

lec 22B-Sept 1, 2024

Psalm 15; Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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In the green season, we sometimes see the first or second lessons go on a jag—a run of five or six weeks with readings from the same book, the so-called semi-continuous readings. This year we've got five weeks of James for the second reading.

This can be a hard draw for a Lutheran pastor. Maybe you know Luther's opinion of this book. He called it "the epistle of straw" and thought it never should have made it into the New Testament. The reason, in part, was James' emphasis on what we do, summed up in the well known verse "Faith without works is dead." Anathema to Luther, of course, since he thought this supported what we have come to call "works righteousness"—the delusion that we can save ourselves by doing the right thing. This book does lean heavily on counsel about doing the right thing; in some ways it has more in common with the Old Testament's wisdom literature—books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—than the letters of the New Testament. There are only two mentions of Jesus in the whole book.

So over the years I've been a little skittish about preaching on James. Even now, I imagine if Luther were here he'd be clutching his pearls. But here we go anyway.

For a few years in my twenties, I was very involved in modern dance. I spent a lot of time in the dance studio—hours each day, sometimes. I can still see in my mind's eye the polished wood of the floor, the long windows that let in natural light, and framed to a starry sky on cold winter nights; the barre under the windows where we practiced the disciplines of ballet technique—and on one side, the mirrored wall that every dance studio contains.

Part of learning to dance is learning how to use the mirrors. That might seem simple.

Mirrors offer instant feedback, reflecting a dancer's steps and body position.

This can be very uncomfortable at first, as you see your every mistake reflected back to you. Then, once you overcome the urge to run out of the room and never return, you can easily become over-dependent on the mirror, watching yourself constantly so you can keep adjusting your position. But that's not going to work when you get on stage, and you're dancing in front of an audience and not a mirror.

Worse, looking in the mirror can distract you from learning what you most need to know—which is what it feels like, from the inside, in the body, to have your body in the right place.

To use the mirror well, you have to look and then look away—but *remember* what you saw.

Now as far as we know, the writer of James was not a dancer, but he's offering the same advice on using a mirror. "For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like."

For James, the law is a mirror. Luther thought so too. The Ten Commandments show us who we are—sinners, in need of God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace; because when we pay attention to them and try to live by them, we soon discover that not one of us can keep a single one of the commandments. Looking into the mirror of God's law, we're going to see clearly how we fall short. And that's a good thing, because then we know our need for God, and we call on the Lord who is already near. And with God's help, we try again to learn the steps, to join the dance of life together.

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves," James says. For James, actions flow out of faith like dance comes out of music. You need to listen the music—to be a hearer of the word—but if you're going to dance you've got to move.

Maybe faith is something like that. Faith comes through hearing, St. Paul declared—hearing the word of God read, hearing it proclaimed in

preaching, hearing the prayers we raise to God. But faith is meant to work on us and in us, and to move us to join the dance of God's own life.

God gives us mirrors so we can see who we are. With the eyes of faith, we look in the mirror, and see ourselves as God sees us--as wounded people in need of God's own wholeness and healing; as sinners, in need of forgiveness and reconciliation; and as God's own beloved sons and daughters, made in God's own image.

God uses us as mirrors, to help others see who they are; we learn in shared reflection and in the gift of honest relationship. Whenever we have the courage to speak the truth in love and to listen when others do it, even when it hurts. The coach who says, "Kid, you're a hard worker and you've got a lot of heart, but ya know, I think maybe you're just the guy we need in the band." The friend who sees the shadows under your eyes and the way your clothes look too big, and doesn't buy your claim that everything is fine.

Or maybe you're the one holding up the mirror so someone else can see who they really are, and what they have to give. The person behind you in church with that amazing voice, so you ask if they've thought about joining the choir. The nephew with a compassionate heart; his parents want him to be an engineer like his mother, but maybe his real vocation is nursing. Your granddaughter squirming unhappily in her itchy tutu—that energy might be better used on the soccer field.

God uses mirrors in worship, to teach us to dance. I've never seen a church with a mirrored wall, but maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. Imagine that all behind the table was all mirrors. When we stood up to confess our sins, we could look straight ahead into the mirror, a sign of what we already do when we confess our sins—we hold up a mirror to our lives, take an honest look, and admit that we aren't the people we're meant to be.

When we came up for communion, we'd stand in front of that mirror. And in a good week, we'd see ourselves as God sees us—as God's own beloved ones, forgiven and set free. In the mirror we'd see the people receiving communion with us. We'd get a glimpse of what God sees—in the tears slipping down one face, the relief in another, the longing, the hope, the joy. We'd see others looking into the mirror with us, all of learning to dance.

And God uses us to make mirrors. We come here as we are, beloved and broken. We come here as we are, and God sweeps up the shards of our shattered dreams, like broken mirrors, gathers them together, and sets them into a mosaic. The Father of lights, fashioning broken glass into a giant mirror ball, lifted up in the air, turning, turning, catching the light and scattering it back over us.

And every week, that invitation to receive what we are—Christ's own body and blood. So let's eat and drink together, and dance in the light of Christ.