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Text: Luke 18: 35-43  
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### What Do You See?

Spend enough time in the New Testament, and you realize that it is obsessed with questions of seeing: who can be seen, who is not seen, whose sight has been taken, whose sight has been restored, and what the sight of particular objects or places might disclose. There's the beginning of Luke's Gospel, in which Jesus announces his intention to grant recovery of sight to the blind. There is the Apostle Paul, who loses his sight and then has it restored after the third day. There's Peter, who needs to see the empty tomb with his own eyes, and there's Thomas, who refuses to believe until he has seen his risen Lord. And of course, there are those born blind who Jesus heals, as in the story we heard earlier from Luke. A man born blind wishes that he might see, and Jesus fulfills his request: the man receives his sight.

Of course, in the New Testament, recovery of sight for the blind is never solely about one's physical sight, though that's a part of it. Recovery of sight in the New Testament sense has more to do with being given new eyes, so that new and different realities become apparent, realities that had previously remained hidden from sight, invisible, imperceptible. Recovery of sight, in the New Testament sense, isn't like going to have one's prescription adjusted at the optometrist. It's about acquiring moral and spiritual vision, so that you're able to perceive what other people simply cannot see, or don't wish to see, or know how to see. In particular, recovery of sight, in the New Testament sense, is about being able to witness the people, and the social realities, that narratives of progress, that narratives of uplift, or success, tend to ignore. In the New Testament understanding of blindness and seeing, we all, as human beings, tend to miss certain things that God would have us see. Each in our own way, we are all the blind man asking Jesus to grant us vision, to grant us sight, that we might discern those realities that too often remain undisclosed.

That's a way of describing the process we undergo whenever we as a community of faith visit another part of the world. It's certainly true of our Tree of Life journeys, which many of you heard about last week. Too often, the discourses and rhetoric surrounding the creation, and the defense of Israel, have rendered us blind to the realities of the Palestinian people. But it's also true of what we've been attempting to do in our explorations of racial justice in this country. In fact, that's precisely why 16 individuals from this community traveled to New Orleans last week. It was an attempt to see beyond surfaces, to witness the world through different lenses, to access a vision of human life that, too often, is simply imperceptible to us.

Here's what I mean: One of the very first things we did as a group was to visit the French Quarter. It's an undeniably charming place, wholly unique in the United States, and it has rightly exerted a fascination for people drawn to its architecture, to say nothing of its food and music. But an astute and very insightful teacher, named Mr. Leon Waters, guided us through a mobile pedagogy - a walking tour - that functioned precisely as the stories in the New Testament do, when the blind receive their sight. Where many people see an environment that feels exotic, and visit the Quarter to release their social inhibitions, Mr. Leon taught us to see with different eyes, perceiving the social history - the humanity - contained in those buildings. It's a social history that continues to play out to this very day. He showed us the African symbols built into

the ironwork of French Quarter buildings. He showed us where public executions took place. He showed us where slave pens once stood. He showed us where human beings were inspected, bought, and sold in an auction house - that site is a boutique hotel now, operated by Omni. I wonder how many of those who stay there realize that they're sleeping in a former slave market. It's like sipping a cocktail and then retiring to your room at Dachau.

Toward the end of our tour, Mr. Leon stood us on a corner, outside a restaurant called Pierre Maspero's, crowded with people enjoying lunch. That's when Mr. Leon told us the history of Maspero's. Pierre Maspero was a slave trader, and the building had once been called Maspero's Slave Exchange. In the 1970's, Mr. Leon told us that he and his friends were visiting the French Quarter - a rare occasion for them, for while Black people might work in the Quarter, they're not really welcome there, he said. In any case, they were passing through the Quarter, and they noticed implements of slavery decorating Maspero's restaurant - iron collars, metal mouthpieces, whips, and brands. He said they couldn't believe their eyes. And so the next day, they returned with some 30 people, and they shut the restaurant down, preventing people from entering. The implements were eventually removed, but to this day, the restaurant bears that name - Pierre Maspero - together with a sign outside that proudly says "Established in 1788." Established, that is, as a market for human flesh.

Here is the point: from one vantage, with one set of eyes, the buildings of the French Quarter convey old world charm, beauty, elegance, and refined taste. But that is to evince a kind of willful blindness. That is to see using the spectacles of white supremacy. To see in a deeper sense - and here I am using that verb in the New Testament sense - is to look past appearances, so that one can witness another kind of story emerging. It is a story of pain, and of unimaginable cruelty. It is a story with tendrils that reach out from the past, wrapping themselves around the present. Most importantly, however, it is a story about learning to see with the eyes of the heart, to see the human lives and stories that remain hidden when we merely gaze at surface appearances.

