‘Just look preoccupied and don’t make eye contact, and you’ll be just fine.’

It was 11 p.m. on a July night. I was 20 years old and arriving in New York City for the first time as my Amtrak train pulled into Grand Central Station. Ahead of me was a walk west on 42nd Street to Times Square to catch the 3 train north to 135th street and Broadway in South Harlem where my friend Wells shared a rent controlled apartment.

Now since most of the stories I had heard about New York streets and subways at night sounded like they were straight from a Dirty Harry movie, preoccupation was not a problem. From my racing mind to my irregularly beating heart to my slightly trembling hands, I was preoccupied all right -- preoccupied with getting from that train platform to the safety of Wells’ triple-dead-bolted apartment with all my limbs and luggage intact.

And so Wells’ words to me on the phone the night before rang through my head again:

‘Just look preoccupied and don’t make eye contact, and you’ll be just fine.’

And I did. And I was. And of my first excursion into one of the most wonderfully diverse and fascinating cities on this planet, I can’t tell you anything except that I arrived at my destination in one piece and that on that train, somehow thinking I was fooling anybody, I spent 15 minutes looking more intensely engrossed in an overhead ad for a neighborhood hair-replacement clinic than anyone in previous human history.

Of course, this wasn’t the first time I had heard ‘Don’t make eye contact.’ It is the mantra of urban living. And practically speaking, it makes sense. When we make eye contact with someone, we make a connection. We establish relationship. We invite them into our lives. And, when we do that, we become vulnerable ... and vulnerability compromises safety.

But most profoundly, what happens when we make eye contact is we encounter each other as human beings. And that is a more rare and powerful thing than you might imagine. Our world encourages us to treat each other not as human beings but as objects to be manipulated to our own ends. But in making eye contact, we touch each other’s humanity. And so eye contact breaks down the power of objectification.

And because it does, our most profound moments are marked by eye contact -- the saying of our wedding vows, the fearful, loving parent saying “look at me” when she wants to make sure the 4-year old who chased his ball into traffic understands he is NEVER to do that again, the exciting and terrifying connection with the girl across the lunchroom you’ve been sneaking glances at when she catches your eye
for that nervous second before you both look away. The final moments with a dying loved one when we hold onto each other with our tear-swelled eyes because somehow we know that in that connection together we touch eternity.

On the other hand, when we don’t make eye contact, we remain safe and untouched. We trade the potential for the richness of relationship for the security of isolation. And, most profoundly, we deny each other’s humanity. We are more easily drawn into the seductive trap of treating each other as objects to be manipulated or avoided as it suits our getting to wherever it is we think we need to be going. We know what we want, we know what’s important and we are in control. And practically speaking, in a world driven by objectification, self-preservation and self-gratification not making eye contact is the smart thing to do.

And so we do it. We do it in our lives as citizens of a global society. We do it in our communities. We even do it in our churches. And what’s more, we are often rewarded for our efforts with prizes that we are told are the American dream -- money, power, safety.

Only for Christian people there’s just one small problem with our favorite urban mantra “Don’t make eye contact.”

It’s called the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let’s hear what it says today.

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus holds up for us the example of the Good Samaritan, who cared for the dying man on the road when others of more respected station passed him by. It’s an easy story to package as a tidy morality play -- which is why we’ve heard it 7,000 times in Sunday school and since. Jesus says we’re supposed to help those in need, no matter who they are. Case closed, break out the glue and glitter.

But while that reading isn’t wrong, it only scratches the surface of the life to which Christ calls us this morning. And, not surprisingly, it is all about making eye contact.

In his story, Jesus sets up the priest and the Levite, a temple assistant, as the villains. But really, they were only doing what was practical and expected. The injured man on the road was dirty and bleeding. According to the law, blood was unclean, and anyone who touched it was unclean -- and unable to go into the temple -- until they went through a period of purification. They knew this and that the practical and expected thing for them to do was cross to the other side of the street to avoid defiling themselves. And so they did, but they did it without even acknowledging the person’s presence. They did it without letting on that they saw the man as anything more than a pothole.

