that was seldom clean, and he wore pants that were too short and shirts that were old-fashioned. He didn't sit with anyone at lunch. The other boys ignored him most of the time, and sometimes they shoved him. One day, in the fourth grade, we went on a field trip. As the orange bus travelled down an unfamiliar road that was near the school but blocks from the street where I

lived, we passed a tiny, ramshackle house sitting at the end of a strip mall. Its roof was sinking and covered in dilapidated tiles. The front steps were crumbling. A shutter hung half off one window. The yard was overgrown. The bus bounced along the tar, and one of the boys in our class pointed out a window to the tiny house and shouted with gleeful scorn, "That's where Mike lives!" I remember that moment because it was when I understood with sudden, sharp clarity that the reason that Mike seemed odd was that he didn't have what I had, that I was rich and he was poor, and I felt deeply ashamed of being on that bus while people laughed at him.

In the poem that was our call to worship, Martha Serpas writes about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and about the tendency we have as human beings to sort ourselves into people who matter and people who don't, people who have access to jumbo planes and are able to fly above suffering because they deserve to, and people who are ugly and sick and poor and make us uncomfortable, people whom it is easier to trundle into harm's way and forget.

As Knausgaard writes, we are a visual species. We get information from what is external, from what we see. Earlier in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he writes that we have the death and life of Jesus within our bodies, as a treasure held in a clay jar, that this spirit is obscured from view by a humble pot in order to make us mindful that power comes from God, not ourselves. And yet, every day, our eyes are seduced. We are drawn to people who are physically beautiful, who seem to have their own power, and away from those whose ugliness frightens us because it is evidence of being vulnerable, of being unable to fix themselves. We see people who look like ourselves, and we gaze straight through people who don't.

I walk on the trails of the Grand Rounds near my house. Sometimes, early on a weekday morning, ninety percent of the people I pass will greet me. On a weekend afternoon, it is fewer. A couple of years ago, I began paying attention to these patterns, to who greeted me and who didn't. I smiled at dog-walkers and joggers, individuals and couples and groups, old women on giant tricycles and young men in racing spandex and small boys and girls who, given the chance, would chatter about what was in their bicycle baskets or about the fairy houses in their back yards. Two things brought me to a new understanding about how we receive each other: mothers and my bike.

A mother pushing a stroller is the person least likely to say hello to me when I am out walking. She will probably neither smile, nor even turn her eyes in my direction, but will push forward, her face set straight across the top of the carriage that shades her baby.

"What's wrong with these women?" I would often wonder. "Why are they so unfriendly?"

And one day it came to me, as I passed a woman wearing large, dark sunglasses and striding forward with a grim set to her mouth like a Secret Service agent : they are doing their job. They are protectors. They are shielding what is more precious to them than anything in the world from threat, and that consumes them. It affects how they look and how they are willing to engage with others.

In my head I protested, “But I am not threatening!” And yet, at the moment that those words floated through my brain, I knew that I was wrong. We are all threatening to those who look at us and see—by what we wear or what we carry or how we sport our hair or what color our skin is or who we are with—that we are not part of their tribe, that we might not like them or be safe for them.

Which brings me to my bike.

It has a red frame and a black seat and is squat, like a child’s, not high and lightweight like a professional’s. It is what I call an urban bike, an old-school bike. I have a helmet that I wear when I am out riding, and what you need to know about the helmet is that it is white; it has a neon pink visor; and it is covered with grinning monkey faces. It is a helmet that I bought in the child’s department at Target because I have a small head. It was either that, or a completely pink Barbie helmet.

When I started riding that squat red bike on the trails in my neighborhood, wearing on my head something that looks like a baby’s onesie, people who had never said hello to me started shouting at me every time I went out. “I like your bike!” yelled a black boy from across the parkway. Two, white teenage boys murmured admiringly as I passed, “Cool bike.” A lesbian, strolling with her partner explained in my earshot, “That’s a folding bike...” A middle-eastern man running with his son and a tall, thin, black man smoking a cigarette outside a doughnut shop both gave me the nod. A black woman wearing bright clothes and standing outside the hospital, lowered her cell phone from her ear and said, “I like your hat.”

The bike and the helmet have been revelatory to me, not because they have changed how I think about the profound worth of other people but because they have made me re-examine the threat that I appear to pose to others when I am not on the trails looking whimsical. I think, not about how people mis-judge me, but about how I participate in intimidation and threat, in making other people feel unhappy and afraid. I think about what I wear, what I say, what I do that conveys that I can’t see the light burning in someone else’s jar.

Jesus reminds us that a kingdom divided against itself will fall, that every human being is a mother to us, a brother, a child in a stroller who needs our protection. The kingdom of God is not made by hands. It is not made of buildings or bodies. It is the love that we accept from God and extend to each other. Several weeks ago, I put to sleep my two, seventeen-year-old cats, and afterwards my house was very quiet. On that day, I received an email in sympathy from a friend saying, "You are lonely, but you are not alone." This is our challenge as Christians, that we not let each other suffer alone, that we not climb into an airliner and fly away, avoiding the sight of human misery; that, instead, we reach out our hands and we look into each other's faces and see.