

Mirroring the Beloved (Communion Meditation)
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 19:1-19a

A friend of mine's teenage kid was accused, on social media, of something they didn't do. Something bad. The accusation, written in humiliating and inflammatory language, was shared and re-shared and then shared again, over and over, until it reached everyone at their high school, and everyone at neighboring schools, and even students miles away.

This caused the kid to be excluded – ghosted – ignored by everyone. Their peers didn't believe the lies, not really, but they didn't want to be stained by them, either. So, a once-vibrant teenager was now alone, despondent, afraid to go back to school. This lethal combination of slander and cyber bullying changed the trajectory of that kid's life.

It doesn't matter that the accusations were not based in facts, right?
The damage is done.

We've been living in a country without actual "facts" for years now. Our young people have been watching adults make up whatever they want and repeat it over and over until it becomes "truth." And we're all worked up into a frenzy, trying to determine what's real and what's not so we can fight about it. It's bonkers out there!

What do you do when your gut tells you one thing but your phone bombards you with something else? Do you believe your "truth" enough to stand against an angry mob?

Or is it way more difficult than it sounds?

Perhaps the crisis in today's reading – the name-calling and mocking, the amped-up Sadducees living a different reality than the disciples, the lack of any shared foundation – is familiar. Who is telling the truth? Who is not? How do you keep order when the crowd is as out of control as the rumors that are spreading like wildfire? Is the fickle tide of opinion still turning regular people into criminals, without a judge or jury?

As we hear these stories from the Gospel of John about Jesus being betrayed, arrested, tried, and then sent to the cross, it feels like a very human interchange is taking place. We have people witnessing the truth of

God's love but deciding to run away from it, or tossing it aside, or believing it is not for them.

I remember seeing the musical *The Man of La Mancha* 30 years ago when it was on Broadway. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the story, it's about a man named Don Quixote who spends most of his time believing he is a dashing young knight who kills dragons and saves beautiful maidens.

The reality is that Don Quixote is very old; there are no dragons, only windmills that he attacks and kills; his beautiful love interest, Dulcinea, is not a maiden, but a prostitute. His servant, Sancho Panza, takes care of him in his madness, allowing his fantasies to be a reality for him.

In the real world of pre-modern Spain, it is dangerous to live in a world of fantasy, and eventually Don Quixote is forced to face his madness as several other knights surround him and the Knight of the Mirrors tells him to look within to see the truth.

What I remember most about the scene was that these knights held very large shields, almost full-length mirror size, and they were very shiny and bright. With Don Quixote's back to the audience, the shields not only faced him, but they also faced us. They caught the stage lights and reflected bright light into the darkened theater and our widened pupils. This bright light hurt, but it also reminded us that the truth might hurt, and that none of us can live in a fantasy world forever.

This scene comes to mind when I think of Pilate judging Jesus. An accused man kneels below, as the accusers hold their mirrors for him to see the truth. Yet, here, the roles are reversed. It is not Pilate and the priests who hold the mirror; it is Jesus who holds it up to them, and to us, to see the truth of ourselves.

In John's gospel, every person who meets Jesus must face their mirror and see the truth reflected back upon them. Think of other stories we've heard this season...

At the Samaritan well, Jesus met a woman, and he revealed that she had been married several times-- not out of failed love but out of duty to the law. In those words, she heard a truth, that in spite of her situation as an outcast, she had a job to share good news of God's Love. Jesus was living water; and she became the one who led people to the well to drink. Jesus held a mirror up to her and she saw that she was a beloved child of God with a role to play in the new kingdom.

Later, Jesus met a man born blind, whom everyone believed had been born in sin, and when Jesus spoke to him and rubbed mud on his eyes, he heard the voice of Love and responded. The formerly blind man, an outcast, heard the Shepherd's voice, and now he could speak about that to others. Jesus held a mirror up to him and the Seeing Man accepted that he was a beloved child of God with a role to play in the new kingdom.

When Jesus met Pilate, Jesus held a mirror up for Pilate to face himself and the truth. Yet, I wonder if Pilate could see himself as a beloved child of God, or if he saw someone else? Did he look through the mirror and project himself onto Jesus, seeing only a heretic, a traitor, an impersonator of the king, and one who disrespected power?

Pontius Pilate's kingdom was of this world; Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. Pilate's role was to judge guilt and pronounce death sentences; Jesus came not to judge sin, but to pronounce belovedness.

Jesus did not judge the Samaritan Woman at the Well who had several husbands. Her society had already done that. Yet when Jesus held up the mirror to her, she saw not what her neighbors saw, but what Jesus saw-- that she was Beloved.

Jesus did not judge the Man born blind; his neighbors had already done that. Yet when Jesus spoke to him, he did not hear the voices of his neighbors calling him a sinner, but the voice of the Good Shepherd calling him Beloved.

Nor did Jesus even judge Pilate! He held a mirror up to Pilate and to the chief priests, but they could not see themselves in the mirror being held up by Jesus. Nor could they see the deeper truth, that God so loved the world-- even them, that Jesus came into the world not to judge but to heal its brokenness. They could not see that they were part of the world that God so loved and was so broken it needed healing.

The task before all of us is to look in the mirror that Jesus holds up and see trust, truth, love, and the desire for wholeness. To see that we are not a judge of the world, but a beloved child of God with a role to play in the kingdom.

I think I will go home this afternoon and put a note on the bathroom mirror that says, "*You are beloved by God.*" Perhaps that is what we all need to hear as we step into the passion story and towards resurrection hope. Amen.

Please remain seated and turn with me to hymn # 207, Just As I Am.