Why? Jesus tells us that they noticed him and intentionally moved away from him, so we know it wasn’t oversight. What it was of course, was that age old mantra, and we can hear them saying it to themselves as they slalomed to the other side of the road.

“Don’t make eye contact. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t make eye contact.” Maybe they were even checking the tightness of their belt or gazing intently at the sun to appear preoccupied with its place in the sky as first-century substitutes for adjusting the car radio or staring at the hair-replacement clinic ad.
The priest and the Levite looked at the man and they saw him as a something, not as a someone. He was something that was going to get in their way -- delay them on their journey, make them ritually unclean so that they could not do their important work in the temple -- so with the safety of their mantra and the blessing of society, they turned their glance away and continued down the road.

What makes the Samaritan remarkable and, in Jesus eyes, worthy of all of us “going and doing likewise”, is that unlike the priest and Levite, he took conventional wisdom and the mantra of “don’t make eye contact” and chucked them out the window. He looked on the man not as an object but as a human being, and in so doing, Jesus tells us he was “moved with compassion.” And then he was hooked. He could no longer dismiss him and pretend the man’s life had no claim on his. He was in relationship, he had no choice. He had to help. And he helped in a way that changed both the injured man’s life by giving him the aid he needed to live, but also in a way that changed the Samaritan’s life in that way that you cannot help be changed and freed when you give of yourself generously and sacrificially.

The Samaritan made eye contact. He allowed himself to be drawn into relationship. He made himself vulnerable and opened himself up to being changed by someone he could just have easily as passed by.

And to this, our Lord says to us “Go and do likewise.”

But what does that mean to us? Is this morning’s Gospel merely a call for all Christians to become an evangelical auto club, helping stranded and injured travelers? I don’t think so. In a world where avoiding eye contact and objectifying others is expected, this morning’s Gospel is nothing less than a call to a radically different way of living in each of the different spheres we live in -- in our lives as global citizens, in our lives as members of this community of St. Louis, and in our lives as part of the body of Christ at Christ Church Cathedral.

First, in our lives as world citizens. As surely as we are tied together increasingly tightly by the internet, we are tied together increasingly tightly economically. The decisions we make about how we spend and invest our enormous resources deeply and directly affect people all over our planet and the planet itself. The practical thing, the accepted thing to do is to go after the highest return on our investment, get the best bargain, to look at the bottom line. But every corporation we invest in, every purchase we make has human faces, human eyes behind it.

We don’t like to think about it, ’cause when we do it gets really complicated really fast. We would rather think of them as objects, and we are encouraged to do so at every turn, not to make eye contact, to live securely in the illusion that our stock in that company is only initials on the crawler on CNBC, that the shirt we buy is about liking the color and getting a good deal and not something that keeps Indonesian children working in hazardous conditions for less than a dollar a day.

As world citizens, Christ’s call to us to make eye contact is a call to recognize the power we have with how we spend and invest. To seek out the human faces and eyes behind the brand names, to use our power as consumers and investors to demand that we stop leaving people for dead by the side of the road and that the millions who are already there are having their wounds bound and treated with extravagant grace and love.

And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”
Second, in our lives as members of this community of St. Louis. This is a fabulous city, but it is also conveniently structured and segregated so that most of us, myself included, never have to venture into neighborhoods of poverty. And so we don’t -- after all, it is the safe and practical thing to do. Those of us who do venture downtown – say coming to church this morning – mostly don’t drive through the neighborhoods but shoot in and out on 40 or 44. But in so doing we are shielded from having to put a face, having to put a pair of eyes on the issues of race and poverty and violence that fragment this community. We’re also shielded from the richness of the gifts those communities have to offer. It makes it easier for those of us who don’t live in these neighborhoods to categorize and talk about “those people” or “that problem” without dealing with the complexities of relationship.

