

Looking in the Mirror

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 22
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Saturday, August 29, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I never looked so tall, so slender. I turned this way and that, admiring myself in the mirror just long enough to realize a line of people was steadily growing behind me, themselves ready to look in that particular mirror.

It was my first and only time in the Fun House at Williams Grove Amusement Park. Six summers ago, my family and I spent a fun-filled day at the park in Mechanicsburg. It has since closed down—no cause and effect there by my presence—so I'll never be able to go back, which is sad. The park reminded me of the annual carnival in my hometown when I was growing up. No high tech rides like at DisneyWorld, but the kinds of attractions from simpler days. The Fun House afforded me the opportunity to see myself as I've never been. So that's what it's like to be five foot ten! Of course, there were those **other** mirrors. I admit not spending as much time in front of those, though they did give me a good chuckle as I gazed at the squat blob of flesh that appeared before me and appeared to **be** me. There also was a mirror that seemed quite ordinary, one without any obvious distortion, but I don't recall whether I took much notice of myself in that mirror either.

And that is part of the human predicament, I think. We don't take note of ourselves in the mirror like we should. We often only see what we want to see. No wonder we occasionally refer to a mirror and sink a vanity. For we can be vain. Sometimes we preen, thinking perhaps overly-highly of ourselves. But if what we see is not to our liking, we turn quickly away.

I don't know how many mirrors you have in your house. You might try counting them. The Eastons have plenty. There's the bathroom sink mirror, and there are mirrors attached to the bedroom dressers. There is the floor length mirror on the back of our daughters' bedroom door. We have one of those two-sided hand mirrors—you know, the ones that magnify—it's frightening to look at yourself in magnification, but necessary sometimes. Oh, and there's a huge mirror spread across the wall in the living room. That mirror is especially useful to my 15-year-old son, who likes to have me stand beside him every few weeks so he can gloat that he has now not only surpassed his mother in height, but is in fact beginning to tower over me.

I want you to think of our Gospel lesson today as Jesus holding up a mirror before the religious leaders of his day—the Jewish Pharisees and scribes. His words to them are an ordinary mirror, with no distortion. He offers honest, genuine reflection showing who they are. (Well, he might have added some magnification so they could see themselves better.) Now, these self-made and self-congratulatory religious authorities thought overly-highly of themselves. So they didn't care to look at themselves in an ordinary mirror, see who they really were. They preferred the mirror that made them look impressive and important to the people, like that Fun House mirror that

made me seem so tall and slender. The leaders of the synagogue and temple preferred the illusion of their human achievements and their spiritual purity. They had no desire to note their true reflection. But Jesus lays all bare.

We come upon the Pharisees and scribes in our Gospel today doing something we are quite familiar with ourselves. They are busy critiquing and judging other people's religious ways. They happen to witness some of Jesus' disciples eating but—collective and horrified gasp—they are not washing their hands before the meal. See, the Jewish law and tradition consisted of elaborate rituals of hand washing and washing of various dining utensils prior to eating. This tradition had grown in emphasis and importance over the centuries, till it seemed to have equal footing with things like the written tradition of the Ten Commandments. The disciples' failure to wash their hands meant they were considered to be ritually unclean, not holy, and thus not fit for polite company and faithful worship.

What's interesting to note is that tradition of hand washing originally only applied to the priests in the temple who needed to be clean before they approached the altar, but the Pharisees over time extended it to everyone. While the Pharisees were fastidiously trying to keep themselves ritually clean, they made no bones about the fact that there were others they saw shirking that responsibility, so they considered them unclean. They saw the disciples not washing hands before they ate, and they saw Jesus, the disciples' teacher, not particularly concerned about the matter. The Pharisees thought the disciples' actions disrespectful of the law and hence disobedient before God. They were haughty enough and bold enough to go up to Jesus and express their opinion. But Jesus holds up a mirror to the Pharisees and basically says in my paraphrase here: "If you could just see yourselves right now. Look in the mirror. See who you really are—You're hypocrites. You pay lip service to God but your hearts are far away from Him. You're so busy mastering what you're convinced is this important ritual that you abandon the real commandments of God. You're so busy fussing over hand washing, you don't have time left to love God. You don't have time left to love your neighbor. Those are the holy ways of God that matter."

Maybe we need to see ourselves as we are in that mirror. I recall the summer my now-taller-son Matthew was much smaller, and had had a bicycle accident. No broken bones. No stitches were needed. But there was plenty of blood and a swollen lip and brush burns and loose and chipped teeth. I had to convince Matthew we needed that day to see our pediatrician and our dentist. Didn't realize we'd also see an endodontist for a future root canal before the day was out. I figured Matt needed to look at himself in the mirror. He didn't become hysterical. It didn't frighten him. But in taking the time to look at himself, he saw the damage done. The mirror didn't lie.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees and scribes to really look at themselves and see the damage done by sin. Not because he wanted to browbeat them and judge them harshly the way they had judged others. Jesus knew the Pharisees did indeed love the Lord God. He knew they wanted to be faithful and live rightly. He just wanted them to recognize their own human creatureliness before God, and their own need to submit humbly before God. He wanted them to understand that holiness is much more than outward trappings.

But just as we sometimes turn away when we don't like what we see in the mirror, the religious leaders did the same. They closed off their hearts, they stopped listening, they turned away. So Jesus continued to teach the crowds and disciples who remained, and that's the second part of our Gospel lesson: Jesus told those who stayed to listen that it's not the dirt under your fingernails or the mud adhering to the soles of your shoes that defile you, make you unclean. No, it's what comes from within a person that defiles them. Hatred. Selfishness. Greed. Deceit. Envy. Cynicism. Prejudice. Slander. That's the stuff that really separates us from God and from our neighbor. That's the stuff we don't want to see in the mirror, but the mirror doesn't lie. It's often hard to look at those things that come out of us, but it's the start of honest reflection of who we are, the damage and destruction our sin has done. In our tradition, we call that self-examination and ultimately repentance.

And once we have seen ourselves for who we are, our gracious God offers us another mirror in order to see what God would have each of us become. He wants us to know the wonderful children he intends us to be. It's true that what comes from inside of us defiles us, but there is something that comes from outside of us that changes everything---that is our God's unchanging purpose to give us new birth, to recreate us through the healing word we hear this day that forgives, restores, and strengthens us. God makes us clean, changes our hearts, and sets us apart each day for fruitful living, for loving and serving others in God's name. And the reflection that we see in **that** mirror reflects the very goodness of God shining through us. **AMEN.**