

## **The Wrong Kind of Death**

“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known . . . . Do not fear those who kill the body; . . . rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul . . . .”

On the edge of a modest neighborhood, in an unpretentious house, a man lives alone. He is the sort of man who makes local children wonder. Seeing a grumpy individual come and go, children invent fantastic stories about him. In his house, they imagine, there is a secret machine. Perhaps he communicates with his base on a distant planet. Perhaps he invents new means of travel. Perhaps he is a magician who does magic. Of course, he is a spy. The stories would grow.

When we don't know who people really are, just that they are grumpy and aloof, we invent stories and give them powers. Children do it all the time. But grumpy people don't feel powerful; just alone.

Adults invent stories as well. We wonder about people who are aloof, people who seem angry, people who are sullen and cynical. Today there is much to wonder about; we live in the age of the angry loner, of isolated people with grudges. A few of these people lash out violently. But most keep to themselves, hiding whatever fuels their unhappiness. We spend little time wondering about them. Most of the time we are preoccupied. We conclude that some people are just made that way. Angry. Rude. Critical. Discontent. Cynical. We let it go at that.

In the best-selling novel, a man called Ove lives on the fringe, in sullen isolation. Life swirls around him, in a contemporary Swedish neighborhood. In his mind there are cascading memories, of his wife's premature death, of the accident that took his father, of the house fire, of the friend stricken with Alzheimer's. In his mind, and in ours, past experiences live on, with great power. We still grieve our losses. We still glory in our triumphs. There is no yesterday; there is only now.

But who would know? Not anyone around Ove. He is living life's best kept secret. Beneath the caustic moods, there is the pain of loss. The father who nurtured him, the wife who adored him, both are gone. He is left, angry, in a neighborhood of strangers. Among people who don't know his story. People who can't feel his hurt. Ove assumes no one cares, no one understands how life cheated him. He nurses his bitterness daily; meanwhile his soul begins to die.

Where is God? Where is the love of Christ? Where is faith? More pointedly, for Ove and for us, where is the fear spoken of in Matthew 10? Not the fear of what could harm his body, but the fear of what erodes his soul. He is dying the wrong death, the death of what is best in him, the death of what is God-given and eternal. He is succeeding, day by day, in isolating himself, of giving children reason for conspiracy theories, of keeping adults away. Beneath the angry exterior there is a profound, human story. But who would know? It is a secret; it is also the impending death of his soul.

All of us have secrets, don't we? All of us get nervous, even fearful, if the truth comes too close, seems too apparent. Our secrets are varied. About family issues. About personal struggles. About certain times and places and people. The memories dance in our minds. The voices still speak. The events happen over and over. And we worry about what would happen if someone else knew. Better left in secret. Better kept guarded, protected at all costs. But what a cost. As we keep the lid on, we die the wrong death, the death of our souls.

We can feel the symptoms: resignation, fatigue, preoccupation. Then frustration and anger, which the world sees plainly. We can't keep it in; then we feel the resentment. Other people seem carefree, laughing and rushing about. The angry loner sinks deeper. There are imaginary insults and slights. Hurt festers; isolation deepens. As we see all around us. It could have continued in the fictional life of a man called Ove. He could have boiled over. He might have found a gun.

"Do not fear those who kill the body; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body." Matthew may say it, but we don't believe it. We fear that someone will find out. We will be seen as we are; our defense mechanisms will dissolve. We don't want to believe what Matthew says; the price seems too high. So we muddle on, preserving our secrets, falling into bitterness, our souls dying even if our bodies endure. Who knows what really goes on inside the people who yell at store clerks, the people who scowl at children, the people who suddenly burst forth in rage.

Who would know their story? All we know is that inside a living body, one more soul has died.

In the novel, someone steps in. She is unlikely. A pregnant, Iranian woman new in the neighborhood, with her family. Things don't begin well; trying to back up their vehicle, they flatten Ove's mailbox. Being neighbors is not neat and clean; it can be messy. Ove's order and decorum are challenged; at first, he is grumpier.

But something unexpected happens. The woman of a different culture, remote from Ove's prior experience, draws him out of himself, back into the neighborhood. There is no dramatic awakening, no sudden change. He clings to grumpiness. But there is fresh connection. He is alive. Even as his physical body falters, his soul lives.

It is a happy ending; we are starved for more of these outcomes. Ove dies; but his soul lives and there is peace. That is where you and I hesitate. It seems unreal. He overcame bitterness and loss too easily. A friendly Iranian neighbor was too convenient, too persistent. The neighborhood called him back too smoothly. So, we are drawn to the story, profoundly moved by it. But we are cynical. We let it go as a novel with a nice message.

We do the same with the Bible. We let go of the Gospel as a nice message that needs to be uttered. But what will it take to bring this message alive for us? Matthew tells us not to fear – how do we do that? And how do we not fear, when

Matthew tells us that Jesus has come not to bring peace but a sword; that families will be set against themselves. What sort of answer is that? Don't we have too much of that upheaval in our lives and in our world? Where do we turn now?

We turn to the realization that we are separate from God and from one another; and we also realize that we must build anew. As people of faith, and as Americans, we have a legacy of building and rebuilding. Now that is our task.

Not simply enhancing what we have: the quantity of our possessions and activities already is staggering. Now we must build in terms of the quality of our lives and our connections to one another. The quality of life in our families; the quality of life as neighbors. This is the source of Jesus' anger; this is the threat to our souls. We say all the right things; but what is the reality of who we are?

The reality is that we are separate from one another; and separation is one of the two great sins in the Bible, the other being hypocrisy. We are willing to condemn people and withdraw from them because of their politics, because of their faith, because of their race or culture. Our readiness to separate and to condemn is our new civil war. It signals the death of our souls, as a nation and as individuals.

So, what do we do, given that we bear such responsibility for our plight? We do what an Iranian woman did for the grumpy man next door. He had suffered, and he was digging a deeper hole for himself. What did she do? She let nothing divide

him from others. By kindness. Consideration. Sensitivity. Compassion. And dogged, polite persistence.

Finally, he grasped that he could live as a neighbor again. Finally, we might grasp that we can be one nation under God, again. Ove didn't know what his neighbors' politics were; but who cares? They were his neighbors, that's what mattered. A woman from a different culture extended a lifeline to him. He rejoined the world around him. It wasn't the same as before. But his soul lived again. So can ours.

We must not allow the death of our souls. We must not fear what can harm our bodies while we let our souls diminish. We can live, together, as people of faith, even amid the chaos of our times. The world needs this witness. Our country needs this witness. Come, let us live our faith; let us be neighbors once more. May we awaken and may we be linked more firmly. Nothing matters more now.

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