

Your Whole Self

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9

James 1: 17-27

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Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

James 1: 17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But 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 at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into 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.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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Don’t we all love to watch a baby seeing themselves in a mirror? The cooing and the giggling, the smiles and the laughter, are priceless and we almost mimic their delight. They have no idea that they are seeing themselves, seeing their own reflection. There is no recognition, no judgment or timidity, no sense of self-importance or vanity. There is only joy to be shared with the one in the mirror. They see just a small bit of who they are, but they do not yet know that.

Time goes by and looking in the mirror takes on a whole new meaning. For some it is something to be avoided as self-judgment and critique reflects only physical faults, bodily flaws, even if it is only in the mind and not in the glass. For others, it is something barely noticed as a

full and busy schedule means rushing around in a blur that leaves them almost oblivious other than a little sideways glance in the mirror before dashing out the door without even really seeing. For me, when I look in the mirror, my Mom is often looking back at me.

Then of course there is the other viewpoint of looking in the mirror, and that is the Greek myths of the story of Narcissus. After a doomed love affair, he wandered into the woods, and he stopped by a crystal clear pool since he was thirsty. He knelt down to drink, and looking back at him was a face so beautiful that he was entranced. He tried and tried to kiss the beauty, but it would dissolve every time he touched the water. He stayed by the water, yearning with every fiber of his being, to see, to touch, the lovely face, without knowing it was his own reflection. From that day on he never loved anyone else, he remained obsessed with his own self, and unaware of all others. In time he died the long and painful starving death of the self-absorbed person looking in the mirror all by himself at himself in the deep, lonely pool of the isolated.

However, whenever, we look in the mirror, we can only see a small part of ourselves at any given moment. We see just a small bit of who we are. We cannot see our whole self so it is easy to deceive ourselves, whether for good or bad, accurate or inaccurate, wise or foolish. This is what James had in mind when he compared checking our reflection in a mirror to our faith journey.

But 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 at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into 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.

Martha Sterne, an Episcopal priest, wrote about the mirror-looking experiences in this way, "Whichever way the story goes--self-absorption or self-carelessness--I don't think we can see ourselves and remember ourselves with much clarity if it is just me, myself, and I, or you, yourself, and you looking in the mirror all by our lonesomes. Frankly, that's why I am in a church. I can't really see myself just by looking in a mirror--and neither can you--and this is very crippling for self-knowledge and self-love. But put us in front of the Christ mirror with some other people who are trying to love themselves and love each other and love God who made us all--well, then, you've got something to see, something that will change the world--when people look in the Christ mirror together and see themselves doing what James calls living in the law of liberty. And I do believe with all my heart--and I have bet my vocational life on this--that mirroring and reflecting Christ together works--in a church that will risk such work. Lots of churches don't, which is why I think lots of people don't go to lots of churches--we don't need one more place to hide from our real selves, our true selves; and if you never find a little group--and there always needs to be a little group--two or three or ten or twenty--who will risk looking in the mirror together and being together a place where love is shared and truth is told and the beauty of becoming is the work of the community, and that's church."

Our whole selves, when we can bring and be who we truly are to our faith community, when we can be our genuine and authentic selves, we can reflect the law of liberty as we reflect the Christ mirror, the image of Christ within us. It takes the church for us to discover and recognize our whole self, as we see ourselves in the Christ mirror together, as we live out, as we diligently observe, what James calls the 'implanted word.'

Be quick to listen, yet slow to speak and even slower to anger. Cast away wickedness and sordidness, and replace them with meekness. With a pure heart and intentions unstained care for widows and orphans, care for those who are lonely, isolated, neglected, oppressed and at risk. Do not forget, do not let these slip from your mind. Make them known to your children and your children's children.

The directions sound simple, yet we know that we cannot do it all on our own as we cannot see our whole self without community. Am I really listening, or am I thinking of how I will respond, or what I need to do later today? Am I too quickly jumping to anger, to irritation and frustration, when it is something I will soon regret? Am I as meek, as accepting, as understanding, as I think I am and claim to be? Have I cared for those in need as I am able, or have I made excuses to stall for another time, another day? Have I reflected the mirror of Christ to my children and my grandchild?

On our own, judgement and critique can cloud our actions, rushing and dashing can dismiss our best intentions, self-focus and preoccupation can blind us to what we are called to see, to hear, to do, as we are called to 'be doers of the word, not just hearers.' We see ourselves reflected in others, and others are reflected through us.

In community, in our church life, we are in Christ's presence, in his community, reflecting him, and not just in passing or in part, but wholly, permanently. Just as we pick up the traits and mannerisms of those we spend time with, those we look up to, so it is that our whole selves can reflect the Christ mirror. When people look at you, at me, at us, can they see Jesus Christ reflected back at them? It is our human nature to reflect and respond to the emotions expressed around us, to mirror what we see. We see someone laugh, we smile and perhaps laugh as well. We see someone hurt, we feel pain for them. We see all that Jesus Christ is and has done, and we reflect that image by our whole selves as hearers and doers of the word.

As a church, where we bring our whole selves, where are called as partners in Christ's service, we do risk looking in the mirror together and being a place where love is shared and truth is told and the beauty of becoming is the work of the community as we reflect the image of God within. Amen.