

“No shirt. No shoes. No bread. No service.” – Mark 6:1-13
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[Lyrics from the Maryland State Boychoir’s anthem]...“If you have a song to sing, faithfully sing that song. If you have a love to show, show it the whole day long... You must be faithful over a few things...”

We are a faithful community exploring what it means to be faithful to God, faithful to each other, and faithful to the world. Synonymous with ‘faithfulness’ is ‘commitment’ – we are committed to these things.

Last week Tim talked about this faithfulness, this commitment, through the lens of that line in Amazing Grace: “I once was blind, but now I see...”

We are called to a commitment of *seeing* each other, recognizing that – as Tim suggested last week – we are all on this boat of life together.

Through a grace that really is amazing, we recognize this commitment to see – to really see – each other.

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But, my friends, churches are burning. Do we see them?

Our sisters, female African American pastors in the south are receiving death threats. Are they seen?

Our African American brothers and sisters are being murdered. And we must begin asking ourselves: Do we see them? We can blame the media for a certain dearth of coverage – but it is also our responsibility as *faithful* people to see – to prevent our brothers and sisters from being rendered invisible, to continue calling ourselves to commitment by saying over and over again, “Black lives matter.”

Sometimes we allow the way we see the world, our perception of worldly things, to be affected in ways we don't recognize or comprehend. We put ourselves at risk by adopting two dangerous opinions. The first, which I've seen pop up on Facebook even as recently as yesterday is that "racism no longer exists." I have many responses to this, most of which involve language too salty to utter from the pulpit with the Maryland State Boychoir sitting behind me. The second, and often more invasive and insidious, is that white folks are lulled by white *guilt* into muted inaction, which prevents us from bearing the true burden of owning and responding to white *responsibility*.

Because black churches are burning, and we must – we MUST – stop here and now and ask ourselves: Do we see them?

We can see how our own perception has been altered or hindered by our history and culture, just as we can see how the perception of the villagers in Jesus' hometown was hindered by their own history, their own preconceptions.

They were **unable** to see who he *could be* because they were **only able** to see who he *had been*. The carpenter's son. The son of Mary – "Wasn't she pregnant with that Jesus BEFORE she married Joseph??"

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As many of you know, my parents were both American Baptist ministers. During the 80's, my father taught at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary outside of Philadelphia – a school where many of our American Baptist leaders were educated because it was so close to our national offices in Valley Forge.

When I attend our national American Baptist Mission Summits, as I was able to do this past weekend on your behalf, I inevitably bump into pastors and national leaders

that I haven't seen since I roamed those halls of Eastern Baptist during elementary school.

When these folks realize who I am, they almost always respond in the same way: "Wait... wait, wait, wait... little Neddy Parker? I can't believe how much you've grown... since you were six. You always wanted to have light saber fights. Do you still like to have light saber fights?"

I resonate with Jesus' frustration because I want these people that I respect and care about so deeply to *see me* – not to see me as I was, but to see me as I am.

The scripture this morning suggests that the people from Jesus' hometown couldn't be faithful to him – couldn't commit to his work, because they were only able to see him as he had been, and were therefor unable to *truly* see him at all.

I'm so thankful to Bruce for gathering us together with his reflection about his experience at the Mission Summit. The story that Rev. Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins shared with us at the biennial was a powerful one. As Bruce described: Individuals in Northern Natal tribes in South Africa greet one another by saying "*Sawa bona*", which literally means: "I see you." The response is "*Sikhona*" which means: "I am here." It suggests the act of seeing brings one into existence. Those who receive this greeting are validated by being "seen for who they are."

What if that's where faithfulness – true commitment begins?... with seeing each other.

Before we say, "I love you." Before we say, "I want to help you." Before we say, heaven forbid, "I want to change you..."

What if we begin by saying, "I see you."

Because churches are burning and our sisters and brothers are being killed, and we must ask ourselves: “Do we see them?”

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As our scripture this morning continues to unfold, we read about Jesus directing the disciples to spread the word – to take nothing on their journey, not an extra shirt, not an extra pair of shoes, no bread – but to go out together to share the word. Within his direction, Jesus empowers the disciples to shake off the dust of their shoes and pass judgment over those who fail to hear.

I confess to you, my friends, that I find this passage disturbing. It is exactly this empowerment that eventually leads to entitlement and privilege. When we misconstrue this passage as a confirmation that we are empowered to judge others, than we risk assuming our own power over anything or anyone deemed “other.”

Today as we remember the ministry of our former pastor, Rod Romney, whose hymns (like the gathering one that we sang this morning) continue to bless us in worship, we also remember his words. In his book, *Love without Conditions*, he wrote: “Although true believers espouse a passion for saving souls, they generally hold contempt for the very ones they are supposedly trying to convert. They fail to see the inconsistencies in their behavior that ignore the mandate of the gospel of love.”

So this morning I wonder, what if we used another passage as lens through which to view and interpret this one? In Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who pray at the temple. In this parable, Jesus himself warns of the dangerous temptations of privilege and entitlement.

Instead of inserting ourselves into the role of the disciples in our passage this morning – an assumptive insertion generations of Christians have made – what if we placed ourselves in the role of the homeowners who would be welcoming them on this journey?

Instead of the demanding and judgmental guest, what if we assumed the role of host – meeting and welcoming people where they are? Recognizing our own privilege, and the fragility **that** privilege is balanced on, perhaps instead of arriving without clothing and shoes and bread and *expecting* others to provide for us, we should be the ones offering those provisions.

