

Taking the Mirror, Mirror Off the Wall

^{NRS} **James 1:17** Every 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.¹⁸ In 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.¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.²¹ Therefore 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.²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.²⁵ But 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.²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.”¹ Mystic, monk, and writer Thomas Merton left this great quote for us from a speech he gave in Bangkok the last day he spent on this earth in 1968. You know every once in a while a man or woman comes down the pike that just has such an impact- shows us all new possibilities and ways of being. For spiritually attentive and seeking person, whether in the church and especially for those without, Thomas Merton was just such a person. In just 53 short years Merton left behind over 50 books, 2,000 poems, and countless writings- all giving us phenomenal insight into the mystery of God from this rare mix of the artistic, the earthy, the contemplative, and always with an abiding care for the other- for justice.

But like most of us- Merton didn't start out that way.

¹ Merton, Thomas, Compassion (From a conference Merton gave the day of his death in Bangkok in 1968)

Merton had a rough time growing up. His mom, an American and his dad, an artist from New Zealand, lived a vagabond life that took them all over the place. Merton was born when the couple was living in France in 1915- tough time to be in that country. His mom died when he was 6. His dad died when he was 16. This sensitive, young boy was shipped over to England to live with grandparents who sent him to boarding school, where his scholarly aptitude began to show- as well as his reputation for being trouble. When he was finished with boarding school he spent a year at Oxford- one of the worst years of his life. His passions out of control he fathered an illegitimate child- a challenge in today's day and age, an absolutely scandal and disgrace in his. Then he faced further tragedy when lost her when she was killed during the German bombing of England in the war.

Advised that Americans might tolerate his behavior a little bit better than the uptight Brits, Merton fled to New York and attended Columbia for the rest of his undergraduate and master's work. But while his mind was flourishing, his passions were still going wild. He drank like a fish, and, according to his friends at Columbia "Partied, chased (and actually caught) women."² All this is to say this was a man who was a HECK of a lot of fun to be around- but one so centered on running after fleeting pleasures, so stuck on self, he really wasn't of much use to anyone but himself, and whatever Columbia revelers happened to be on hand. Whatever he was- he was certainly far from the spiritual giant he would become.

"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a

² Both quote and citation are from The Real Thomas Merton <http://www.therealmerton.com/tommie.html>

mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

What an image from the Epistle, the Letter of James. When we hear the Word but we don't chase after it and live it out- we're like people who look at ourselves in a mirror. And then after we get our make up just right, and our hair just right- then we still keep turning to look back at ourselves throughout to day. How am I doing, we wonder. Is my hair still all right? How am I doing? Did I get that piece of broccoli out from between my teeth? Basically, what James is saying is that when we hear the Word and that's it- when we hear the Word but it doesn't get inside of us enough for us to act on it- well, we just stay the same as before. I mean we start out, you and I, pretty much focused on ourselves-how am I doing, what am I thinking, what do I need to be accomplishing today? Believe me, I've used the back of church bulletins to write down my things to do list as much as anyone- I know all about letting the Word bounce off me like water off a duck's back.

You know, when we just hear the Word, but it doesn't really take root- well we're left pretty much the same as when we came in. Why that was a nice sermon. Yawn. Or, that was a nice piece of music- did you notice how nice it looks outside? Or, communion was OK- but whew, I'm glad I don't have to drink that wine at home. We come in pretty much focused on ourselves, and when we are hearers only, then we leave- still pretty much focused on ourselves only in nicer clothes.

There's a great poem from Sir Walter Scott that get's at what this is like- if it sounds familiar it's because it came from that fantastic movie Groundhog's Day- you know, the one with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell, where he lives the same day over,

and over, and over until he gets it right. Now, I hear from a lot of people who just hate this fine piece of cinema, but my family loves it- my folks watch it every Groundhog's Day- which, I tease them, is a pretty Groundhogian thing to do, really. Well, at one point Andie McDowell's character is trying to tell Bill Murray's character what a self-centered jerk he's being. At a diner, she leans in and quotes from Sir Walter Scott's poem My Native Land:

High though his titles, proud his name,
 Boundless his wealth as wish can claim;
 Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
 The wretch, concentred all in self,
 Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
 And, doubly dying, shall go down
 To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,
 Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung.

Now granted, Scott puts the case here a little strongly, but he's trying to warn us about living just for ourselves- for then not only will our bodies die, but our name, our fair renown, will have already long since given up the ghost, as well. And this is exactly what James is talking about. James knows most of the time you and I go around caught up in our own little worlds- having little time to see the roses around us, much less give them a sniff.

