

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018
The Rev. Jamie S. Samilio

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

We stand out of respect, we sit when we are listening and learning, we kneel when we are penitent. These are our traditions and it is how we communicate with our body language that something worth noting is happening. When we take communion we place our hands together or if your tradition taught you, by sticking out your tongues. I grew up a Roman Catholic and over the years many traditions have changed and evolved. When I first went to church the priest faced the wall to celebrate the Eucharist, and it was said in Latin. And if you were a RC, the wine was rarely served to the general congregation, and it has only been in the last part of the 20th century that receiving both the body and blood became the norm.

People have all kinds of traditions they follow. For example, when we sit down to dinner we put our napkins in our laps, and when the flag is raised we salute or put our hand over our hearts, and we take off our hats. We stand when the bride begins her walk down the aisle. Across the world traditions and norms have developed, drawing on the land, water, and culture of the people inhabiting areas of the globe. Language, music, laws, religions, and holidays all developed as creation did what creation does; grows, develops, and evolves. All creation is in an ever-changing environment, and if we are to survive, we need to adapt. We have learned to take the best of what we know and move forward, changing and adapting as the world around us evolves. Evolution is a law of nature—something I can now say in a church and not be immediately pulled from the room and charged with heresy. This itself is proof of our evolution—that and the fact that I am a female and clergy.

In the last 2000+ years much has changed in the way we relate to each other and to God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, science has advanced, literature, language, and cultural exchanges have come as globalization has increased—we evolve as we discover and uncover the wonder of creation. How we deal with our humanity as we change is what the scriptures are talking about today.

The challenge for us is that we are subject to the laws of nature, and like water, always taking the path of least resistance, we always seek to take the easier, smoother path—it is in our nature and our instinct to survive. And while we believe that God gives us maximum support in our quest to evolve mentally, physically and spiritually, God does not protect us from the laws of nature or from each other—that is up to us, and the choices that we make. And we make those choices based on our learning and experience, and following our social norms and traditions.

Our letter from James and the Gospel of Mark run parallel today, and I found myself interchanging the scripture as I collected my thoughts. I also found that my subconscious deemed it necessary to loop a Michael Jackson song in my head as I contemplated the scripture. Usually, that means there is something in the song I need to pay attention to, and I will get to that in a minute.

The people hearing the words from James for the first time, framed them using their understanding of God, religion, culture, and tradition. Remember that our “English” scriptures are derived from texts written in Greek and Hebrew. In James, the writer used a Greek view of God and the universe, but chose a Jewish view of the law to reach the people of that time. In Greek philosophy, every being has its origin in the highest being—who is the source of light, life, truth, good and ideas. From the Greek perspective, God is on the top and all others are lined up on a ladder below. The people closer to God, that is, the higher you were on the ladder, the more important you were considered.** Our Christian view was very appealing to these Greek ears. When they were told that with Jesus as our brother, God’s children are not on a ladder, but are together on equal footing, the concept empowered these listeners—and it should empower us as well. The Jews back in the day had many laws and traditions, and Jewish law requires a

response of doing, not just saying. These words were a call to action, as individuals and as a growing Christian community.**

The Gospel challenges those Jewish laws, and I think the message Jesus is giving us is that the people have so tight a grip on the laws and traditions, that they have failed to evolve as the world around them has changed—let this be a warning to us as well.

In the “evolution meets tradition tension,” they had lost sight of the spirit of the law in favor of hanging onto their traditions. Embracing new ideas and ways of operating in this world is hard, and it can alter our culture. On the surface people say they fear change, but it is really loss that they fear, not change. Change happens every day, but when it does, what we fear is losing our identity, our status, our place high up on the ladder. If we change, who will we be? If we do not change, then we box ourselves in. If we do not embrace the wonder of creation and continue to grow, develop, and evolve, we will remain boxed in mentally, spiritually, and physically. Boxing ourselves in, thinking we are protecting our interests, status, and wealth, cuts us off from the world. The box we build to protect us, will keep us bound inside of it. It is in our nature to choose the path of least resistance, and we tend to first trust what is concrete and in front of us. At some level I think we all know that we need to continue to learn, adapt, and change. Especially if we are to thrive and if we are to use all the gifts God has graced us with to their full potential. But, change is easier said than done, yet we need to start somewhere, and then keep at it.

Strange, but somehow it always seems easier to throw stones at other people than it is for us to look in the mirror—we deflect. Still, scripture tells us to take the plank out of our own eyes before we try to remove a splinter from someone else’s eye. I think most of us have a layer of protection that makes it difficult see ourselves as we really are. That may actually be a protection for us because seeing ourselves as we really are might paralyze each and every one of us. My experience with blinding flashes of insight about myself are that they are painful, and scary, and sometimes shameful. It’s much easier to focus on all the ‘wrong’ that is ‘out there’ in other people and in the world, rather than focus on all the ‘wrong’ that is ‘in here,’ inside our heads and our hearts. And yet, the only wrong we can do anything about is the wrong that is in ourselves. Jesus points out that it’s not all the stuff ‘out there’ that will defile us, but the stuff we have inside that we project out into the world that is the real defilement. Clean hearts are more important than clean hands.* It is crucial that we embrace the spirit of the laws and tradition and not hang onto human precepts as doctrines.

Where do we start to clean our hearts? I think we start by taking a long, hard look at ourselves in a mirror. Are we the people we hoped we would turn out to be? We tend to trust people we can look in the eye, but can you look yourself in the eye? If it is true that we are what we eat, then stop consuming “...fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” Feed instead on faith, hope, love, kindness, thanksgiving, appreciation, concern, tolerance, and acceptance. These things reflect back a brilliant and shining glimpse of what is beautiful in the world. Having feasted on what is good, look back in your mirrors. I know that if I embraced more of the good, I would more closely reflect the kind of person I want to be. All good thoughts about becoming a better person, but how do we do that? Here is where Michael Jackson comes in, he wrote: “I’m starting with the man in the mirror, I’m asking him to change his ways, and no message could have been any clearer, if you wanna’ make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, and make that change... You can’t close your mind, you gotta get it right while you’ve got the time.”

How do we begin the process of change? James gives us some insight on how we can work on that with some grace, “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...” Quick to listen—learn to take in information. Slow to speak: Listen to understand and not to respond. Slow to anger: Give people some time and space—and even a second chance, judgment is not ours. “...for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Respond to controversy with love, a can

of gas in a firestorm does no good for anyone. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” You choose what you feast on and fast from, let go of the parts of your character that serve no one well. The word of God is in all of us. Welcome the wisdom God brings to our lives, welcome the love that surrounds us, and the life within us. If we welcome the good inside us, our mirrors should reflect us brilliantly.

One final thing to remember, do not just pay lip service to God and then do what serves your best interest. Having good intentions is not enough, and I hear there is a road paved with them. We only have the power to change ourselves, but what we do after that matters, what we do produces the first fruits, and what we do has the power to change the world. Change yourself, and then go, and be doers of the word. Be the good in the world, and love one another. Amen

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*Inspired by the writing of The Rev. Liz Tomlinson

** Information from: *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, Westminster John Knox Press 2009

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23