

Looking in the Mirror
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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James 1:17-27

Let us pray... Loving God, hear the prayers of your people in the multitude of your mercy, look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help, for you are gracious. Amen.

I was surprised to read about looking in the mirror in this morning's scripture. I didn't even know that they had mirrors way back then (although, the apostle Paul talks about looking through a glass darkly). But it seems they did have mirrors--mostly polished metal. People looked in the mirror back then just like we do now and saw what they saw just like we see what we see.

When is the last time you really looked at yourself in the mirror? Do you remember what you saw?

A little bit of a belly roll? Wrinkles in your forehead? A weirdly shaped nose, perhaps?

Many of us, when we stand in front of a mirror, just see the parts of ourselves that we want to improve... either we're too thin or we're overweight, maybe we have blemishes, or our hair is a mess, we're wrinkled, even scarred. But taking stock of our outward appearances is not quite what our scripture is getting at. No... today, James asks, "Do you see who you REALLY are?"

James goes on to remind us that we are someone who has been blessed by God's gifts, someone who has been brought to new life through God's word—someone who is precious, a first fruit, set aside... belonging to God.

Sometimes I think we forget that grace and love we've been given, who we are and WHOSE we are. We become focused on ourselves. Life becomes a quest to get what we can get while we still can. And when we encounter those who are suffering in our world, the widow and the orphan, we think to ourselves "gee, that's too bad but it's a rough world out there!" and we move along. After all, what can we possibly do to help?

Sometimes an event happens that brings us back to ourselves... like a tragic loss.

Some of you know that some of my dear friends at Silver Lake (our UCC church camp) had one of those losses last week. On the afternoon of August 15th, three long-time volunteers, Don, Ledell and Kat Mulvaney were in a car accident on their way home from camp. Ledell and Kat died immediately, and Don continues to fight for his life at Westchester Hospital.

When we heard the news late Sunday night, those of us who spent the previous week with them were stunned and saddened. We still are. When I saw them earlier that day, they were so very full of life. They had just completed their 38th year volunteering their time at Silver Lake deaning God Show; think of all the young lives affected for the better through their influence. What a legacy!

And I wonder what my friends Ledell, Kat and Don saw when they looked at themselves in the mirror... Wrinkly laugh lines in the corners of their eyes from the time they spent with these talented teens in the CT conference... Calloused hands worn tough by hours spent practicing sacred music... Hearts filled with the love of friends far and wide... I hope that's what they saw.

And I wish that I could get in a time machine and change what happened. That's how loss works. When we lose someone we care about we'd sure like to have the power and ability to change it and go back to the way it used to be. But we can't. So we do what we can to help each other through the wall of tears, and we remember who and WHOSE we are.

Don, Kat and Ledell's friends have been so kind and generous...

An apartment and car offered to their son Devan and his partner Lucy so they can stay close to the hospital while Don undergoes various surgeries and treatments... Songs of hope and courage were written, sung and shared by camp friends who knew them best... About 66 thousand dollars have been raised in the last week to cover funeral costs, hospital costs and lawyer's fees.

There have been prayers and memories shared in person and online, at their home church in Norwalk, Connecticut and at camp. In a very tangible way, these acts of kindness and generosity have given their loved ones new comfort and hope in the middle of pain and brokenness.

All of this love that has been shared doesn't change the fact that a terrible thing happened. There is no logical reason for it to have been this way, and I do not believe that God caused it because of some higher purpose we will never know. Simple explanations, even offered with the kindest intentions, do not help.

What does help is that we remind each other that God enters the dark valley of grief, and walks alongside his hurting children... And Christ beckons us ever closer, especially when we are at our most broken-hearted... and that the Holy Spirit gives strength to all who mourn, even when our sighs are too deep for words and we feel weak at the knees.

Today, James says, "Look at yourself again, in the perfect law of liberty, and tell me what you see" (1:25). The law of liberty is the law of love. The law of love frees us all. To know that we are loved and held in God's arms, especially through the difficult times, can be the most freeing thing imaginable.

Here's the thing to remember about plain old mirrors... they are incredibly unreliable. Stare too long, and we can get stuck on ourselves like Narcissus did in that ancient Greek myth. Or we could be like the person in today's scripture, looking in the mirror by ourselves and then rushing away and forgetting not just what we look like but who and WHOSE we are.

All through our lives, there will be temptations and tragedy, human failings and tendencies that have the possibility of shaping us into something less than God's dream for us. But these things are not sent by God to tempt us. All good things, every good gift, comes from the God who calls us to goodness. Perhaps life tests us, challenges and brokenness test us, sickness and resentment test us, but God gives all good gifts, and in God is the strength we need to meet the challenges that life presents.

Sometimes when we look into the mirror, we don't see the real me or the real you. We are so much deeper and more interesting and real and eternal than what we can see in even the clearest light with the finest silvered glass. There really is no time like the present to stand at each other's side and look in the mirror together. To know and love the real me and the real you.

To look into the Christ-mirror and say when I see you, I see power and grace. I see compassion, creativity, bravery, humor, loyalty, endurance, forgiveness, wisdom, abundance. I see potential.

When I look with you into the mirror of Christ, I see the beauty of our beloved-ness far beyond any words that I can tell you to describe it. And if I were to hold back and tell you this tomorrow, it might be too late... and yet... the truth of love won't be kept silent. Amen.