

Imagine yourself deaf and blind, like Helen Keller. You can't see or hear the person sitting in the pew next to you. You have no preconceived notion of him. You can't see his sin or wrongdoing. You can't see that he is East Coast or West Coast, African or Asian.

You can't see much at all about the man. He looks over at you. He perceives your disability - your blindness, and your deafness.

He scoots over to you, and takes your hand. Not out of pity, but something deeply human. You are stunned.

He lifts your hand to his face. You are tentative; you don't know the man, after all, but he guides your fingers anyway, across his forehead – you realize he wants you to know him. Maybe he needs you to know him.

To know him and not judge him. So you follow his lead. You press your fingers into the parallel lines of the man's forehead – the lines are deep. Weather has carved these lines like canyons, sun and wind and rain and years. His life has been tough – this you can see.

Tough living, hard work, but an honest life. You feel his rough brows; they are thick. And now down; his broad nose is muscular and not fleshy, as if it holds disparate cheeks in balance.

And finally, the lips, they turn up at the edges – Ah, you say to yourself, this man has a sense of irony.

He holds the pain of life tenderly. And so it is, you experience this man without prejudice, without the handicap of sight. Sight, of course, is handicap. You see the skin and color and style and even education and social standing, but do you see the person?

Kevin Westin lives in Oakland. He talks about being pre-judged. As an African American, he is racially profiled on a regular basis. So much so that, his whole life, he has felt like a second-class citizen, even though he is fully American. That is, until last month.

Things changed for Westin, last month. Surprisingly, the change happened at the airport, in one of those innocuous moments –

He was in line waiting for the new security. You know - everyone has to go through the full-body scanner or undergo a pat-down. We are all suspects. Not just those who look Muslim or foreign or African American. Anybody might be hiding a bomb,

Westin looked around, and he noticed babies in carriages under scrutiny, grandmothers in wheelchairs, a well-dressed businessman, and a student holding a skateboard.

And as Westin looked around, he realized for the first time, he was just one among many equals, all threats, awaiting the indignity of airport scrutiny.

Now – ironically – Westin feels -- as he says – fully American.

We're all the same, after all.

We're all the same.

Which reminds me of the Bette Midler song, From a Distance. From a distance, you look like my friend. Even though we are at war.

From a distance, I can't comprehend what all this fighting is for.

Distance is blindness, or blindness is distance, with barriers of space and culture, color and education – and from a distance, you look like my friend. Even though we are at war.

From a distance, I can't see the contours of your fear, the lines of your hate or your angst.

Nor can you see mine.

We are the same, you and I, from a distance. You are my family, my friend and my neighbor.

We are made of the same basic DNA and genetic material, we want the same things out of life – security, food and shelter, a sense that life will be better for our kids.

But there is one additional thing: we long for connection. To something greater than ourselves. To know that there is more to this desert existence than we can see with our eyes, or hear with our ears.

I was thinking about the human condition, the other day, and I decided what some preachers say must be true. There is a loneliness. An isolation. That marks our time here on earth. Especially now.

In this world of wireless connection – email, Facebook, Linked-in, instant chat, Skype, cellphones. People walk down sidewalks, through malls, along bike paths and even hiking trails, texting or talking on phones – They are Bluetooth connected, but the irony is obvious, isn't it?

The Bluetooth that connects us is the very device that isolates us. People are oblivious to their surroundings – cut-off. We live in a Matrix reality, shifting and surreal.

It appears we're connected, but we are more alone than ever.

From a distance, we are alone, more than ever.

Fear Not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

From a distance, God has seen us. From some remote star or galaxy or atom in heavens and space and worlds we can neither know nor access. God has seen the isolation, the loneliness, the chronic yet reparable condition of the human race.

Could it be? A baby born in a manger in a dirty stable of barn animals and foul smells, that baby somehow bridges the chasm?

Resolves the dissonance, the gap located not in the heavens, but deep in the human soul?

Yes, that is it! This birth, this night, God has declared an end to the isolation. You and I need not be alone any longer.

The heavens were filled with the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Peace on Earth, Good will to all. And with that, God metaphorically sat down on the pew next to you, reached out a hand, to touch your face. Running kind fingers across your forehead, down your cheeks, held in balance by breath and nose –

God has felt with warmth and love the worth of your soul. On this night, the soul felt its worth.

As Pope Paul VI said (to paraphrase), Christmas is the great and decisive encounter between God and you – Let us rejoice!

Behold, I bring you good tidings of great cheer. For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.