

“The Face in the Mirror”
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; Psalm 139:1-18

Psalm 139:1-18

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down
and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,
you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Mark 7:1-23 (selected)

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

²¹“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, [recklessness¹]. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

James 1:17-27

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

²¹Therefore 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.

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Sermon

In an ancient fable, told in Greece more than half a millennium before Jesus was born, a dog is carrying a big, juicy bone in his mouth, and comes to a bridge over a stream. While he's crossing the bridge, he looks down to the water, and he sees his own reflection on the surface, and thinks it's another dog, carrying an even bigger bone.

So he opens his mouth, dropping the bone, and dives in to attack the other dog, to take what he wants for himself. That means he's lost two things: he's lost the good thing that he had, which is now swept away in the stream;

and he has lost the *illusion*, which he'd wanted even more than what he

had.ⁱⁱ

Because the things we do and say, or don't do or don't say
—because *who we decide we want to be*—
can make life easier, or make life harder
for the people around us,

God's word reminds us who we were created to be
—children of God, disciples of Christ, created in God's image—

by inviting us to think about the face we see in the mirror,
and whether or not we will remember who we are,
even when we're not looking in the mirror.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
get rid of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness within you;
welcome with meekness the implanted word
that has the power to save your souls—
but be doers of the word,
and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

“Because those who are only hearers of the word, and not doers,
are like people who look at themselves in a mirror:
as soon as they look away,
they forget what they just saw” (James 1:19-24, paraphrased).

Remember who you are.

“Now,” says Isaiah, “thus says the LORD,
who created you, O Jacob,
who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

“I praise you [O God],” says Psalm 139,
“for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth” (Psalm 139:14-15).

When they saw Jesus and his followers eating without having gone through the ritual cleansing, the Pharisees were appalled. (Whether they were more appalled at the eating habits or that Jesus would thumb his nose at the tradition is left ambiguous.)

And Jesus said, it isn't about some ritual impurity that you take in that “defiles” a person; it's what comes from a person's heart that can defile: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, carelessness treatment of other people—it's the garbage that comes out from *within* that defiles a person.

“When you look at your face in the mirror,” asks Fred Buechner,
“what do you see in it that you most like
and what do you see in it that you most deplore?”^{iv}

Each of us is responsible for that person whom we see in the mirror—

when we get ready to leave the cocoon of our privacy,
and present our prepared face to the world;
when we're getting dressed up
to celebrate, or mourn, or attract a partner, or do business;
when we're treating a wound;
or troubleshooting something that just doesn't feel right;
when we're at the wheel of a lethal machine,
and we see that pair of eyes looking back at us
as we check to make a lane change
or see if there's a patrol car coming up behind us.

That person whose image is right there in front of us at those times—
we are responsible for the actions of that person.

That's the one person with whom we have spent every moment of our lives.

The author and editor Victoria Zackheim wrote, “When you were in your youth—riding your bicycle, playing stick-ball, learning how to knit, sitting too close to that old black-and-white television, attending the senior prom—did you look in the mirror and imagine yourself in any way close to the person you are today? And now that you are here, in this place, at this age,

do you look back with longing at the old dreams and expectations? Perhaps you are delighted, even surprised, by what you have achieved.

“In my adolescence,” she said, “the child I saw in that mirror in no way resembled the person I’ve become, and I imagine many of us can say the same. You wanted to be a doctor or ballerina, the next person to walk on the moon, a teacher who stirs the imagination of students. Did those dreams come true? Perhaps a more important question: Was your future defined by your own dreams, or by the dreams and expectations of others?”^v

She tells a story of a young man she had met some years earlier.

“[His] specialty,” she said, “was putting together funding for Silicon Valley start-ups. When the funds were in place, he would take on the role of chief financial officer, and stay with the company until it was ready to fly.

“Once it launched, he would resign his position and look for the next start-up, taking with him substantial shares of stock. He did this for nearly five years, amassing a considerable fortune along the way.

“One day,” she said, “his mother called. She was in her eighties, and her voice quivered as she expressed her concerns about her son’s life.

“‘But I’m doing great!’ he enthused.

“After a long silence, his mother responded, ‘You say so, dear, but you never seem to be able to hold a job.’”

Zackheim explains: “*He* was a risk taker, *his mother* was a child of the Depression, and *his* sense of adventure and joy caused *her* untold anxiety—perhaps because [...] he was living *his* dreams, not hers [emphasis added].”^{vi}

We are the ones responsible for that face that looks back at us.

If you ever saw the movie a few years ago called *Up in the Air*, you might remember a dialogue between a 23-year-old professional and another woman who is maybe a generation ahead of her. The younger woman, coping with a recent disappointment in her personal life, says, “I thought I’d be engaged by now... When I was 16, I thought by 23, I’d be married,

maybe have a kid, corner office by day, entertaining at night... ”

She goes on to describe the checklist of her ideal husband:

“White collar; college grad; loves dogs; likes funny movies;
6-foot-1, brown hair, kind eyes;
works in finance, but is outdoorsy, y’know, on the weekends.
I always imagined he’d have a single-syllable name,
like Matt, or John, or Dave.
What about you?”

