

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17B  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-13

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Let me ask you something. When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Do you see a person with friendly eyes and a sincere heart... or do you see pimples and wrinkles and messy hair that needs combing? Do you see what's on the inside, or what's on the outside?

Our longtime member Dorothy Caffee was about 90 years old when I knew her. Dorothy used to say: "I look in the mirror and think: Who is that *old lady* looking back at me??? Inside, I only feel about 20 years old!" Ah, Dorothy. We understand that disconnect... better and better as the years go by.

Today's scriptures encourage us to take a look in the mirror, in a spiritual sense. To take stock of ourselves, engage in some healthy self-examination. To consider what we're like on the inside-- the values and beliefs we hold. And also what we're like on the outside – how we act and behave day to day. Is there integrity between our beliefs and behavior? Or is there a disconnect?

When there is a disconnect, we know it instinctively. I imagine the fans of Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer are feeling that disconnect, as a person they respected and admired is being disciplined for covering up the domestic violence and bad behavior of a favored assistant. However honorable the coach appeared on the outside, that's not exactly who he was on the inside.

Roman Catholics are sadly feeling the disconnect too – we're all still reeling from the grand jury report of hundreds of priests in Pennsylvania abusing children over the course of 70 years. Superiors covered up their crimes, because preserving the institution was more important than caring for the little ones. E.J. Dionne, a columnist who is also a devout Catholic, names the disconnect: "Christianity heroically preaches a devotion to the poor and the marginalized, [yet] the abusive priests often preyed on the most vulnerable and least advantaged children... these acts turn Christianity on its head." (*"It's becoming harder to explain while I'm still Catholic"* by E.J. Dionne, Jr, *Washington Post*, 8/26/18)

Every day the headlines are filled with examples of public figures who don't act with integrity. And it's discouraging, demoralizing-- let's admit it. But people of God, we

cannot afford to be distracted by bad behavior, or let it drag us down. As Christians we don't take our cues from the headlines. We take our cues from what we know of God's goodness alive in Jesus Christ, and God's worthy intentions for this world, which we all have a part in fulfilling. And we keep a steady course, following the path we know to be true and right.

We choose who we will emulate. And when we do see someone living with integrity—it could be a leader, a teacher, a friend -- we know it, we're drawn to it. Integrity means their actions line up with their values, their word can be trusted, they are honest in business dealings, responsible in relationships. They act the same way in private as in public. Nobody's perfect, but when someone does their best to live out the values they hold, we give thanks for their example and we want to do the same.

Jesus faced a situation where religious people were overly focused on looking good on the outside. They knew all the proper rituals for washing hands. Following religious rules was how they expressed devotion to God. But Jesus judged that their faith was tipped too far toward acting godly, without truly being godly. There was a disconnect. Their holy actions had no heart to them. Jesus told them in no uncertain terms to search their hearts. Look within. Center themselves in the Living God.

We've all known people who put a great deal of effort into cultivating their outward image but have ended up neglecting their inner life. That could even be us, sometimes. Striving so hard to look good, keep up appearances, but ending up empty inside. God calls us to pause in the hustle, just stop – and listen to God's promises, let God renew our hearts and ground us in sincere devotion.

The congregation James worked with had the opposite problem. Their hearts were in the right place, presumably, but they weren't doing much to act on their faith. They were privileged but lazy. They didn't let God rearrange their lives too much. On a personal level, they allowed their tempers to get the best of them. In terms of social action, they didn't even make an effort, were quite content to keep on favoring rich people over poor people. But James wanted a living faith for these people of God. A faith that could improve both their personal behavior and their social conscience.

“Be doers of the word, not hearers only” was James's greatest theme. He was extremely practical and action-oriented. James would have been one of those citizens walking at the front of the protest march, carrying the big banner that says “Thoughts? Prayers? ... ACTION!” James defined true religion as this: “caring for orphans and widows” (the vulnerable ones) and “keeping yourself unstained by the world” – which is a rather intimidating way to say, keep working on your own personal behavior. Strive to be the

best person you can. Challenging? You bet. James is nothing if not intense, and that's because integrity matters.

James urges all of us to do some spiritual self-examination: Look in the mirror, see who you are. You are children of God, set apart for love and justice and courage and doing what is right. When you act this way, you are true to your highest identity.

Professor Craig Koester reminds us to look in that mirror with kindness, the way God does. *“Do you see who you are?” ... [The answer is not: You are wrinkled, you have pimples, you need to comb your hair! The answer is] You are someone richly blessed with God's gifts, someone brought to life through God's word – a person set apart and belonging to God forever.* When we see this true identity in the mirror, the challenge is not to forget what we've seen. Remember how much we've been given, and what we have to give. Remember what God's word means to us, and let our words mean something too. *(Craig R. Koester commentary on James, 8/09, workingpreacher.org)*

People of God, we want a living faith. We want to live with integrity. Following Jesus, we search our hearts. As James urges, we examine our behavior. This is healthy and good.

But listen, I know you pretty well, and I also know myself. I know how quick we are to notice our own flaws in that mirror. On a personal level we are so aware of how we fall short. On a societal level, we may feel we can never do enough. A lot of us tend to be overachievers in the discipleship department, always thinking we should do more. (Maybe that's just me, but I doubt it.)

I do want to say this. This is a very rough time we are living through, as a society. Incivility and injustice are on full display every day. We can get overwhelmed and even paralyzed in the face of it. But my friends, being paralyzed is no good for anything. Even James would say that! Being paralyzed is no good for us, it's no good for God's world.

We cannot personally solve every problem facing us today. It took a long time for things to get the way they are right now. We are simply asked to do our part, as faithfully as possible. We don't have to be Mother Teresa, we don't have to be Martin Luther King... we just have to each take up the mantle of discipleship that is ours to take. Do what we each are called to do. Let our actions be in keeping with our values. Step forward as boldly as we can. And stay the course, trusting in God's power and love.

God needs all kinds of people taking all kinds of different actions, as part of God's kingdom. When our family visited Holden Village this summer, we met a bunch of famous people – and I was struck by how really different they were from each other.

We met Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, the presiding bishop of our national church, who's amazingly down to earth for someone with such a big job. Bishop Eaton is practical and plainspoken, but with a great sense of humor. She's a traditional kind of person, in the very best sense, and her work is traditional, within the institution, promoting its health.

Another famous pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, is anything but traditional. Nadia's arms are covered with tattoos of biblical themes, her style is edgy and brash and outspoken. In videos, books, sermons, what Nadia does best is challenge the system, and tell her own truth boldly, always keeping God's love at the center. We need her to do exactly that.

A third famous person we met is different yet again, a poet named Padraig O'Tuama who leads a community working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Padraig is a quiet man, his personality is gentle, artistic, spiritual. His work for God's kingdom is gentle too, the subtle task of helping people from different backgrounds learn to talk and listen to each other, in this way encouraging peace to grow.

God's kingdom needs all these different kinds of people, and many more. God gave us a variety of styles and talents and a variety of callings. Some are intellectuals, others are activists. Some are brash, others are quiet. But all of us have our faithful ways to be "doers of God's word."

Whatever your gifts are, be as bold as you can. Be as responsive as you can to God's Spirit and the needs of the world. "Be doers of the Word" – God's good and loving word – and trust God's love and power.

Amen.