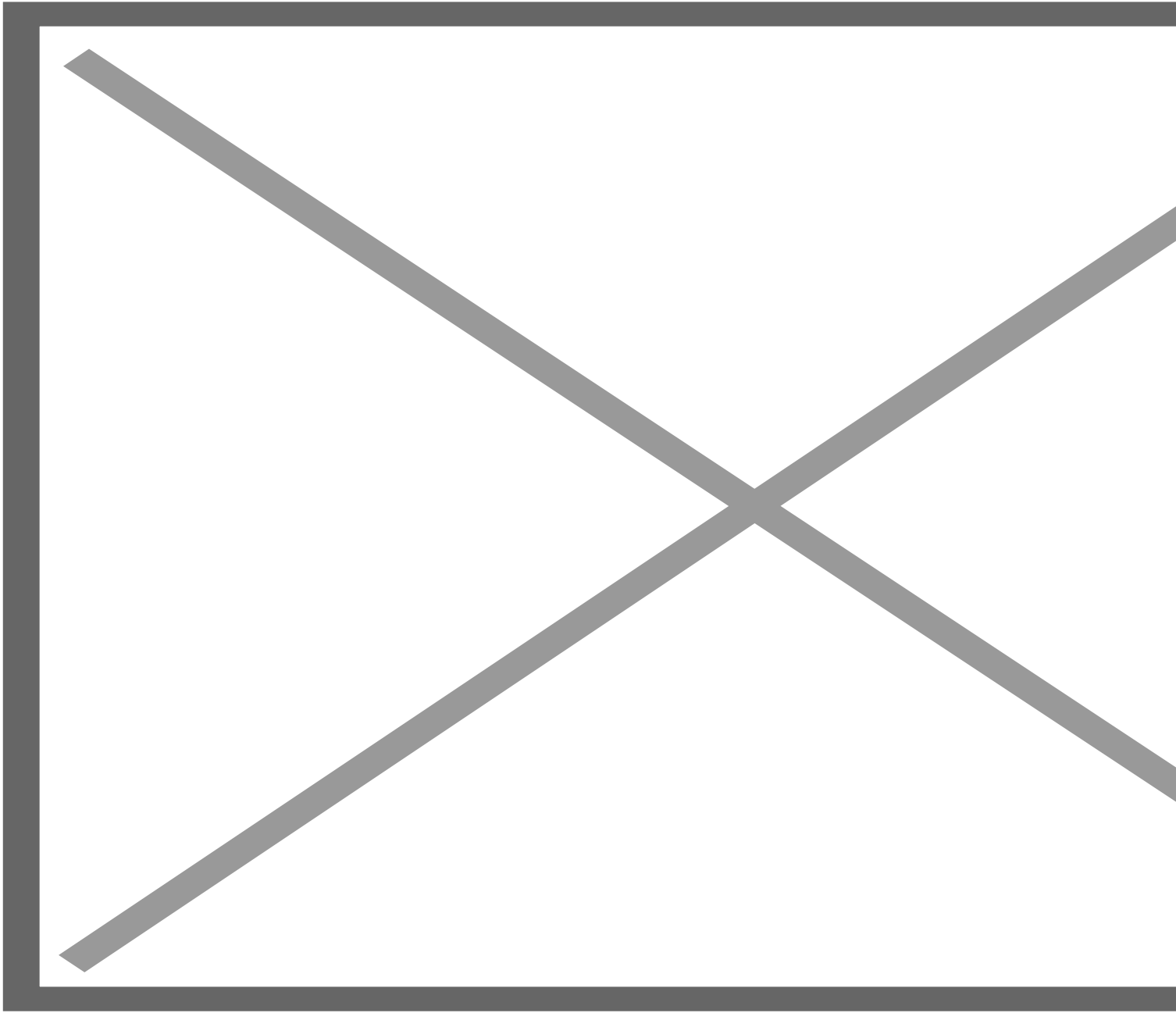


Amid cruelty and oppression, can the church be faithful at human scale?

We are all being formed not only by what we profess but by what our bodies learn to tolerate.

by [C. Andrew Doyle](#)

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty, Unsplash, & Creative Commons)

Every so often, the levers of power in this country begin speaking a strange moral language, one impatient with persons and fluent in categories rather than faces. It speaks of order while practicing cruelty. It names enemies while erasing faces.

