

September 3, 2006  
Psalm 15, James 1:17-27  
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### **“Transforming the Image in the Mirror”**

What’s the first thing you do when you get up in the morning? Do you need a cup of coffee before you can do anything else? Do you make your bed as soon as you get out of it? Maybe you read the morning paper or let the dog out. Do you eat breakfast first, or hop right in the shower? Some of you may even start getting ready the night before by laying out your clothes for the morning. Whatever your practice may be, there’s a good chance that part of your morning routine involves spending some time in front of a mirror.

I don’t know how you feel about that moment in your morning, but for me it’s becoming pretty scary. Our scripture passage is concerned that we might forget our image in the mirror, but in the morning, for me - it’s a goal. My eyes have that bleary, dazed, sleepy look, my face is scruffy and in need of a shave. There may even be a new wrinkle or blemish that has appeared.

But there is one piece of good news. As my hairline continues to change, my struggle with that pesky bed-head look has gotten much better. It’s good to look for a silver lining, especially in the morning mirror.

Whatever we see in the morning mirror, most of us are hopeful that a transformation will occur before we face the world.

Facing our mirrors in the morning is not an easy task. Mirrors can be painfully honest and they don’t compromise. They will reflect the best parts of how we look, but they also point out our blemishes and shortcomings. Our mirrors won’t minimize our imperfections or tell us that we are better looking than we might be. In fact, the better the quality of the mirror the more flaws we are likely to see.

So why do we have these mirrors in our bathrooms?

We have these mirrors because, as unpleasant as it might be, we know that if we don’t face ourselves honestly, and engage in a morning transformation, we won’t be at our best. Most of us would rather “face” the truth than let the world see us at less than our best.

But the mirror in our bathroom is not the only mirror we will encounter each day. Our culture is full of mirrors. There are the literal mirrors found in bathrooms, hallways, reflective windows and shiny objects that tell us how we look.

Then there are the metaphorical mirrors that we find in the eyes of our families, friends, co-workers and those we meet throughout the day. These metaphorical mirrors can be the most powerful, as they reflect to us either an image of encouragement or criticism. These

relational mirrors underscore why it is so important that we treat one another with humility, love and grace.

Some of us have been blessed to live with people that reflect back to us the best parts of who we are and only offer honest critique to help bring out the best in us. But others of us have experienced the painful, distorted reflections that come when we live with daily criticism, conflict, domestic violence and abuse. Those of us in these situations often see a shattered image when we look in the mirror and will struggle to find a reflection that helps us see ourselves the way God sees us.

But despite the reflections we receive from others, the most important reflection we see in a mirror is not whether our hair looks out of place or how we look in our new suit or dress, it's when we look a little deeper to see what's in our heart and soul.

Every day in the Center for Family Life Ministries, we encounter people that are coming to take a deeper look into their lives. Like the people that James is referring to in our passage, they have forgotten who they are and have become anxious and depressed. They struggle in their relationships because their relationships have lost the mirrors of kindness and validation. Through our counseling work in the Center, they hope to find a supportive mirror that can help them re-discover themselves and the beauty that God has placed within them.

Have you ever tried to compliment someone and felt that your words of encouragement fell flat or were dismissed? Your attempt to value and affirm your friend, co-worker or loved one seems to hit a brick wall because they could not receive the gracious gift you offered them.

Or have you ever been complimented and felt that the kind words weren't really justified? We can often think to ourselves in those moments, that if they only knew the truth they wouldn't be saying these kind words. We may think of ourselves as an imposter who doesn't deserve this praise or encouragement.

What we believe about ourselves really matters!

We all form beliefs about ourselves from the many reflections we encounter in life. These reflections profoundly affect the image of ourselves that we see in the mirror. If we hold a positive belief about ourselves, we can recognize the good within and not be undone by our weaknesses or shortcomings. We can celebrate life and offer love and encouragement to those we meet.

But, if we have a negative opinion of ourselves or struggle with guilt, shame, or self-hatred - which is something far too many of us wrestle with in life - then we can't hear or won't believe those who try to compliment and encourage us. We become consumed by our flaws and shortcomings, and then try to avoid any mirror or reflection that might cause us to look into own heart and soul.

Too often we spend far too much time gazing into the mirrors of our culture which can distract us from who we are or cause us to judge ourselves harshly. The mirrors of materialism and consumerism can leave us feeling jealous, frustrated, tired and defeated. The cultural mirrors of style, beauty or success can leave us feeling inadequate and ashamed. In our school hallways, there are the mirrors of popularity and peer-pressure that can result in heartbreak and insecurity.

We look for the mirrors of validation and encouragement, but struggle to find or believe their affirming reflections. We too quickly see our flaws and shortcomings and overlook the beauty that lies within each of us. We struggle to “remember who we are” as a child of God and get caught by the reflections of the world that can leave us feeling empty, confused and restless.

