

My mother always told me never to bore people with my dreams. But at the risk of violating that advice I would like to describe briefly one of my dreams. One night in the Fall of 1996, a few weeks before my deacon ordination, I awoke suddenly, as from a nightmare, troubled and shaken. I remembered perfectly the dream that had caused this unease because it was very simple. My entire dream had consisted of nothing but a young girl's face looking at me. I instantly recognized who it was, although I had not seen her, or given her a single, solitary thought in 26 years, not since fourth grade.

When I lived in Pendleton, Oregon there was a girl my age, who I'll call Renee. She only lived four or five houses down and across the street. We were neighbors and sometimes classmates, but despite that I never knew her. To the best of my knowledge I never spoke to her throughout those years. That simply wasn't something you did. She was commonly referred to by a nasty nickname. She always dressed in old and dirty clothes. Her whole family had a bad reputation. Their lawn was always unkempt and overgrown. They didn't mix with others. Somehow, through an ancient social process deeply rooted in original sin, Renee had been selected as a victim to be ignored at best, or tormented at worst.

The clearest memory I retain of Renee is of me walking home from school one day with friends as Renee ran past us, crying, followed by several boys yelling and shouting insults as they hit her with small sticks and threw dirt clods at her. I paid no more attention to this natural state of affairs than I would have to a cat being chased by a pack of dogs.

"A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." The point of this famous parable of the Good Samaritan is not the actions of the robbers who almost kill the nameless traveler. Their deed is, of course, reprehensible, but not the focus of Jesus' attention. It is the priest and Levite's inaction that Christ wants to condemn most harshly. Here are two men, no doubt in their own minds upstanding fellows, who pass up the chance for charity. They don't beat, murder, or rob. But they refuse to love, and in this omission Christ sees a violation of the most fundamental moral commandment, "you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

I don't think I ever insulted Renee. I never tortured her. But I also never noticed her. Certainly I showed no kindness when that was what she desperately needed. Today I want to speak, not of our sins of co-mission, the evil deeds we do, but of our sins of o-mission, what we don't do for our neighbor. The charity we don't give crushes lives, as I suspect it did Renee's, but it is much more difficult to identify than our sins of commission. It is easier to identify our adultery than our failure to act lovingly toward our spouse. It's easier to notice the times we speak harshly than it is to notice the chances we did NOT take to speak words of consolation to someone in pain.

Our lives are filled with living, breathing people with immortal souls, people who sit in our classes, work at our offices, and ride the same bus, with whom we interact every day, but never see – the unattractive and irritating, the shy and wounded people – like Renee -- the people lying spiritually half-dead and helpless by the side of our life's road, unloved. Today's gospel is God's warning and plea to us that we not turn our heads and walking by.

I don't think it was a coincidence that I had my dream of Renee when I did, on the eve of my ordination. I believe God was telling me two things. He first wanted me to know how often throughout my life I had failed to act as the Good Samaritan in the past so I might do better in the future. And remembering Renee did have that effect of reminding me of my weakness, self-centeredness, cowardice. It was an uncomfortable and humbling experience. It is still humbling to remember that dream because I continue to fail to see most people as Christ.

But that is, I believe, the second reason God sent me that dream when He did – to help me see Christ in others as I began my ordained service. Perhaps it was only then that I could see it. Ten years before I would not have been ready. As imperfectly as I did (and do) live out the lessons of the Good Samaritan, by 1996 I had at least begun to pray. How do we see and come to notice the Renees of the

world – those the world has chosen to ignore? Prayer is the best way. We finally see Renee when, consciously or unconsciously, we see Christ in her. And the better we get to know Christ the easier it will be to recognize Him under His disguise of you and me. And that takes prayer. Love for God and neighbor are inseparably linked. The answer to the Pharisee's question, "Who is my neighbor?" is, "My neighbor's everyone." But even more deeply, "My neighbor is Jesus Christ."

"You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself." I have no idea where Renee is now. Since that dream I have prayed for her every night. It's all I can do -- now. We must really look for, and at, those with whom we live our daily lives. Whom have we omitted from our charity or denied simple friendship? We must pray to see. We must pray in order to be able to stop and help – while we still can, for our sins of omission will not remain hidden from us forever. If not before death, in trouble dreams and memories, then at death certainly, we will be shown faces we were given to love but chose never to know, the people lying on the side of the road we passed by. And then we will remember them from the past perfectly, and in Renee and all the rest we will see Christ stripped of His disguise, and in our acts of love and mercy, and just as surely in the acts we failed to do, know beyond doubt how well we've truly loved Him – or how we have not.