

Half-Shadows, Lent 5B, 2015
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I only remember two times my father went to church with us, growing-up. And I remember both instances only because of the car rides home. The second was in Florida – when I was eight years old. All four of us kids were riding in the back seat, jabbering on about things. When all of a sudden, one of us – I don't recall who – used the phrase, *you guys*, instead of a good, southern, *ya'all*.

My dad grew-up in Memphis, and for those of you who don't know, Memphis is really a Mississippi town – and “*you guys*” is not part of the dialect. My dad slammed on the brakes, stopped the car smack in the middle of the street, and started in on us: “*You guys? You guys? Ya'll sound like a bunch a damn Yankees.*”

Years earlier, we were riding home from church – we still lived in Tennessee, then, before we moved to Florida. I was three or four – and was holding tightly to the crayon picture I'd drawn in Sunday School. I leaned against the car door as my dad pulled – somewhat slowly – around a curve – and the door swung open. I reached out to pull the door shut, and fell out. My dad jumped out of car to save me, forgetting to put it in park, leaving my older brother and sister – seven and eight – stranded in a moving car. My brother smartly slid into the driver's seat, put his foot gently on the brake, and stopped the car. Everybody was frazzled, nobody was hurt, and all I could say was, “*my paper tore.*”

Incidentally – the church we had attended that morning is the same church I'm returning home to serve – and as I said in my letter to you, the Ascension holds memories for me. But even these memories are half-memories, more like dreams, movies I watched a long time ago, all so very vague.

I just finished reading a second Haruki Murakami novel– *Kafka on the Shore*. In *Kafka on the Shore*, several of the characters live what Murakami calls half-lives – they are bifurcated, it is as though part of their essences are lost. The shadows of these half-people aren't as dark as the shadows of everybody else. But all of us – and perhaps this is Murakami's point – *are* the shadow people. At best – our awareness of reality is vague. Reality is some other world existing elsewhere, deep below the surface.

At one point in the novel, the protagonist emerges from a dark metaphoric forest, the forest of his anxieties - Only to encounter a vibrant, real world:

I ... gaze up at the sky. The world ... is suddenly filled with brilliant sounds – birds chirping, water gurgling down the stream, wind rustling the leaves. ... [I]t's like corks have been pulled from my ears and now everything sounds so alive, so warm, so close.

Several days ago, I walked past a tree - and stopped cold, because I heard the singing of a bird – only it was a bird I'd never heard before. I listen to the birds; I know their chirping. How could it be, I've never heard this one? I peeked through the leaves to find him, but the leaves occluded my view.

**The Greeks approached Philip rather than Andrew because Philip was Greek.

Philip, in turn, took them to Andrew, who took them to Jesus. I imagine Andrew said something like, *Hey, Jesus. Do you have a little time for a group of Greeks?* To which Jesus replied, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Okay.* Andrew was befuddled.

Jesus continued: *A seed must fall to the ground and die.* This time, Andrew looked over at Philip, who shrugged his shoulders. *Don't look at me; I have no idea what he's talking about.* But there were then, as there are now, dual realities: the vague superficial reality of Andrew, Philip, and the Greeks, and the precise vibrant reality of Jesus. Our life *is* vague, or as Paul so poetically wrote, *Now we see through a glass dimly ...* A few minutes later, Jesus prayed to the Father, and the Father answered audibly.

They all heard the voice, but most doubted it. Was that thunder? Was it an angel? ...Maybe an earthquake? ...Half lives, muffled sounds, opaque vision, and don't we all have cataracts attached to our souls? I remember when my own father-in-law had cataracts removed from his eyes – The one thing he said was, *I forgot how blue the sky really is.*

The voice of God, and I can't tell you how frequently the seemingly opaque Holy has frustrated me, and each time, I would discover later it wasn't God's opaqueness, but my own. How many times have you begged God to speak plainly? Not metaphorically, or euphemistically; not by thunder or through dreams? *If God would just tell me what he wants ... We want to see Jesus,* the Greeks told Philip: we all do. *We all want to hear God.*

...Ambiguity to all things divine, but one scholar wrote, "*ambiguity tests hearts.*" I don't mind telling you that my decision ten years ago to move to California as a single father of two young children – lacked clarity – I wasn't sure ... Only, I experienced this irresistible draw. And there God was, with me all along. Likewise, I can tell you, my decision to return to Tennessee is equally opaque, I think I hear the voice of God, but maybe it is just thunder? And yet, I feel this irresistible draw.

Don't think I am not anxious; but then, every movement of faith is born in the labor of anxiety like a baby. That's why its called *faith*, and not certainty. That's why even Jesus asked, *should I pray, let this cup be removed?* ...Jesus' faith born of anxiety. I imagine you will feel anxious, too – We all see through a glass dimly - But there is this perennial promise. And it is this: When life is vague, when the shadow is weak, you and I turn are invited inward, for it is all there – inside of you that God resides – In the heart, and in the soul, you are not half-shadows, after all, but complete. What you see as ambiguity, is your opportunity to trust. For, says Jeremiah, the law is already written on your hearts. And neither you nor I need to say, *know the Lord*, for each of you already *knows the Lord*. Even now, you have all you need. Thanks be to God.