

5.6.2018 Rogation Sunday (James 1:22-27)

*“Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was”* (James 1:22-24).

There’s an old article from Readers Digest written by a man who’s telling the story about a band of gypsies that stopped to drink from a well that was located in the courtyard of his childhood home. He was about five years old at the time, and remembers being fascinated by one gypsy in particular. This gypsy, who looked like a giant to the little boy, had pulled a bucketful of water from the well and was standing there drinking, holding the large wooden pail as if it weighed no more than a teacup. When he finished, he mopped his face with a scarf and then leaned over and looked deep into the well. Curious, the little boy tried to pull himself up the well’s stone rim to see what he was looking at. When the gypsy noticed the boy, he smiled, scooped him up into his arms, and said, “Do you know who lives down there?” The boy shook his head. The gypsy said, “God lives there. Look!” Then he held the boy over the edge of the well. There, in the still, mirror-like water, the boy saw his own reflection, and said, “But that’s me.” “Yes,” said the gypsy, and as he gently set the boy down, he said, “Now you know where God lives.”

Indeed, and as Christians we are assured, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that God resides in all who believe in Jesus Christ, for on the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord made this promise to His disciples, saying: *“I will pray to the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: but ye know Him; for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you”* (John 14:16-18). We know where God lives. Through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, by the precious Blood that was poured out for our redemption, God lives in each one of us, and this profound, miraculous mystical union involves every Person of the Holy Trinity. The Father (1 John 4:15), the Son (Colossians 1:27), and the Spirit (2 Timothy

1:14) have come unto us, and have made their home within each one of us (John 14:23).

By the grace of God, we were scooped up into the arms of our Father in heaven, and there He revealed to us the unimaginable truth that Almighty God no longer dwells among His people in a Tabernacle in the wilderness, or with His people in a Temple in Jerusalem, but in His people, in the temple which is our body. As St. Paul declared: *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body”* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Our bodies have been purchased, ransomed, redeemed by the atoning sacrifice of our Lord. We were bought at a price of infinite value, and the truth that God now lives in us, that the bodies of all who believe in Christ are the temple of the Holy Spirit, is a fact that we must cling to if we are to be *“doers of the word, and not hearers only,”* deceiving our own selves.

In our epistle this morning, St. James makes a comparison that just about every adult can relate to. If you're anything like me, you've stood in front of a mirror under a bright light and thought: “Who is that person staring back at me?” As I go about my day, I'm sure that I have more hair, a strong athletic build, and rugged good looks, but when I take a close look in the mirror, the flaws and scars that are not always visible from my subjective (and very deceptive) point of view are quickly revealed. A good mirror and a bright light allow us to clearly see our physical appearance, but the truth isn't always flattering, and there comes a day for most of us when we begin to think that it's better not to study these things too closely. Yes, we know that we're deceiving ourselves, but it's easier, and more flattering, to take a quick look in the mirror and then turn away, forgetting the actual image and holding on tight to one of our own imagination.

We must admit that humans are really good at deceiving themselves, and St. James brings this fact to our attention in order to warn us about a particular type of self-deception. His real concern is not the way we deceive ourselves by overlooking the physical imperfections in our bodies. He wants us to recognize the tendency we have to ignore the defects and blemishes in our souls. James tells Christians in this passage that those who hear the Word of

God, and do not embrace its promises, stand in awe of its power, or obey its commandments, are those who deceive themselves. They're like a man who takes a quick look in the mirror and then turns away, so that he can get on with his daily life without the bother of bringing his soul into conformity with the truth of what the Law and the Gospel require.

The sermon we heard last Sunday brings to mind an example of such a man. On Good Friday, as God in the Person of Jesus Christ, stood before a man who was given the power to crucify Him or to release Him (John 19:10), our Lord said to Pontius Pilate, "*Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto Him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again...*" (John 18:37-38). On that day Pilate came face-to-face with Truth itself, but instead of asking his question sincerely and waiting patiently for the answer, Pilate quickly "*went out again,*" just like a man who looks at himself in the mirror and then goes his way. The only truth that was of any concern to Pilate was his own truth. This man who committed the most unthinkable crime had deceived himself so completely that he even made a public show of his own self-proclaimed innocence by taking water and washing his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "*I am innocent of this man's blood*" (Matthew 27:24). Not so fast Pilate, take a look in the mirror!

The fact that Pilate could so dramatically and publicly profess his innocence as he simultaneously gave the order for Jesus' crucifixion is a solemn lesson for all of us. Clearly, humans are so good at self-deception that we can convince ourselves anything we do is right. This frightening and convicting thought brings us back to where this sermon began, because the only way to avoid self-deception is to cling to the Truth, the Truth that has come unto us, and has made His home within each one of us.

We know where God lives, and as creatures made in His image and likeness, who are blessed with the dignity and freedom of personhood, we must be those who choose to objectively measure all we do by standing in front of the mirror under bright light. The mirror that St. James speaks of is the Word of God, and the light by which we see ourselves is God's only Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the "*Light of the World*" (John 8:12). As we

patiently and prayerfully search the Scriptures in His light, they tell us plainly what manner of man we are. Unlike Pilate, we humbly stand before our Lord as those who seek Truth, and desire to bring every aspect of our lives into conformity with God's Holy will, and while we must admit that left alone, humans are really good at deceiving themselves, by the grace of God, He has not left us *comfortless*. We are children who have been scooped up into the arms of our Father in heaven, and the glorious truth is that God has not set us down. He continues, through His indwelling Holy Spirit, to hold us in His loving embrace, constantly revealing the unimaginable truth that God lives in us. May the light of His great love shine on us, and in us, to the end that He may shine through us, bearing witness of the Truth to the world He gave His life to save.