

Sermon for Sunday, August 29, 2021 - "Reflecting Love"

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The second lesson today, the Letter of James, encourages us not to be like people who look in the mirror and then just go away without anything changing.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you focus on all the flaws, the dark circles under your eyes, the acne or the wrinkles (or both!). Do you notice all the ways you don't measure up to your own or others' standards? Or do you think, "You know it could be worse", or even "Hey there, looking pretty good?" Does it depend on the day and the lighting?

What happens when you look into a metaphorical mirror? When you take a good long look at yourself and your life, what do you notice? Do you focus on your brokenness and failings? Or do you think, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as that person."

Whether they're literal or metaphorical, spending a lot of time looking into mirrors, or looking at our selfie pictures, rarely makes a positive impact on our lives. If you fixate on your failings you can start to think "I'm so messed up it is hopeless, I might as well just binge on ice cream and TV." Or, you can develop a driven anxious sense that "I've got to fix this." It's also easy to get self-righteous as we look at others. Using ourselves as a reference point so often leads us to be judgmental of ourselves or others. It can lead to one of two ditches, despair or pride.

Often, we approach the Bible in the same way we look at ourselves in the mirror - as if the Bible is all about us and how good or bad we come off looking. We use the Bible to make harsh judgments of ourselves and others. This kind of approach can cause us to hear Psalms like Psalm 15 that we just sang and think, "Wow, I'm so far from walking blameless and doing what is right and speaking truth from my heart it's hopeless; why even try to be better." Or it can lead us to listen to the readings today and think, "You know I do give money to help widows and orphans and I don't get hung up on rules like those scribes and Pharisees in that Gospel reading today. I guess I'm doing OK."

When we approach the Bible like that, it doesn't do anything for us. It just reflects back to us what we already think, what we already feel about ourselves and the world. When we approach the Bible in this way it has about as much effect on us as gazing into a mirror does - very little changes. So, the Letter of James encourages us not to be like people who look in a mirror, but instead to look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, God's law.

That may seem like it gets us back into the same predicament - considering how often Christians have viewed God's law as a kind of measuring stick that can be used to beat up on ourselves and others. But God's law was not intended to be a measuring stick; it was intended to be a gift. Like the rest of what we find in the Bible, God's law isn't all about us. It's about God and how God works with and through people.

When God first gave the law to the Hebrew people, something we heard a bit about in the reading from Deuteronomy today, it was given to remind them that God had chosen them, that they were God's people. The Hebrew people hadn't done anything to deserve to be God's people. They hadn't cleaned up their act or proven to be better than all the rest of the people out there. God simply said, "I will be your God and you will be my people." They weren't a great and powerful nation, they were a small, weak band of nomads. But when God chose them and gave them the law, they were given a new birth and a new identity as God's people, as people who were blessed to be a blessing for the world. God gave them a law to show them and the world that they were God's own, that God was so very near to them and that God would lead them into the ways of life.

After years of slavery in Egypt, the law gave them new identity and freedom from oppression. And then 40 years later, after they had refused to trust and follow the law and spent 40 years wandering in the desert, the law was given again to lead them into new life in a new land. God's law wasn't intended to be a measuring stick, it was given as a gift to remind the people that God had chosen them, that their identity came from God, that God was with them, and that they were to be a blessing to the world.

God's law and God's entire word now does the same thing for us. We were not part of that original bunch of God's chosen people. But out of God's original chosen people came Jesus. Jesus, God's Word made flesh, makes it known that God so loves all people. All of us broken, wandering, sinful, self-righteous people are God's beloved and chosen people. This Word from God, the word that we are loved and chosen, gives us a new birth and a new identity. We are not just the people we see in the mirror, we are broken and beloved. Our value does not come from comparing ourselves to others. We are God's good creation as is everyone else.

This word from God is the law of liberty. It sets us free from the despair, anxiety and self-righteousness that can arise when we use ourselves as reference points. It leads us out of slavery to our own judgments of ourselves and others. God's judgment is what matters and God has looked at the whole world and said, *beloved*.

This word of God also sets us free from wandering, wandering aimlessly trying to find meaning and purpose. Our purpose, in all that we do, is to live as God's beloved and to help others know that they are God's beloved. In the way we speak, in the way we treat others, in the way we respond to those in need we are guided by this law of liberty - that God loves the world and calls us to do the same. As we look into and are shaped by God's word of liberty and promise, we become not only hearers of the word but doers of the word for the sake of the world God loves.

You are God's beloved. Reflect that love in all you do.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.