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Texts: Mark 10: 21a; Luke 18: 35-43; Luke 22: 54-61
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The Humanizing Gaze

Last week I began my remarks with a plea for both patience and time. Given our commitments around racial justice and reckoning, it was clear that we would need to respond to the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of five Black police officers. It was clear that we would need to respond not because, externally, anyone is waiting to hear what the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme has to say on the matter. There are more eloquent, and more qualified voices to perform that role. Rather, we would need to respond for ourselves, for what those events disclose not only about a distant city, but about the country as a whole, not only for what occurred among six men on January 7, 2023, but for what it disclosed about the humanity that we all share in common. It was clear that, if we are to have integrity about what we have declared to be true, that Black Lives Matter - that they matter to God, that they matter for the functioning of a healthy democracy and cultural life, and they matter to us, a predominantly white faith community in a predominantly white town - that we would need to reckon with what took place in Memphis.

Before proceeding further, allow me to put forth my own sense of inadequacy, in several senses. First, there is the inadequacy of words in a moment such as this. Words run the risk of trivializing, or intruding upon a grief which is not, at least directly, our own. So too, there is the inadequacy that comes from repetition. The death of Mr. Nichols is but one more in a numbing series of similar deaths, which provoke similar responses. There comes to seem a ritual sameness about it all. What more is there to say than has already been said? But then of course there is also the inadequacy that many people feel before history, and not only recent history. For generations, people have marched, agitated, taught, preached, reformed, but to little apparent effect. And the tactics that many have advocated, including, at times, myself, have been exposed as embarrassingly naive. Diversity and diversity training? Greater education and enlightenment? Stronger methods of accountability? In Memphis, they had them all. And they were all exposed as grossly inadequate. Thus it is that many of the reformist solutions that became popular after George Floyd's murder were shown to be shallow and uncomprehending, leaving unexamined the raw power dynamics of race and violence in the United States.

Mine will not be a comprehensive response this morning. I leave it to thinkers of greater subtlety and scope to propose the larger interventions that we require in our national policies. Instead, at least for this morning, I wish to focus on one particular aspect of the Memphis case, an aspect that pertains to the age of Youtube and iPhone videos, but also one that extends backwards into history, as we consider this particular species of violence. The aspect I wish to address is that of spectatorship, the gaze, and especially the white gaze. What does it mean that, with a keystroke, we're all able to watch dozens, maybe hundreds, of situations in which Black bodies are abused unto death by agents of the state? What are the ethical stakes in watching, in seeing, or perhaps in not seeing? How do we know when to look, and when to look away?

There are important ways in which the gaze, seeing, has been a catalyst for social change. Mamie Till-Mobley left the casket of her son Emmett open in 1955 in order to utilize the power of the gaze, to show the world, but especially the white world, what had happened to her son. It

was images broadcast from Birmingham in 1963 of police dogs and firehoses turned upon Black bodies that helped transform the Civil Rights Movement from a regional into a national struggle. And of course, it was a video of George Floyd's murder that catalyzed the protests of 2020. Spectatorship has been a powerful tool in resisting the violence of white supremacy.

Even so, debates quickly sprang up last Friday about whether one should watch the footage of the police beating Mr. Nichols, or whether one should abstain from watching. A.O. Scott, the chief film critic of *The New York Times* argued that people of moral conscience have an obligation to watch it. According to Scott, as vile as the footage may be, and as awful as it may make us feel, it is incumbent upon a democratic populace to confront, viscerally, the reality of police brutality trained upon Black and Brown bodies.[1] On the other hand, there were those, like the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, Rev. Adriene Thorne, who urged her congregation *not* to watch the footage, not because she or the rest of the congregation wished not to know, but rather because they already know too much, and a centuries old wound gets reopened every single time footage like that goes out. I myself chose not to watch, not this time. But the very question - to watch or not to watch, to see or not to see - got me thinking about the ethics of the gaze, the ethics of spectatorship, the ethics of witnessing, in a society where electronically disseminated lynching scenes proliferate. It's likely that by now that we have all seen at least one example of what the scholar Saidiya Hartman has called, these filmed "scenes of subjection."[2] How are those videos, those filmed scenes, working upon those who watch them? What work are they doing for spectators? Might there be a way to construe it all theologically?

James Baldwin addressed the power of the gaze, and especially of the white gaze, in a short story published in 1965 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, entitled "Going to Meet the Man."[3] It concerns a white Southern sheriff named Jesse, modeled after any number of historical figures who occupied such roles throughout the 1960's. Jesse is charged with maintaining order within his small town while seemingly endless waves of Black protesters seek to overturn the segregationist laws and the norms of that community. Jesse is disturbed, rendered sleepless by a feeling of impotence and rage over the ways his own understanding of moral rectitude had been challenged. Roaming about the town, and later, the prison he oversees, Jesse is especially agitated by all the singing coming from the jail cells. "All that singing they do," he says to himself. "All that singing." The songs constitute a form of psychic torture to this sheriff, leading him to vent his fury upon a young man, a prisoner, unfortunate enough to become the object of Jesse's gaze.