Even as these Cathedral grounds are a place where the “we” who are of privilege meet the “we” who are not – how often to we really encounter each other. How often to we really let each other in? How often do we really make the kind of deep eye contact that says to each other – I seek and serve Christ in you?

As citizens of St. Louis, Christ’s call to us to make eye contact is to venture into the neighborhoods of poverty and to literally look the “we” who live there in the eyes, and listen to them and learn from them. It is a call to take the fantastic history of community ministry this Cathedral has and in going even further beyond that literally to do what the Good Samaritan did, to not drive by or drive around but to gaze on people on society’s margins with compassion, to bind their wounds and love them extravagantly. To take the time to build relationship, to talk, to listen, to eat with, to invite to church those who the more practical and safe path would never put you in contact with. And even for those of us with power and privilege to give that power away within the structures of our Church. To take those among us who live without privilege in society and give them privilege in our church. To invite those among us who live on the streets in this neighborhood to be lectors and acolytes, serve on committees – even on Chapter. To view those among us who live on the streets without power and privilege not as “our honored guests” but as fellow members of this family, with gifts to be offered at the altar and for the mission of the church.

And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

Third, let’s look even more closely at our lives as members of this church, members of this Body. It was no accident that first the ancient Hebrews and then Jesus put love of neighbor in the same breath as love of God. Loving our neighbor is an integral part of loving our God. And that means our worship life together on Sunday mornings and whenever we gather is not about the individual piety of 200 simultaneous yet isolated “personal worship experiences” but about making eye contact with each other, seeing Christ in each other as we come together to hear the word of God and to be fed at the Lord’s table.

As members of Christ’s body at Christ Church Cathedral, Christ’s call to us this morning is to stand up and look around. I mean it: STAND UP AND LOOK AROUND! Look around you and behold the Body of Christ! Look at all of yourselves. Look near and far. Look at the faces who are here. Look especially at the ones you don’t know very well or at all. And when your eyes meet and that contact is made, resist the temptation to immediately look away. Hold that gaze even just for a second.

You see, being the church, being the Body of Christ IS about eye contact. Encountering Christ as we encounter each other. Hearing those words “this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for you
and for many” and realizing that THIS and more is the many. Going to the rail to receive that body and
that blood -- that new life in bread and wine -- not as individuals but as one body of inextricably
connected members. Look around you. This is why we are here.

Ok, you can sit down now.

Now that was pretty weird, standing up in the middle of the sermon and locking eyes with each other.
Maybe you felt self-conscious or uncomfortable. That wasn’t the point, but if that’s how you felt, it
shouldn’t be terribly surprising. Because all of these things are difficult for us - having promoting human
dignity and human rights be the lynchpin of our spending and investment strategies; venturing into
neighborhoods of poverty and sitting with people very different from us; standing up in church and
making eye contact with people perhaps for the first time. These things are hard work. They pull us out
of our comfort zones and defy conventional wisdom. So why do it?

I’ll tell you why. Because the parable of the Good Samaritan was not Jesus’ answer to the question, “how
do I make my life suitably difficult?” -- it was his answer to THE question, “Lord, what must I do to
attain eternal life.” Eternal, in the Greek, meaning not just or even primarily in terms of length of time,
but in terms of depth of existence, depth of meaning, depth of joy.

Christ calls us to make eye contact because it gives our life a breadth and depth of meaning not possible
in any other way. Christ calls us to make eye contact because the way of the cross, the way of radical
vulnerability and radical love is the most powerful, most incredible, most liberating force in the universe
and he longs for us to know it and feel its joy.

Christ calls us to make eye contact with each other because he longs to make eye contact with us, to share
our gaze, to feel that charge of excitement, to know that in that moment that his eyes touch ours that
together we really do touch eternity.

“Go and do likewise.”