What we believe about ourselves has a profound affect on what we will see in the mirror. What do you see when you look in the mirror?

In our New Testament lesson, James, the brother of Jesus, is writing to the Jewish Christians who seem to be losing their sense of identity and what it means to love and follow Jesus. James is encouraging these followers of Christ to “remember who they are.”

The pressure was growing on these early Christians. The persecutions of Christians at the hands of the Romans had begun and there was a growing conflict in the Temple between the followers of Jesus and the Temple leaders. The Temple leaders were calling on the Jewish community to live by the teachings of Moses. These leaders were trying to encourage a form of Jewish nationalism that seemed to excite a rebellious, angry attitude. These Temple preachers were quick to anger and slow to listen for God’s leading. Being quick to speak, their preaching often fanned the flames of angry passions which only agitated the hearer and provoked conflict in the people, which was viewed by the Roman imperium as sedition.

These early Christians that James was writing were influenced by the angry mood of their countrymen and as a result began to forget that they were called to live in humility, as a reflection of Christ, that offered love and care to those who were in need.

In response, the author of James calls upon the followers of Christ to look into the mirror he called “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” Christians throughout the ages believe that the Word of God is the perfect law and the one true mirror that will help us to know and discover who we are as God’s children. This mirror is found when we look into the scriptures and learn from its teachings and embrace the “Good News” that we find there. Better than any high quality mirror, the scriptures help us to see who we really are by revealing our strengths and shortcomings. They help us to make sense of life and teach us how to live. They expose our blemishes and sins, and then point us towards the path of transformation and redemption.

When we look into the morning mirror we are often tempted to use make-up and polish to cover or hide our blemishes, but the scriptures instead help reveal our blemishes and sins, which God then begins to heal from the inside out.

But James tells us that it's not enough to simply see ourselves in the mirror of God's word. We are to be transformed, which comes when we change our beliefs about ourselves, embrace the Good News and live in the ways of Christ with gratitude. Our deep beliefs that fill us with guilt, shame, and self-hatred are transformed by the "renewing of our mind" when we encounter and receive the Good News that we are God's beloved children. We no longer need to look for our reflection in the mirrors of the world, but instead in the mirror of liberty that is found in the Gospel.

As God's community of faith, we promise to be a mirror of encouragement to one another as we all grow in faith and transformation. This very morning we were blessed to participate in the baptism of Eliza Hage. We are called to be a mirror to her of God's love. Through our Sunday School program she will begin to see the mirror of God's word and through our care and fellowship she will find the mirror of God's grace and kindness. We are called to help her "remember who she is" as one of God's own.

One of my favorite Disney movies is the Lion King. In this movie the King of Beasts, a great lion named Mufasa, has a son named Simba.

In his early years, Simba was a playful cub who was eager to grow up and become who he was created to be. But one fateful day, Simba's life was changed by deception and tragedy. Simba's beloved father was killed in a stampede, and through the treachery of his uncle Scar, Simba comes to believe that this tragedy is all his fault.

Filled with guilt and shame, Simba tries to hide by running off to a distant land where he seeks to live as something other than what he was created to be. As Simba enters into his time in the Wilderness, or in this case, the Jungle, Simba befriended Pumba and Timon. For a season of time, Simba lives in guilt and shame apart from those who love him, refusing to discuss who he is and what he thinks he has done. But one day Simba encounters a wise spiritual counselor named Rafiki who challenges Simba to look into a mirror-like reflective pool.

When Simba first looks, he only sees an image of a guilt ridden, frightened lion that will never amount to much. But then Rafiki tells Simba to look deeper into his reflection and when Simba looks again he hears the powerful words of his beloved father, Mufasa, saying, "Remember who you are." Simba is first in stunned awe, but then embraced his God-given identity and acted upon his remembrance. In so doing, he reclaimed his birthright and became the King.

Likewise, James is calling us to look into the reflective pool of the Word of God, so that we too can "remember who we are." But like Simba we may need to look deeply.

When we first look, we will encounter our sins and regrets which may cause us to want to look away from our reflection. But if we are willing to look deeper, we will begin to discover the law of liberty that will transform us and set us free.

But James reminds us that it's not enough to simply remember. We must then live as the people that God has created and called us to be. We are called to love one another, being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. We are called to serve one another and care for the widows and orphans and all who are in need of God's love. James challenges us to give up our selfish and sinful ways as we live in humble gratitude and offer God's love to all that we meet. We are called to become a mirror that reflects the love of God to the world.

If we truly want to transform the image we see in the mirror, let us remember, and never forget, who we are - for we are the Beloved. We are the Children of God. Amen.