

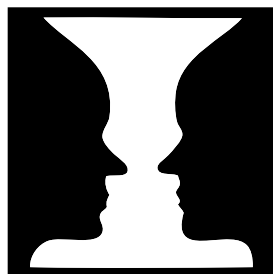


## Differing Realities

One challenge for a monthly column is timeliness. Given lead time, a piece might not be printed until weeks after a significant event has taken place. That delay can also be an advantage. The intervening weeks provide an opportunity to look yet again at an incident of consequence, here the Trayvon Martin–George Zimmerman verdict.

What do you see in this image?

Some will say two people facing each other. Others will say a candleholder. Both are right.



This image is not an optical *illusion*, where something is different than what it appears to be (such as stick drawings where one line looks longer than another when both are actually the same length). This is about optical *perception*, how the brain factors spatial information to make an orderly determination. Some begin at the outside and move toward the center. They readily see the two people. Others are drawn to the center and work to the edges. They easily see the candleholder. Both perceptions are entirely correct insofar as they go. However, for each, a second accounting reveals something additional. This does not negate either, instead pointing to a both/and.

The churning in my own stomach following the verdict came as commentators and conversations quickly polarized into either/or interpretations: “candleholder” backers decrying the “two people” proponents, and vice-versa.

I was grateful when President Obama spoke to the reality of the duality. On the one hand, the verdict could be singularly seen as a narrow judicial decision based in reasonable doubt. This view is the inclination of those whose cultural experience with the criminal justice system has been largely trustworthy. The prosecution and defense both had their day in court, capable legal counsel argued the case, and a jury verdict was rendered. Do you not see the “two people”?

On the other hand, the verdict could be seen as fitting a pervasive pattern of racial disparities

in the application of criminal law. Would the same verdict have been reached were the roles reversed? It is a fair question, and one that I cannot answer with confidence. Further, the verdict awakens fear for the safety of anyone (and more so their mothers) who knows what it is like to be eyed warily, to be presumed guilty of malicious intent. The verdict was painful, made more so by a general societal lack of acknowledgment that there is long-standing context for that pain. Do you not see the “candleholder”?

I am one whose personal background makes it easier to see the first perspective. But people in this church have helped me see more.

Several years back Don Davenport, an African American colleague living on the far south side of Chicago, and I were scheduled to meet at Covenant Offices on the far north side. It would take Don ninety minutes each way. He called me from his car when he was getting close, saying he would have to turn around and go all the way home to retrieve his wallet which he had forgotten. He dared not risk being stopped without his identification. It never would have entered my mind to do the same. I began to listen more closely and look more intently. Over time I have begun to see there are indeed differing realities that stand side by side in this multiethnic mosaic we are in the Covenant.

In embracing that in the Covenant, we are proving to be stronger for it. Not only are we more reflective of the kingdom of God, but we are better positioned for ministry. There is a very real pace-setting dynamic to being a multiethnic movement. This means that as we are increasingly diverse, with each person we gain additional expertise, insight, and passion to initiate and strengthen ministry opportunities we would not have been prepared for otherwise.

An image of two people facing each other interposed by a candleholder. Hmm. If we see it all, perhaps we can indeed be the light of Christ to a fractured world. There, can you see it now? ■

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