Eventually, the narrative suggests that Jesse's agitation over the singing, and his violence, are linked to an early childhood trauma that Jesse had long repressed. It was at the age of eight, perhaps sometime in the 20's or 30's that he had first heard the singing. "I stepped in the river at Jordan," the song goes up, a coded announcement to a fugitive, fleeing the consequences of an undisclosed transgression, that a posse had been formed, and that he must flee. For several days, Jesse hears the singing, until one day his father announces that the fugitive has been caught. The family - Jesse, along with his father and his mother - join the rest of town to become spectators at the ritual execution, the lynching, that follows.

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[1] Scott, A.O., "The Responsibility of Watching," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2023.

[2] Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[3] In all that follows, I am using the Library of America edition of "Going to Meet the Man," found in the volume *Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1998), pgs. 933-950.

And here we confront the underside of the power of the gaze, the power of spectatorship. Because for the townspeople, the scene of ritual mutilation and torture is a scene of difficult pleasure. Difficult because what they are seeing is unpleasant, but pleasurable in that a certain order, a certain kind of power, is being restored. Jesse's father hoists his son up onto his shoulders, that the boy might be able to see the spectacle before him. The boy is terrified, and fascinated, and also, strangely, thrilled at the sense of initiation and belonging that he feels with the gathered spectators. And then, in the climax of the story, the suffering man, eyes wide in agony, locks eyes just for a moment with Jesse. And Jesse, just for a moment, is forced to return the look. Then the man looks away. Jesse keeps on watching.

Everything turns upon that look. Everything in Jesse's character hinges upon how he responds to that moment, when, as he looks, as he watches, the one he is watching looks back. It is said that the eyes are the windows into the soul of a person. Then as now, non-violent protesters are taught to make eye contact with those charged with law enforcement, the better to forge a connection to the humanity of the other, thus reducing the risk of violence. An entire abyss can open within the soul as a result of a shared gaze. With Jesse, an abyss does open, but it frightens him. That link between his own humanity and that of the tortured man does indeed occur, but the sheer trauma of what he is witnessing forces the boy to protect against that trauma by repressing that shared humanity. Feelings of shame, horror and repulsion flood him, but his psyche quickly acts to protect him from those feelings. And so he distances himself, walls himself off from what he is feeling, by dehumanizing the suffering man, imagining him as an animal, an uncivilized beast threatening the order around him. Jesse protects himself from the painful wound of that gaze by immersing himself, protecting himself, in that strange, but also very human, feeling of solidarity and vindication that he senses in the faces around him.

It is not an exaggeration, or at least not much of one, to say that our technology has placed us all upon those shoulders, gazing upon further scenes of subjection. Footage from phones and body cameras have placed each of us in a crowd of spectators, gazing. And now the entire country sits on those shoulders, looking. The images gaze back upon us, gaze back upon the country itself, holding our eyes, inquiring of us: what do you see? What will you do with what you are seeing?

The responses are many, and varied. We do it differently now, but many of us, myself included, still move to protect ourselves from the trauma that we are witnessing. There are those who, after the Tyre Nichols beating, wished to dismiss it because it was so called "Black on Black" violence. Lurking just beneath that phrase is the conviction, not unlike Jesse's, that these must be less than human, less than civilized people. There are those in the white community who protect themselves by saying that at least it wasn't white people this time, which is a way of saying, hey, this one's on you, not us. There are those who look toward some probable cause - he or she must have transgressed somehow, he or she must be guilty of something, and however unjustified or unfortunate the means, we need forces around us that maintain order. Better that than the opposite, such thinking goes. In a wider sense, I interpret all the vitriol against so-called "critical race theory," and the will to suppress particular subjects from high school A.P. African American Studies courses as instances of the child on the shoulders writ large. Ron DeSantis, to name but one example, was a history major. At Yale. He has looked, in other words. He is an instance of the ways that our individual psyches, to say nothing of the collective psyche of the country, works to protect us from unwanted knowledge, from the trauma of seeing, of spectating, at a scene of subjection.

What would it mean, I wonder, to quit protecting ourselves, as individuals and as a society? What would it mean to expose ourselves to the abyss contained within those images, to feel them looking back at us even as we look at them, without all the familiar mechanisms of avoidance and distancing? What would it mean to hold that gaze, and to allow it to transform us all the way down, as we recognize and discover the terrifying truth of our shared humanity across that sea of spectating faces, across that digital chasm between my gaze, and who it is upon which my gaze is directed? What else might we be capable of seeing as a result?

