

Mirror Mirror

Proper 17 - James 1:17-27, Mark 7

Slide: Disney's Snow White

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?" Most of us probably know the famous 1937 Disney version of the story of "Snow White", but even if we don't, we usually know the famous line, "Mirror, mirror on the wall" was uttered by a wicked queen, who was used to receiving from the mirror unconditional affirmation of her beauty; until one day, she hears to in her rage that she no longer is the fairest, but rather Snow White is.

Slide: Chess Piece in mirror

Somehow and in some way, however, it's a little bit of a reminder of a reflection of our own human tendency, whether we can admit it or not, that we, not to mention likely all others, have a natural tendency towards pride. As a protective mechanism for survival, and in a culture that values

superiority, we naturally wouldn't mind to have a mirror tell us we are the best at everything compared to our neighbor who is not. Oh, we would be as humble as humble pie about it, but of course we wouldn't deep down love to be best: best hair, best chocolate chip cookie baker, best singer, best leader, best teacher, best student... In Snow White's version of the magic mirror, the mirror never lies. But, I'm certain that I would probably prefer that the mirror tell a few white lies for my sake, wouldn't you?

Slide: Lake Wobegon

Psychologists today actually call this the Lake Wobegon effect. If you don't know where that place is, it's based upon the Prairie Home Companion fictional place, a place where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. This tendency to think of oneself as superior over and above others is also accepted in our culture. In fact, it just may be encouraged.

Much of the research pans this out and it explains why, for instance that people with very marginal talent may be deeply shocked that they should be cut from American Idol. How could they be when they think they are the best? This, of course leads to a lack of self-understanding and perception.

Slide: Who are you to judge

But, the most unfortunate part of that is that if I am to believe I'm the best at something, than others must be the worst. This is called "downward social comparison", seeing the negative in others, being the critic of others, so that we may feel better about ourselves. It's a catch 22 really. On one hand, we have a high opinion of ourselves over and against the neighbor, especially the neighbor who thinks and acts differently than I. But, on the other hand, we deep down are afraid we are not superior, leading ultimately to a horrible self-criticism. The inner critic can also be as bad as the outer critic of others.

All in all, the mirror is a place where, metaphorically, we must grapple with a few realities. The writer of James says, that when we are in front of a mirror, we are to clearly see who we are, so that we may when away from the mirror, listen with our hearts, and love the widow and orphan who are in need.

Slide: James

The book of James was written, likely in the 2nd century, and during a time that the church was firmly established in Jerusalem. By this time, it was clear that the church was challenged by very similar challenges as any church might, especially in a decadent or hierarchal society. Throughout the book, James speaks especially about tensions between the rich and the poor. The people of God were favoring the wealthy and pushing aside the poor, likely to jokey for positions of power and wealth. And, there was the tendency of the wealthy to hold just wages from workers. This is why James is deeply concerned about the appearance of hypocrisy.

When looking in the mirror, he says, don't speak Christian and then go away from the mirror in pursuit of superiority against all others, especially the poor. Really, he is speaking the classic problem of sin, the turning in on oneself over and above any other. The Christians during the time of James had a little bit of the "mirror, mirror on the wall, whose the fairest of them all" conundrum. How can you be fairest or best without seeing others as worst or least? And in the case of James' church, the poor were the worst, the wealthy were the best.

Slide: Walk the Talk

"Be doers of the word and not merely hearers of it," James tells us. So, too, Jesus reminds the Pharisees in the Gospel reading of today: "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come."

So, when you stand in front of the mirror, and in this case, I don't mean to look merely at your physical self,

what do you see? What do you hope to see? Do you see yourself clearly and realistically, able to see where God does gift you with unique abilities and talents? Do you criticize what you see? Do you criticize and gossip about others? Do you compare yourself to others? Standing in front of the mirror as a Christian who loves the neighbor as also yourself, are you able to see what God does?

Yet, what if...Let's take the metaphor of our image in a mirror in a different way. What if we were to change what image, what appearance we see in the mirror? How would that change us to be doers of the word and not merely hearers? All of us, unique individuals with unique vocations, lives, genetics, we all of us look different in the mirror from each other, and often when we leave that image we see, we can get mired in the difficulties of living a Christian life throughout the day.

Slide: Seeing and reflecting

Yet, all of us, unique though we may be, all of us

have one thing in common with our image that we cannot compare or contrast with other. This unique quality we cannot be better at or be more self-critical about. This unique quality is...we are all made, loved, redeemed, and created in the image of the very God we worship. Despite the differences of our appearance in the mirror, despite how deceiving that appearance can be, we are all still Children of God.

Slide: Image Bearers

What if when looking at our image in the mirror we saw God's image instead of our own when looking back? What would happen if when looking at ourselves we saw the image of God imprinted upon us? If we are focused upon seeing God when looking at our appearance, how different would that be when we go away from that reflection? How would we treat ourselves if we saw ourselves as a walking, talking image of God? How would we treat others if we saw them as walking, talking images of God? Would we still leave the mirror

without being doers of God's word?

Slide: Every person...

Something tells me that it's about our focus. Quite frankly, I think this is what the writer of James wants to do, too. He wants his communities to love God, love the neighbor, and be God's people and he writes his letter to his church to help them refocus, to refocus away from appearing righteous to being righteous, from being superior to pointing to the one who is. One way to do this is to know that in our very insides, we are made in the image of God. Knowing that God loves us that much, we can only respond to God's word, not because we have to, but because we want to.

In the Gospel lesson from today, Jesus tells the Pharisees, who have the appearance of righteousness that being right with God is not about what you see on the outside. It is what is inside that counts. Therefore, it's kind of like growing in faith from the inside out. It is in the guts, the primary stuff within us, where we first know our

need for God. That need for God is so great, that no matter how much we may get caught up with our desire to be best on the outside, we may come back to God daily in forgiveness and acceptance.

Slide: Baptism

Today, we (had) are having a baptism. The water of baptism, the water in this font, is like a mirror, reflecting the divine face of God. This image belongs to Levi. It belongs to you. And, in these waters, God promises that you can start each and every day new and as you are - a beloved child. Sure, we all struggle with that mirror. We can struggle to see ourselves in it and also struggle to see the neighbor in it, to see that image of God reflecting back. But, washed and cleansed each day, we have the true image reflected back at us - and that image is indeed the fairest of them all.