

## Seeing Ourselves – Pent+14B

James is encouraging us to lead lives of godly activity, through habitual reliance on godly influence. An archer goes forth looking for targets of fun, food or foe. Whenever the archer encounters one of these, feelings arise: desire for fun, determination to get food or destruction of a foe. But before anything can be accomplished, the archer must reach back into her quiver, pull out a suitable arrow, notch and draw it according to her ability and training. Only then, with calm breath and open eyes can her best shot be taken.

Every one of us feels these feelings: desire, determination and destruction all the time – hopefully not too much of the latter. We all want happiness and entertainment; we all want to provide for ourselves and those we would love; we all have situations we would change, forces we would arrest in ourselves and the world. The question is, do we select our arrows from the supply God provides, the kind that fly straight and true on wings of compassion, hope and equanimity? Or do we meet each situation with a desperate scramble for whatever arrow is nearest to hand, battered, warped, flimsy and obsolete though they may be, and just blast away? All too often, without knowing we fire off volleys that boomerang back to lodge themselves in our own hides where and when we can least expect or tolerate them: where the sun shineth not.

*Yalla du rayal nit-i-bañ-am.* From the Wolof of Senegambia. *Yalla du rayal nit-i-bañ-am.* God does not always destroy those whom one hates. My anger does not produce God's righteousness?' Wait a second! You mean to say 'feelings don't bestow rights, they occasion responsibilities? That's what the fellow seems to be saying. Yes, our language can be confusing – that word responsibility sneakily implies that we have the ability to respond. But without a clear look in the mirror of God's precepts -- an acknowledgement of what we see there and how we are inclined to respond to those precepts – we have no ability; we are bound to falter. And unless this acknowledgement is followed by a sustained awareness of those inclinations, when we falter, we veer, we rationalize; we justify listless, disappointing, even downright disagreeable behavior. As our Communion prayer confesses, 'we wander far away.'

Perhaps we come away from our godly mirrors with some clarity of vision and conviction of purpose but, as Mark says, "We hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word that is sown in us." In other words, we have feelings, and they obscure our vision. *Ojos que no ven: Corazon que no siente.* With eyes that do not see, comes a heart that does not feel. We may convince ourselves that our so-called 'gut reactions' are good indicators of what we ought to be

doing, but without an open channel to the greater good of God, we are gambling with our very lives and, all too often with the well-being of those around us too. Anger here is getting a bit of a bad rap. Self-righteous anger is a luxury we cannot afford, it's true, but any emotion – even so-called good ones -- can wreak havoc if unreflected-upon, unfiltered, unchecked by prayerful consideration before propelling action.

The truth of this has not been shaken through the millennia. Time and again God has called us through them. The words of the Book of Deuteronomy, probably set down in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, are attributed to Moses himself: “So now, Israel, just as God has instructed me, I teach you statutes. Observe them diligently to show your wisdom, so everyone will say, ‘What a discerning people!’ But take care and watch yourselves closely; don’t let the things your eyes have seen slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

Because we are inclined to point our accusing fingers at all the circumstances, institutions and individuals that make it difficult, if not impossible for us to act self-reflectively – all the things that force us to behave “off-line” where God’s Word is concerned, Jesus preempts the discussion: They asked him, “Why don’t your people live according to tradition? They’re eating with defiled hands!” He said to them: “Nothing has changed since Isaiah. God is still crying out, ‘You people honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from

me. You're teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human traditions instead." In other words, this part of your religion is worthless.

"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within. They are what defile a person."

Of course nowadays our self-reflection also includes thanking God for the gifts of scientific discovery, and also paying attention to what they continue to teach us about God's greater purpose. We know it's also an exceedingly good idea to wash our hands before eating – or doing surgery; cups and bronze kettles too. And if Jesus came today, he'd say so.

As we heard from James, Jesus' message is both an invitation and an obligation: "In fulfillment of God's purpose we have been born by the word of truth. My beloved, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Those who look into the perfect law of liberty and persevere will be blessed in their doing. But those who think they are religious, but do not bridle their tongues but rather deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless; they are defiled. Religion that is undefiled

before God is this: to care for the needy and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

If we are paying attention to the mirror of God’s purpose and the multitude of subtle and not-so-subtle veerings away therefrom that fragile, fearful, foolish creatures such as ourselves can undertake and undergo, if we are trying, our goal and our reward is hope. The hope that Jesus promises is the very same that James and the prophets of old have been holding up to us as the most desirable and lasting of treasures, indeed as the meaning of life. It is the hope that, because Creation is good, we might be good too. It is the hope that we are moving in the direction of goodness despite all our fragility, fearfulness and foolery. It is the hope that, little by little -- with all our missteps and false conclusions and reservations – little by little, if we pay attention to the mirror and glorify the one who made it and graciously inclines it to our faces, we might come to recognize ourselves in it’s refracted light and be glad of what we find there.