And the more wizened one says, “You know, by the time you’re 34, all the physical requirements just go out the window.”

“I just don’t want to settle,” says the 23-year-old.

“You’re young,” says the other. “Right now you see settling as some sort of failure.”

“It is,” says the younger one. “By definition.”

And the more experienced one says, “By the time someone is right for you, it won’t feel like settling. And the only person left to judge you will be the 23-year-old with the target on your back.”^{vii}

Is there a younger version of you judging the person you see in the mirror? If so, you can tell them it’s time to put a sock in it. They may be more idealistic than you are. But you are much smarter than they are, and you have lived more experiences than that person could ever have imagined.

In the introduction to a recent book about trauma and healing called *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes,

“One does not have to be a combat soldier, or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight

witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.

“As human beings we belong to an extremely resilient species. Since time immemorial we have rebounded from our relentless wars, countless disasters (both natural and [human]-made), and the violence and betrayal in our own lives. But traumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations. They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems.”^{viii}

The face you see in the mirror has lived all of that with you, and knows that when you look back at your life and see, at the hardest times, just one set of footprints in the sand, you would not have made it this far if Someone hadn't carried you.

John O'Donohue has a meditative piece called “At the End of the Day: A Mirror of Questions”—ideally, a way of figuratively looking in the mirror and thinking about who you have been on that day, before turning in for the night:

Where did my eyes linger today?
Where was I blind?
Where was I hurt without anyone noticing?
Whom did I neglect?
Where did I neglect myself?
What did I do today for the poor and the excluded?
Did I remember the dead today?
Where did I allow myself to receive love?
What reached me today? How deep did it imprint?
From the evidence—why was I given this day?^{ix}

Because the things we do and say
—because *who we decide we want to be*—
can make life easier, or make life harder
for the people around us,

God's word reminds us who we were created to be
—children of God, disciples of Christ, created in God's image—

by inviting us to think about the face we see in the mirror,
and whether or not we will remember who we are,
even when we're not looking in the mirror.

One of the most touching moments of this year's youth conference was when Gail Porter Nelson was telling 1100 young people (and the adults who were with them) about how she herself as a girl had despised her hair, her stance, the way she looked in the mirror.

That already was ministry: Everybody, especially at that emotional hurricane of an age, thinks they're the only person in the world who doesn't look as good as they wish they did.

And, she said, "Now when I look in the mirror, I see God, and she is beautiful."

When you look away from the mirror, do you remember who you are?

You are a child of God.

You were made in God's image.

Jesus Christ died for you—specifically!

Jesus Christ died specifically for you,

and was raised from the dead specifically for you.

That face you see in the mirror—weathered, blemished, craggy, enhanced; wise, noble, knowing, tested—that face belongs to an indescribably beautiful creation.

It is, to those around you, for better or for worse, the face of Christ.

So let us all be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

ridding ourselves of what does not reflect

the unsurpassable love of God,

and welcome with meekness the implanted word

that has the power to save our souls.

Let us be doers of the word, and not just hearers.

And don't ever forget who you are.

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ⁱ This is my translation of ἀφροσύνη, which in the NRSV is “folly” and in most English translations “foolishness.” Nobody willingly says “folly” anymore, and current American English use of “foolishness” suggests either idiocy (a dated term for an actual condition of mental incompetence), or “acting stupid.” *Aphrosuné* suggests to me a deliberate decision—by a person who is perfectly capable of knowing better—to act without consideration of consequences or concern for others. I believe “recklessness” is the most accurate English word for that phenomenon.

ⁱⁱ Aesop’s Fables, “The Dog and Its Reflection” or “The Dog and His Shadow” (Perry Index #133).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is the three-part sermon thesis formulation as taught by Don Wardlaw (“Because... I will... by means of...”). I use it to prepare every sermon, but rarely spell it out in the manuscript.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; pp. 82-83).

^v Victoria Zackheim (2009-09-22). *The Face in the Mirror: Writers Reflect on Their Dreams of Youth and the Reality of Age* (pp. 13-14). Prometheus Books – A. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Zackheim, op. cit., p. 13.

^{vii} *Up in the Air* (2009, Paramount Pictures), script by Jason Reitman & Sheldon Turner, based on the book by Walter Kirn.

^{viii} van der Kolk MD, Bessel (2014-09-25). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (p. 1). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. [Note: the data summarized in the first paragraph is credited by van der Kolk to V. Felitti, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study.” *American*

Journal of Preventive Medicine 14, no. 4 (1998): 245– 58].

^{ix} John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (Doubleday, 2008).