We live in such a season now.

Ordinary rights are being suspended for migrants and asylum seekers—many of whom entered legally, filed their papers, and waited years for hearings this government never scheduled. Agents are now authorized to detain and deport in churches, courthouses, and schools. Coercive force is normalized in the name of order.

This moment demands clarity from the church: lines drawn, principles defended, prophetic imagination. But it also presses a more uncomfortable question: What kind of people are we becoming while this violence is normalized?

I have learned much from Eugene Peterson. He spent much of his ministry warning Christians about what he called the “Americanization” of faith, captivity to urgency, efficiency, and visible results. His resistance to power rarely took the form of slogans or fists raised in the air. Instead, he practiced disciplined attention. When speed becomes our moral measure, Peterson believed, we lose the capacity to see one another at all.

What is being lost is the moral practice of seeing. Rage farming, algorithmically curated outrage, has trained our bodies to react before we perceive. We scroll past faces. We sort humans into threats and allies before we have met them.

And so hospitality, the willingness to receive the stranger who stands before us, is eroding. Christian faith insists that dignity is never abstract. It is learned face to face, sustained by presence, and violated when bodies become problems to be managed rather than persons to be encountered, or worse, when humans become instruments of political power.

When people are treated as threats to be contained rather than neighbors to be loved, violence does not announce itself loudly. Often it arrives calmly, carrying paperwork. It wears a uniform. It follows procedure. It files reports.

Peterson suggests reading scripture less as a storehouse of principles than as an apprenticeship into a way of life formed over time. Due process, seen this way, is not merely procedural. It is the discipline of a community that has resolved not to rush human life past its own dignity. When such practices erode, the harm is not confined to those detained or deported. Agents and officers, judges and attorneys, neighbors and churches are formed by what they are permitted to do and what they learn to tolerate.

At the center of the Christian confession stands the body of Jesus. The doctrine of the incarnation does not solve political conflict, but it does pronounce clearly that bodies matter to God. Human bodies, vulnerable and irreducible, are not units to be managed and used but persons to be encountered.

Empire has little patience for such claims. Its logic teaches that the security of some justifies the dispossession of others. Bodies become movable, expendable, and sacrificial for the sake of the nation. But Christian faith cannot speak this way, because it has been formed by a body that refused this logic. Divine love does not coerce. The kingdom does not arrive by crushing people into submission.

Authorized violence coarsens everyone it touches. It trains us to accept outcomes without asking what they cost our souls. We are undergoing moral trauma—all of us, on every side.

This is why the church cannot speak casually about enforcement and security, as though they were morally neutral. Such measures always have texture: they are enacted somewhere, by someone, upon someone. Silence is not neutrality; it is permission.

We are all being formed not only by what we profess but by what our bodies learn to tolerate. We learn to look away. To speak about suffering at a distance. To pray without interruption. To read headlines without allowing them to trouble our theology. Abstraction becomes fluent. Compassion becomes performative. Love becomes difficult.

Our bodies must be reframed by baptism, by the life and death of Jesus the Prince of Peace, by what Walter Brueggemann called the prophetic imagination.

Restraint in the face of outrage is not merely political wisdom. It is spiritual resistance. The church's vocation is not to amplify the anxieties of the age or to cloak the urgency in theological language. Its calling is countercultural faithfulness at human scale.

Tell the truth. Speak without spectacle. Refuse language that turns people into threats. Practice hospitality not as sentiment but as learned in bodies, enacted in shared life, sustained over time. We cannot love our neighbors if we cannot see them. Fear trains us to forget this. So does the algorithm.

The gospel does not rescue us from history's tragedies, but it teaches us how to inhabit them faithfully. Jesus draws near to broken people not to manage them but to love them into restoration, refusing coercion even when urgency tempts it.

This is not the moment for the church to discover a new mission of outrage. It is the moment to remember its old mission: to witness to a God who will not save us by crushing us into submission. Dorothy Day once wrote that "the Gospel takes away our right forever to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor." We are called to share a life lived with the people now being isolated and harmed.

If we are losing the capacity to see strangers as God sees them, to love them as God loves them, and to protect and feed them as God invites us to do, then we are not merely failing the vulnerable. We are forgetting the gospel itself. And a church that forgets the gospel has nothing left to say.