

THE MIRROR

Sermon for Pentecost 14B—Jas 1:17-27. Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

LPC, 8/30/15

History Lesson!

In the “good” old days you could break all Ten Commandments before breakfast, and as long as you had enough money, you could contribute toward building a cathedral, or finance a crusade, and you’d be all right with God. This was called selling indulgences, and it was a very effective fundraiser for the church.

Now there is a shred of good theology here. Christianity is a religion of “second chances.” Remember that “The Lord desireth not the death of a sinner but that he turn from his wickedness and live.” In a way, the church was making available the ready forgiveness of God.

But there were several problems with the execution of this policy. For rich people it was license to sin freely. You could continue to do all those things listed by Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson from Mark: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly, and things would be great as long as the money held out. Poor people could just wallow in guilt, unable to pay adequately for the forgiveness of their sins.

Along came a young man called Martin Luther who called the sale of indulgences a travesty and preached justification by faith alone. Luther said that a person’s works, no matter how virtuous, cannot buy salvation or forgiveness of sins. Only God can save. And there’s definitely good theology here. Salvation depends on God alone. We don’t and we can’t earn it by either money or good works.

This is clearly Jesus’ message to the Pharisees, who fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Jewish laws of purity and considered themselves righteous, while neglecting God’s basic commandment of love of neighbor. Jesus came down very hard on the “works righteousness” of the Pharisees. Luther was right to call the church on encouraging works righteousness among Christians.

But Luther then had a huge problem with the Letter of James, which we also heard this morning. James emphasizes the *doing* of the word. Hearing the word is not enough. Faith is not enough unless it bears fruit in action and attitude. This reasoning was so inconvenient for Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone that Luther called James “an epistle of straw.”

The problem, I think, arises when you try to drive a wedge between faith and works. James’ point is that faith and works go together. A person of faith performs works of faith. A person of faith reflects that faith in being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, and in caring for the needy.

James compares a person of supposed faith who does not reflect that faith in actions to someone who looks in a mirror and then, in going away, forgets what he or she looks like. Let’s explore this mirror metaphor.

Do you remember the ending of the classic movie *Bullitt*? In this movie Steve McQueen plays a San Francisco police detective investigating a series of murders. The deeper he gets into the investigation, the more sordid the case becomes, involving corruption at high levels. His girlfriend challenges him on how he can remain untouched by all the ugliness in which he works. At the end of the movie, with his girlfriend asleep in the next room, Steve McQueen stares at himself in the bathroom mirror, clearly contemplating his girlfriend's challenge.

A mirror is a metaphor for the reflection of the soul. When we look in a mirror we cannot avoid what we are. That's why, as we age, some of us begin to dislike mirrors rather intensely. We don't like seeing those unavoidable signs of age: wrinkles, a few extra pounds, hair growing where it shouldn't, or hair not growing where it should.

Likewise, when we look in the mirror of our soul, some of us don't like what we see there: avarice, envy, pride, folly. But those of us who are Christians should also, always, see Christ.

People who follow Jesus should not look at a mirror, either a physical mirror or a mirror of the soul, without seeing themselves as Christians. We need to remember who we are. We need to remember *whose* we are.

If we come to church on Sundays to remember that we are Christians and then go out and curse other drivers or slander our political opponents or ignore our obligation to the marginalized of society we are like the people James talks about, who look into a mirror and go away forgetting what they looked like. Our religion, in James' word, will be worthless if we do this.

Church is all about remembering who we are, whose we are, so that we can leave this place, and this holy table, and go out and love and forgive and feed and heal as we have been loved and forgiven and fed and healed.

Now the problem with this teaching is that people hear it and fall back into the trap of "works righteousness," supposing that if they keep their noses clean and maybe feed a few widows and orphans, they have earned favor with God. Christians actually do this a lot. They think, "Well, I haven't fornicated, stolen, murdered, cheated, lied, envied or slandered, so I'm in good with God ... not like those other people who are fornicators, thieves, murderers, cheats, etc. etc." This is not what Jesus wants us to do.

The remedy is always to come back to center, to look in the mirror of the cross, to remember who we are and whose we are.

It's fortuitous for the sake of my sermon that this church has a cross with a mirrored finish. In church we see ourselves mirrored in the cross. Our reflection in this cross is as beloved children of God. When we leave this place, let's remember what we looked like in it.