It's not an accident that Baldwin has written what is, in reality, an updated crucifixion scene. That's a clue that we might do well to think about all of this in relation to the Gospels. Indeed, when we read Baldwin's story alongside the crucifixion narrative, we can perceive that these questions lie at the very core of Christian faith. The crucifixion is itself a scene of subjection, a spectacle designed to be seen, and watched, by an assembled crowd. Here, Jesus himself becomes the object of the gaze. We can wonder: what is happening inside the souls of all those who have gathered to watch? What sorts of psychic defenses and protections are being thrown up? For the most part, I suspect it may have been similar to the responses in Baldin's story - horror and shame somewhere deep inside, but also relief, and a feeling of being absorbed within the solidarity of a crowd, certain of its own moral impulses.

But a deeper question is, what is happening inside of us, spectators at second or third hand of this ancient, and yet all too contemporary, scene of subjection? Are we ourselves not suddenly dropped into a scene strikingly similar to that depicted in Baldwin's story? Are we not suddenly confronted with the shocking realization that, here, in the Christian narrative, we discover that God not only identifies with the victim of that lynching scene, but actually *is* the victim of that scene? Is that not the scandal of Christianity, what continues to give it its moral force? God is located there, precisely there, in a bleeding man, not because God values victimhood, or suffering as such. Quite the opposite. God is there, precisely there, as a means of insisting on the inherent dignity, on the worth, on the humanity, of those subjected to such cruel mechanisms. God is located exactly there, on the cross, on the lynching tree, not so that we venerate those mechanisms - the opposite is true - but so that humanity might be resurrected from all of that death dealing, delivered from it. God is resurrected from out of that scene so that we might come to enact other resurrection scenes - of human flourishing, of human care, of human love. God shows up there, at the scene of subjection, and is resurrected from it, so that death shall be no more, so that lynchings shall be no more, so that police executions shall be no more.

Even so, humanity has its own ways of protecting against the traumatic discovery that God *is* this man Jesus. We tell ourselves all kinds of stories that all serve as protections, akin to what young Jesse experienced - it was all preordained, part of a cosmic justice system, the result of a backstage negotiation between the first and second persons of the Trinity to remove the stain of sin - that sort of thing. Those are ways to defend against the traumatic insight that God identifies first and foremost with, and actually is found within, the body of an executed man, the body of a lynched man.

If that's what it means to defend ourselves against that insight, he Gospels hint at what might happen if, unlike the young boy Jesse, we choose to open ourselves to the gaze of a suffering man. Late in the Gospel of Luke, after Peter has denied Jesus three times, the writer adds a small but very significant detail: "The Lord turned, and *looked* at Peter," the text says. Why does it include that look, that gaze? I like to imagine that it was a look not of shame, but of love, a look that, somehow, Peter was able to receive, and to hold, even as it turned him upside

down. Whereas Peter might have walled himself off from his own shame - he wept bitterly, the text tells us - and while he might have protected himself from the trauma of what he witnessed, he somehow managed to remain open. He allowed that look to enter his soul, all the way down. And then Peter was able to reconstruct himself from the ground up, the way Paul reconstructed himself a little later, the way all the followers of Jesus have been asked to do ever since. He learned to identify with a lynched and crucified man. He learned to see in that man a bond of shared humanity. And it moved him to see those same bonds of humanity with everyone that he encountered, even, eventually, at the cost of his own life.

That scene serves as a parable for a world that can't seem to quit killing and harming Black bodies, and not only Black bodies, but also Brown, and Asian, and Queer, and Female, and Jewish, and Muslim, and Immigrants, and poor White bodies as well. I don't believe we have an obligation to dwell upon the gruesome details of the crucifixion story, and I don't believe we have an obligation to watch lynching scenes or police videos. I do not believe that. But I do believe we are asked to see. Like the blind man that is given sight by Jesus, we too are offered the gift of sight, but it comes with a responsibility. The responsibility is this: that we learn to see as God sees, that we learn to identify as God identifies, and that we learn to practice a resurrection life where human dignity and worth is reclaimed, and restored, from all that would ruin it.

Tyre Nichols was a photographer. He understood the transformative power of looking, and of seeing. I have included one of his images on our bulletin as a means of helping us to sense what else we might see if we let our own sight be transformed: perhaps just the ordinary humanity of a young man capturing the radiance of light, a moment of splendor in a city, and in a world, that scarcely knows what to do with such visions. If only those five men could have seen like Tyre Nichols in that moment.

What about you? What do you see?