That is, in a nutshell, what we were in New Orleans to witness. Yes, the music is amazing, but contained within each note, within each chord, is a deep history of struggle. Yes, the suits of the Black Masking Indians are gloriously beautiful, but they emerge from a long tradition of resistance to, and defiance of, white supremacy. We were granted access to a culture that few outsiders get to witness. And it comes with a responsibility to tell the stories, and to let what we have seen and heard work its way deep into our being, that we might do our part to overcome the legacies of white supremacy that continue to cling to us all.

To help share a little more of what we witnessed in New Orleans, I've invited two of our travelers, Jill Harned and Barbara Smith, to share something of what they experienced.

(Jill Harned and Barbara Smith)

Toward the end of our visit, our group sat down with the author and filmmaker Jason Berry, whose film *City of a Million Dreams* we screened here at FCCOL about a year ago. Jason talked about how after the collapse of Reconstruction, the history and culture of Black Americans was suppressed, as monuments to the Lost Cause were erected around the city, and as white terrorist organizations began to spring up to lynch and otherwise intimidate African Americans. He shared that, in his estimation, early jazz and the Black Masking tradition, which both developed at precisely the same moment those Lost Cause monuments were going up, should be heard and understood as a counter-narrative to Lost Cause ideologies.

He then drew parallels between the suppression of Black history and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and a very similar suppression occurring today. He noted the appalling efforts in Florida to control the curriculums of universities, with an unprecedented assault against academic freedom. He noted the edits made to AP African American history courses - also initiated by Florida. And he noted the ways local school boards and libraries across the country were under attack for carrying books portraying the full complexity of LGBTQ lives, as well as full and forthright accounts of the history of the United States. There are those who wish us to be blind.

It turns out this hits close to home. Here, I feel I must apologize for what I am about to say, but it must be said. Just as we were preparing to leave for New Orleans, a letter from the Republican Town Committee of Old Lyme arrived in my mailbox, as it did in every single mailbox in town. It listed the platform of the Committee in language that sounded, on the face of it, relatively innocuous. One item, however, was alarming. Item five of the local Republican agenda reads: "Standing up for parental rights in the town's school system regarding the school's curricula and student policies." That's a dog whistle. It's a coded way of saying that the book bans and curriculum censorship that Republicans have been pursuing in other parts of the country will be attempted here. It's a way of controlling the teaching of history, policing which truths can be told, and which lives can be seen, and recognized. It's a way of remaining blind to social dynamics, and to human lives, that complicate easy or facile versions of our national story. Though often undertaken in the name of preserving some notion of faith, or some notion of the United States, such language is a betrayal of both faith and democracy. My quarrel here is not with Republicans per se, though they have given us much to quarrel with of late. Some of those I have loved best and most in my life have so identified. Rather, my quarrel is with book bans, and the spirit of censorship, particularly regarding marginalized populations. Such practices stand in opposition to everything I believe as a Christian. Everything I believe as a citizen. Everything I believe as a human being.

That's why the work we do around here is so important. It's why journeys like the one we took to New Orleans, or to Palestine, are so very necessary. It's why our efforts to tell the truth about the North and its legacy of enslavement is so vital. It's why our efforts to tell the truth about Old Lyme, and its origins, and to tell the truth about the very street on which our church is located, is so very important. It's why our efforts to tell the truth about our origins as a faith community are so very necessary. Those represent efforts to live into "seeing" in the New Testament sense of that word, so that lives and stories that were once rendered invisible - especially Black and Indigenous lives, though not only Black and Indigenous lives - can come into focus. With that act of seeing, other things follow - empathy, mutuality, acceptance, and yes, democracy itself, which requires constant practice and care.

We'll close with the hymn that our travelers sang together when we attended church in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans last week: Amazing Grace. It was written by John Newton in the late 18th century, a former slave trader who could not see or understand the humanity of the captive Africans that he treated as chattel. But then, like the Apostle Paul getting knocked off his horse, he somehow came alive to the humanity of those he had once disregarded. "I once was blind, but now I see," he famously wrote.

We too are trying to see. We too pray, like that blind man on the Jericho Road, that Jesus might grant us sight, which is to say, the ability to see the humanity concealed behind the surfaces of buildings, stones, monuments, songs, and artistic creations. We too are those in need

of sight. We too are those in need of vision. We too are those in need of the grace that such vision implies. When we open our eyes, we see Jesus, and a whole lot of other people as well.

Just before we left the city, we visited Demond and Alicia Melancon, artists within the Black Masking tradition. They're at the top of their game. They invited us into the inner sanctum of their world, and showed us the scorching beauty of their art. As we were preparing to leave, Alicia said, as if in benediction for our entire journey, "Don't forget about us."

We shall not forget. We cannot forget. We have been blind...but now we see.