Because as a church committed to the good work of social justice, if we're not providing shirts, shoes, and bread, then we risk not providing service at all. And we do provide these – I hope in both literal and metaphorical ways. We participate in the loaves and fishes ministry, and we feed our neighbors experiencing homelessness during the 4th of July picnic (as we did yesterday), and we share responsibility for the thrift store. But we also provide people the sure footing to help them along the winding road of recovery, and the garments they need to feel accompanied during the long dark nights of the soul, and the spiritual bread to sustain through any toils and snares that might exhaust and deplete them.

But it requires a certain vulnerability to be the host that welcomes the stranger.

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Before killing:

54 year old, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd who was a Bible study member and a town librarian

87 year old, choir member, Susie Jackson

70 year old, Ethel Lee Lance who was the church sexton

49 year old Depayne Middleton-Doctor, a pastor and also admissions coordinator at Southern Wesleyan University

41 year old church pastor and state senator Clementa C. Pinckney

26 year old Tywanza Sanders, who was there with his aunt Susie (also killed) during Bible study

74 year old pastor Daniel Simmons

45 year old pastor, speech therapist, and high school track coach, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton

59 year old Bible study teacher Myra Thompson

...before taking the lives of these nine beloved church members, police reports tell us the killer nearly had a change of heart. He almost changed his mind because these faithful people were so kind to him.

Because of their own faithfulness, the church and families have already stated publicly they forgive him. Forgiveness in this scenario is something I will continue to struggle with.

But I do think the ongoing testimony is that after an hour, he almost changed his mind. One hour of welcoming and loving this man nearly undid a whole lifetime of racist indoctrination. When he arrived at Mother Emmanuel, the members there weren't people, they were merely abstractions; their humanness distorted by hate. He could not see them. But after an hour, he began to. He began to see them.

He began to see them, and what took years of mental and emotional infiltration was nearly undone. What if he had waited another hour? A half hour? Five more minutes? Would he have really seen them, and then changed his mind for good?

We could trace the indoctrination that brought the killer to this place back a few hundred years to the moments our ancestors began to use our Bible as a tool of power to be unleashed on slaves as a way of spiritually, mentally, and emotionally shackling them in a way physical chains already had.

With due diligence, working carefully enough, we might even look back and see how this morning's scripture justified the judgment the killer passed over this congregation of faithful people. But he did not stop with his own judgment at merely shaking the dust from his shoes.

If we did this research and reflexive work, we might be confronted by both White responsibility, yes – but also Christian responsibility.

We are in a tenuous and fragile place as a nation – a place where the visibility of the 'other' is masked by our own inability to see each other.

And yet, good things are happening... With the Supreme Court's recent decision, we learned that the long moral arc bending toward justice can look an awful lot like a rainbow.

Beautiful victories like this one should give us courage and help us understand that seeing isn't just believing – seeing is acknowledging, seeing is validating, seeing is justice at an intrinsic level.

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This August will mark one decade since that summer day I was hit by a car in Western Massachusetts. Many of you have heard the story – or what little of it I remember. One of the things I do remember, as I lay there broken and bleeding was the voice of the woman driving the car that hit me... Over and over again, she moaned as she sat on the side of the road, “I didn’t see him. I didn’t see him. I didn’t see him. I didn’t see him...”

These ten years later, I sometimes wake up in the morning and hear her voice echoing around in my head. “I didn’t see him.”

As the national post traumatic stress disorder of racism continues to unfold – even after hundreds of years – we must ask ourselves if we want to be haunted by similar words: “We didn’t see them. We didn’t see them. We didn’t see them.”

Can we offer shoes, clothing, or comfort – can we offer the bread of life or the cup of blessing without seeing, really seeing people - without recognizing who they are and who they could be?

I know we have already paused in worship to welcome one another. But, I wonder if we might pause again, before we faithfully break bread together, to see – to really see who’s sitting around us.

To do this work, we must recognize the power of presence and to honor our faithfulness to the inherent worth and dignity of all who gather in this place, and then pray that from this moment forward, it continue to be so...

In faithfulness to this community, my friends, I wonder if you would please stand as you are able and greet each other with that South African affirmation and validation of

personhood, saying to those around you, "I see you," and then by responding, "I am here."

Prayer Following Communion:

Faithful God,

When I said, "I am hungry, where can I find food?" You gave me bread. Even in the wilderness, where sustenance is scarce, I was sustained. And I was not satisfied.

When I said, "This bread is dry and tasteless, how can I eat it?" You gave the fruit of the vine, and honey, and figs, and pomegranates, and olive oil. And still, I was not satisfied.

When I said, "I am tired and hungry, where can I sit to eat?" You gave me a sanctuary, and comforted me with music and psalms. When I said, "I have no one to eat with; who will share my bread with me?" You gave me community. Where we share bread and rest together and sing songs. Where we stand – no longer invisible – but seen and seeing. Our humanness is validated and we are finally satisfied.

My heart wells within my chest.

Thanksgiving is on my lips where the crumbs of bread still stick sweetly, reminding me that "All we have needed your hand has provided...." Great is your faithfulness because you have given bread, and friends with whom to share it. We are, for this passing moment, satisfied. Even in the world's bleak wilderness, we stand in the oasis of this sanctuary, bearing the fruit of change, holding out the bread of life. Great is your

faithfulness, o God, our strength for today and brightest hope – our greatest vision for tomorrow.

May it continue to be so.

Amen.