The last time session met I started them off with an exercise- because that's the foo-foo kind of thing I do these days. And I had them pair off into couples. And then I had them spend several minutes examining one another- gazing at each other from top to bottom. And believe me this is as uncomfortable as it sounds. I had to do this with a group this summer and got paired up with a young woman who was not wearing a ton of clothing. You could have lit up the room I was blushing so much. Well, I was feeling

cruel that night, so I even had our elders spin around for each other- two guys who got paired up together and will remain nameless particularly loved that part. And then, I had each of them turn away from one another and change three things about their appearance- they could move a ring from one finger to another, change an ear ring, button or unbutton a button- you name it. Then they had to turn around and figure out the three things that had changed in their partner. Now, let me say to their credit- nearly every one of the elders who was there that night got all three changes. But I'll tell you what- most of the time what that exercise shows us is that we don't really look at others and the world around us very well. Most of the time we just scan and move on, you know? We just look around, see something, recognize it, and then move on, without really taking the time to look with care- with depth. And this is more true today than ever, I think- when we are constantly bombarded with sounds and images from every corner.

Well, the good news is we aren't always like this. The good news is that by the grace of God- sometimes we aren't just a mirror, mirror on the wall kind of people only seeking after our own thoughts and reflections. No, every once in a while we know the blessing of being a people who take the mirror off of the wall- letting us look to those around us instead.

See, James imagines a completely different way of being- a way he says characterizes those who hear and do the Word. James says there are times when we not only hear the Word, and like the prophets do we eat it up, we chew it up and digest it, and it gets inside of us- and then it flows out from us in our words and actions. James puts it like this: "But those who look (not in the mirror, and stare back at ourselves) but 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.”

Now what on earth is the law of liberty- or the perfect law? James later defines this in chapter 2. What’s the law of liberty? “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (v 2.8) You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Sometimes, says James, sometimes we know those moments when we are freed from our constant fixation with ourselves, our needs, and our wants. Sometimes- we know the freedom of looking around ourselves and truly seeing, truly seeing, the wonders that start exactly where we stop.

And this is what happened to Merton. Merton didn’t stay stuck in that place as that self-centered young man- chasing after fleeting experience after experience. His transformation occurred over several moments in his life that pulled him out of himself- one was when he heard the call to the church and to writing. Merton remembers a love affair that went horribly wrong and nearly destroyed his sense of self and how he finally came that decision point where he realized that road that seemed so fun at first had taken him about as far as it could go. He writes: “If my nature had been more stubborn in clinging to the pleasures that disgusted me; if I had refused to admit that I was beaten by this futile search for satisfaction where it could not be found, and if my moral and nervous constitution had not caved in under the weight of my own emptiness, who can tell what would eventually have happened to me? Who could tell where I would have ended? I had come very far, to find myself in this blind-alley: but...this defeat that was to be the occasion of my rescue.” (Seven story mountain, p. 182)

Rescue for him, would mean a life lived obedient to the spirit- if not always his church. I think Merton may have been one of the fathers of the modern spiritual seekers- we who love Jesus, even when we're not always sure about his friends. Merton tried and failed to join the Franciscans- largely because he was too argumentative with them and out of the box. Ironically, he was finally being allowed into the Trappists- an even more disciplined minded bunch of austere monks if ever there was one. You know the basic history of monastic movements- a group of monks start out saying THEY are going to get back to living how Christ really intended. And they strip away all the trappings of the world- and they're so good at it, that they start to pick up a following. Then, they start to get funding. And then, they start to build buildings- and pretty soon the abbots, the chief monks start having nicer robes and cells. So, then ANOTHER group of monks says, this is ridiculous. WE know Christ didn't want all this- and so they split off from the first group and start ANOTHER group. Well, the Trappists came pretty late in the whole scheme of things- which means they're about as bare and austere as it gets.

So, Merton joins the Trappists, and some churchy people think this is when he really becomes important- but I think his real transformation comes, a little later- and from a thoroughly secular place. On March 18, 1958 at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky, this monk who was so intent on his own spiritual journey had an awakening that changed his life. He had an awakening to the fact that he wasn't alone in the world- that he was part of a great fellowship, more broad, deep, and wide than he had ever fathomed. He writes: "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one

another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special (religious) world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. (Why) the whole illusion of a separate, holy existence is a dream... This sense of liberation from this illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God, that I AM like other men, that I am only a man among others... I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun!"

All walking around shining like the sun. And with this Merton throws himself into dedicating his life to others- through his writing but also through engaging the world around him, marching for civil rights, protesting the Vietnam war, and starting some of the very first inter-religious dialogues traveling around the world meeting with religious leaders, caring not so much about their beliefs as much as the passion of their search. Merton was the absolute embodiment of how James defines true religion at the end of our text today: You want to know what religion is true, James wants to know? Well it isn't mere talk- mere talk about beliefs and positions. James tells us 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'

Of course the question for you and I now is who shall we commit ourselves to be in the crisp days of Fall ahead? Hearers only- unmoved, unchanged by the Words of life. Or Hearers and doers- people who are vulnerable and open to wherever it is the Word will have us go, people who are constantly astounded by others and who see, especially from the vantage point of this table, how we are all walking around bright shining as the sun. Friends, I ask you- what will you do with these amazing lives you've been given? How will you use the time you've been given?

As you chew on this, I'll leave you with the words of Mary Oliver, a poet who has also let go of the mirror to see the world around her- a world teeming with the fellowship of all life.

“Wild Geese”

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things.

The world and all that is in it stands before us this very moment. What shall we do about it? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.