

**True Religion
James 1:17-27
Jon Frost**

Rachel and I recently celebrated an anniversary and as is often the case with anniversaries, we were doing some reflecting; reflecting on vacations taken, milestones in vocational and family life, but also reflecting on moments where everything could have gone awry. One such moment particularly haunts me.

We had been dating for a couple of months and were entering that phase where we were introducing one another to our friend groups and definitely still trying to make the best impression possible at every moment. On one of these occasions, we were traveling to Baltimore by bus for an Orioles/Red Sox game with several of my friends. Upon arriving to Camden Yards and exiting the bus, a friend approached me with a look of worry and concern. He pulled me aside and in a hushed tone he informed me that I had a very...visible...nose hair. A nose hair. That's not what you want!

So we wandered off a short distance out of view and, let's just say, the situation was taken care of. Potential crisis averted. But a couple of things went through my mind. Did she see it? And if she did what would that mean?

But the second thing was, how on earth did I miss it? I had to have encountered a mirror at some point in the process of getting ready for this occasion. I just clearly did not pay close enough attention.

And that's the problem with mirrors. "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."

Beginning with today and the Sundays through September, the lectionary moves through the short book of James, which is in that section of the New Testament that I think particularly in the Protestant church, to some extent dwells in relative obscurity. It isn't one of the Gospels and it isn't one of Paul's letters.

In this first chapter, various themes are introduced which will reappear in greater detail later in the book. So like the introductions of other New Testament epistles, this passage feels like it meanders all over the place. Look at the big picture of this passage. It begins talking about every good gift coming from above, from the Father of lights. This could be a reference to the stars, so the image of God here is of the creator of the cosmos. But look where it ends up. Religion that is pure before God is to care for orphans and widows. It begins in the cosmic and ends at the street level.

What holds this passage together is the contrast between two narratives - that of taking and that of giving. What we see in the world is a proclivity for aggressive taking.

Violent words, unbridled tongues or in today's world unbridled keyboard strokes which seek to take others' dignity and sense of worth, aggressive anger that does not lead to justice because it is purely self serving and self interested. The narrative of the world says take. Horde your resources. Live for yourself.

The narrative of the Gospel is entirely different. It is one of abundant giving. Every generous act of giving, and every perfect gift, is from above. God is a giver and the fundamental truth of the cosmos, into which God has placed us, is that of a perpetual giving of gifts. In fulfillment of God's purpose, God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. In other words, God gifted us new life so that, in the midst of the brokenness of the world, our lives would show the new creation bursting forth out of the old.

In verse 21 James talks about this word of truth as having been planted in us. And so we have to make our lives a hospitable place for this word to take root and grow, and shape us into the image and likeness of Christ. We prepare the soil of this growth by being quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; by living with meekness and humility so that the implanted word has the power to save us.

This gets back to mirrors. In these two contrasting narratives of taking and giving, there are two ways of seeing. One, in a mirror, we only see ourselves and superficially at that. We see flaws but we'd rather not do the work of spiritual formation. We hear the word but it ends there. In the other way of seeing, where we look into, as verse 25 says the perfect law, the law of liberty, we see ourselves in the context of what God is doing beneath the surface of our lives. There, we face the things we'd rather not see and enter the hard work of spiritual formation. We hear the word and strive to do what it says.

But it doesn't end with us. Because the most fundamental thing about God's world is that it is a gift, as we are more and more formed in Christ's image, we more and more live our lives as a gift with and for others. James breaks it all down like this. Do you want your life to reflect the image of God, the Father of lights, from whom every gift is given? Take care of orphans and widows in their distress and keep yourself unstained by the world. Unlike the world that takes, give your life for the sake of the most vulnerable.

With so much overwhelming need in the world right now where do we begin? We live out the universal truth of the Gospel in particular ways. We have to. We can't start everywhere.

This Chosen initiative, in partnership with World Vision, is one way we are striving to be hearers and doers of the word in caring for the most vulnerable in their distress. Several things excited leadership of this church months ago, when we discussed this opportunity. It resonated with our vision to expand our witness, to serve our neighbors, and to equip the emerging generation. It connected with our identity as a Matthew 25 congregation with its goal of eradicating systemic poverty.

We were also so excited for the chance as a collection of households to focus our resources on one particular community through child sponsorship. This resonated even

more for me when I heard World Vision staff in Vietnam last week share about the community of Lam Binh and how the children there are among the most vulnerable.

We are also excited that their work in that community just began in the last year and so as we journey with them, we will see lives and communities transformed in the coming years.

And all of this at a time when relational connection to the global church is increasingly difficult because of COVID. In a time when so many factors are reinforcing the message to withdraw from the world, isolate, and focus inward, this week you were sent and you gave the gift of your presence to vulnerable children thousands of miles away.

God is the giver of every perfect gift. And God has planted in us the word of truth. In our hearing and doing of this word, may our lives be fertile soil so that we may be given as a gift again and again for the sake of God's world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.