

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
James 1: 19-27
“Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall”
15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2015

The author of James was a keen observer of human nature who paid close attention to the details of everyday living. His entire book points to the way in which the small acts of Christian disciples are the nuts and bolts which hold together the scaffold on which human relationships, both within and beyond the community of faith, are built. (1)

He is also a master of metaphor, as we became aware last week when we read from the opening verses of James. In today’s scripture lesson, listen for how he uses the metaphor of a mirror.

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Mirror, mirror, on the wall....

Mirrors are a useful part of our everyday living.

We brush our teeth, comb our hair, and shave in front of them.

They show us when we need to straighten our ties or adjust the seams of our skirts.

(Ministers depend on mirrors to help us keep our stoles aligned. One of my nieces, the daughter of a minister, was with a group of other preacher’s kids when the conversation turned to what is the hardest part of being the child of a minister. Any guesses? *“it’s soooooo embarrassing when my mom’s, my dad’s, stole is hanging uneven and ALL!”* I’m pretty sure that all the PKs in this conversation among middle schoolers were girls, by the way. I will confess, however, that I actually texted my soon-to-be 33-year-old son yesterday and asked him if it had ever bothered him that my stole was out of alignment. He texted back: No, but you should wash it. Nothing like your own kids to keep you humble.)

There are some of us who love looking at ourselves in the mirror. Leonard, the labradoodle who lives at the McGregor Simmons house, loves to hoist his front paws up on the back of the sofa and peer into the mirror and admire how absolutely adorable he is. (And he is! Not that I’m biased or anything.)

Kids who haven’t yet absorbed the messages about body image that are so rampant in our culture love to prance and preen in front of the mirror, dressing up in clothes that are too big for them and football helmets that fall down in front of their faces and necklaces that reach down to their knees, admiring the cuteness that they see reflected back at themselves, simply delighting in the way that they live and move and have their being.

But like the evil queen who asked the question, “Who’s the fairest one of all?” many of us have an ambivalent relationship with our mirrors. Mirrors don’t lie. And sometimes the truth that our bodies are showing a bulge here and a sag there morphs into a gnawing sense of unworthiness, the illusion that there is mythical Snow White out there somewhere to whom we are comparing ourselves who is “more fair than we.”

James perhaps has all of this in mind and more when he writes, “you must understand this, my beloved...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look in the mirror; they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into [the mirror] of the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.”

Let’s unpack these verses a bit.

First, what is the mirror exactly?

The mirror is, according to James, “the perfect law.” I don’t know how it is with you, but when I hear “law,” it feels like a five-pound weight is being placed on each of my shoulders. And when I hear “perfect law,” it is as if another 50 pounds is being added. It is a bit like the response of the magic mirror to the evil queen, “there is someone out there fairer than thee, and you will never be able to measure up.”

But this is not at all what James means. When James speaks of the perfect law, it doesn’t mean “without flaw,” but rather “whole,” or “complete.” It is “the law of liberty,” “the law of freedom.”

In other words, the mirror of God's law, God's law of wholeness tells us the truth. However, it is not the truth about where we are not measuring up on the goodness scale. It is the truth that God has created us good and whole and there is not a thing in the world, not a person in the world who can define us as anything less than this, not even on our worst days, the days when we fall miles short of God's best intentions for us. God's law means liberty; it means the freedom to live a brave and caring life because we have been created in God's own image and named "beloved" by our Creator.

And God's aim for us, God's own beloved, is for us not to look into the mirror and catch a single, momentary glimpse of our "beloved-ness," if you will, and then to forget who we are and the God to whom we belong.

This is easy to do in the culture in which we live.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Her new book *Rising Strong* was published last week. It contains her research in which she listened to a range of people—leaders of Fortune 500 companies, people in the military, artists, couples in long-term relationships, teachers, parents—tell their stories of being brave, of falling, and of getting back up. She asked, "What do these people with strong and loving relationships, leaders nurturing creativity, artists pushing innovation, and clergy walking with people through faith and mystery have in common?"

The answer was clear: they are not afraid to lean into the hurt, the discomfort, the emotion of life, for it is in this crucible that morality, values, a meaningful life are forged. (2)

She writes in one memorable section, "There are too many people today who instead of *feeling hurt* are *acting out their hurt*; instead of *acknowledging pain*, they're *inflicting pain on others*. Rather than *risking feeling disappointed*, they're choosing to *live disappointed*." (3)

James would say that these are the people who look into the mirror and then walk away. And once they have walked away, they have forgotten who they are and whose they are.

However, James calls us to look so unceasingly into the Word of God, the Word which is Jesus Christ and the Word that is Scripture, so that the law of wholeness, the law of freedom, is implanted (v. 21) in our very souls. To look so deeply into the heart of God that even though we are sometimes scared to the tips of our toes, God gives us the grace to stand fully in the truth and to say things like, "Our family is really hurting. We could use your support and prayer," or to be the dad who tells his son, "It's okay to be sad. We all get sad. Jesus cried real tears, and it is okay for you to cry too. We just need to keep talking about what it is that hurts," or to say, "our committee dropped the ball. We need to stop blaming each other or someone else and talk about it so that we better understand each other and move forward." (4)

It is significant that James links the living of a life under perfect law, the law of liberty, particularly to speech. He says that one of the key ways that we exhibit a life integrated and whole in God is in the way that we use words.

This past week, I was privileged to teach a Bible study at the Pines, in this case, the first lesson of the Come to the Waters Horizons Bible study. The text was the creation story found in the first chapter of Genesis.

In Genesis 1, the key metaphor for God's creative activity is speech. Language creates time itself ("Let there be light"). It pushes back the primeval waters of chaos. God speaks something new that never was before. The means of creation is the very word of God.

The words are not commands. The author of creation is not authoritarian. "Let there be" is not coercive language; it is invitational language. (5)

And so, my brothers and sisters, as we come to the Lord's Table today, we who are created in the image of God are invited by Genesis and by James to speak as God let us look into the mirror of God's perfect law, and as we go out into the world, let us not forget who and whose we are, that we may use our words not to shame, but to encourage, not to degrade, but to empower. In the name of the One who continues to create us and all things in love, Amen.

1. Archie Smith, Jr., "Pastoral Perspective: James 1: 17-27," *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 14.
2. Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), xxviii.
3. *Ibid.*, xxvii.
4. *Ibid.*, 123.
5. Celia Brewer Marshall, *Genesis* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 6-7