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Through a Glass Darkly

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There are many images of the pandemic seared into my memory: the intubated patients prone in the intensive care unit; the nurses with faces bruised from wearing masks for days on end; iconic spaces like Times Square or the Champs-Élysées devoid of human life at high noon.

But the image that has seared the deepest is the one of a couple separated by a windowpane – one slowly dying inside a nursing home, the other desperately trying to visit. Hands are pressed against the glass, but they will never again touch their partner. Silent words of encouragement and love are mouthed but are not heard. It could be the last visit, but nothing is clear. It is as if they can only see through a glass darkly.

And this, I think, is our dilemma. Nothing is clear. Nothing is as straightforward as it was sixteen months ago. Sure, we've learned to adapt. We work from home. We move to new houses in small towns. We install gourmet kitchens in our back yards. We Zoom our family reunions, and our church services, and even our funerals. Some of us have developed good

habits: we exercise more, and we go out of our way to stop and chat with our neighbors.

But adapting is not the same as recovering; it is not the same as returning to life before COVID. Of course, we can't go back. We have lost friends and loved ones. Jobs and whole businesses have disappeared. But we have also lost, it seems to me, a sense of certainty, a general feeling that we know the way the world should work, at least most of the time. We look to the future but cannot see it clearly, at least not like we thought we could in the past.

But what if the clarity of the past was an illusion? What if the blurred image we glimpse through the glass darkly is the way it really is, at least in this life? Perhaps we've grown so accustomed to having the data in front of us that we just assume that with enough smart people armed with enough information we can work our way out of any predicament.

Now there have been a lot of smart people doing a wonderful job in a really tough situation. After all, a highly effective vaccine was available to all who wanted it a little more than a year after the virus arrived in our community. But I'm thinking more along the lines of those decisions that we need to make at a more personal level. That's where the uncertainty appears to be.

It seems that many of us are waiting – waiting for clarity that may never come. Jobs go unfilled as people weigh their options and look at new careers. Young people defer starting college. Some people retire young, almost on impulse, while others who could retire stay put, waiting for things to become clearer.

I am reminded of Hiroo Onoda, the last Japanese soldier to surrender after the end of World War II. Lieutenant Onoda held out in the jungle of the Philippines for twenty-nine years, finally surrendering in 1974. He had been waiting for orders from headquarters, waiting for clarity.

But when the only thing that is clear is that there will be a lack of clarity for a long time to come, we need to turn to other sources. There are no headquarters to guide us, but we can turn to Scripture. As St. Paul teaches us, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I

know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So "then" we will see face to face; "then" we will have clarity. But when exactly is "then"? Traditionally, "then" is when we are up in heaven, or after the return of Jesus, or some such future time, in "God's time." But as with many traditional interpretations, we need to be wary that the passage has been taken out of context.

These chapters of 1 Corinthians are dealing with spiritual gifts: gifts of prophecy, gifts of speaking in tongues, gifts of healing. Now each of us is a member of the body of Christ, each with our own gifts. But we are admonished to use our gifts humbly, in a spirit of service and of love, in the here and now.

Paul ends this chapter with the memorable verse, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

And that is perhaps the answer. It is not possible in this life always to have great clarity. It certainly isn't possible in the midst of a pandemic. It really never was and never will be.

What we can do is use our gifts in a spirit of service and love, to seize and cherish even those moments when we can only see through the glass darkly and to live in hope that one day, we will see as if face to face.