

Sermon: *The House of Mirrors*
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Scripture James 1:17-27
September 2, 2018

When I was young I loved going to the Muskingum County Fair and to an amusement park at Buckeye Lake, Ohio.

I think it was at Buckeye Lake, though I am a bit unsure since being young was a long time ago, that I dared to enter a “house of mirrors.” That was my one and only venture into such a place! Let alone seeing my own image over and over again from every possible angle, a scary enough experience for a skinny kid, I was filled with terror for another reason. I could not readily find my way out of there! I recall, vividly really, feeling my way along walls of my own reflection hoping to find an exit; I wanted out of the “house of horrors,” desperately. I was filled with panic beyond the multiple self-images.

It is clear to you now that I did find a way to escape that unamusing amusement park attraction, and great was the relief and joy when I did!

I begin with this story of panic and feelings of a kind of “selfie entrapment” because I, in some ways, feel the same way in the world in which I live today. I am more than slightly bewildered by the swift societal and cultural changes which are sweeping across our world like a desert sand storm.

Among those changes is a disturbing and growing disregard for truth. We live in a time in which lies have become so commonplace that people, for a moment at least, tolerate them, even believe them!

Think of the evidence of “truth loss:” A) There are some who openly proclaim that there are “alternative facts.” (This with a straight face!), and B) Recently I heard a legal spokesperson say that “facts evolve,” or even that “truth isn’t truth!”

Recently there was a cartoon in the *Christian Century*. The cartoon is a picture of a woman in a witness chair being sworn in by an officer of the court. The caption reads: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, even though nobody has any idea what that means anymore?” (Cartoon: *The Christian Century*, p. 8, August 15, 2018)

There are seemingly hosts of people who will believe the power of lies if they seem to confirm a preconceived notions about life established long ago. For such people, and to some degree we are each among them, if a lie serves my long engrained “values,” then the lie is acceptable. In this circumstance, alas, truth is not the guide for life; self-interest is!

If we hear Jesus, and seek to follow him when he said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32), then most of us remain in bondage.

Having said this I now, at last, come to today's scripture lesson written in the Letter of James at 1:17-27. In my long ministry I have likely preached from the Book of James less than a half-dozen times. I heard in seminary that Martin Luther called James, "the epistle of straw." Luther had his reason for this harsh judgement, but if it is an epistle of straw, then I'm looking to dwell in an entire haystack now!

James proclaims that truth comes from God and is anchored in the One in whom "there is no variation or shadow due to change." Then James says, "Of his own will be brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." (James 1:17-18) In other words, James preaches that truth is from an unchangeable God, and that truth is to be the foundation and guide for all Christian actions and behavior.

In language which reflects thinking in the western world beyond the New Testament, indeed the whole Bible, there has ever been a belief that truth is a reflection of ideals which are unchangeable. Truth, in still other words, is unchangeable. We as flawed human beings are best served, wisely guided, when we try to act out in life what exists beyond us.

In the world today we seem to act as though there is no belief in models of truth above us to guide us; we seemingly don't "look upward" as a guide for "going forward" toward truth.

The Book of James is based in his conviction that the Gospel revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the guide beyond to direct us. There is an observation from C.S. Lewis which, I think, is a guide to truth preached by James-and preached by Gary today! -that is expressive of the quest for truth in life and society.

C.S. Lewis said: "I believe in Christ like I believe in the sun-not because I can see it, but by it I can see everything else." (From Ely Cathedral page on F.B., 7/9/18). That says it, as I see life and truth! The Word which inspired James is, indeed, the sun of truth which makes clear how we all should walk. Psalm 119:105 put it another way: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

For us in our faith tradition we need the light from beyond us in order to see our way on paths of truthfulness. Should we avoid the sun of the Word of truth, we walk in a kind of murky darkness where lies likely lie. In such a state where there is no "truth Lamp," anything goes, anything is ok, if it preserves or enhances my self-interests and prejudices. This way of living is headed for a spiritual house of mirrors from which these may be no-exit, but with ample time to dwell upon and admire our own self-images!

There are other legitimate claims to the quest for truth, of course, but for us who are the church listening for the Word of God, for the Word made flesh, it is crucial for ourselves and

our culture to hear that Word of truth. James said that the Word of truth, once heard, must be acted upon with “meekness of the implanted word,” and act in accord with that Word.

I like the idea of the “implanted word.” The Word of God above and beyond us, once heard must be within us, an essential part, of who we are. That internalized word, as James says it, “is able to save our souls” (James 1:21). The implanted word, James also teaches, is not to be a redemptive treasure for ourselves alone.

In James 1:22 he says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only...” We must act upon the Word of God for the sake of ourselves, yes, but for the sake of the world, as well.

James ends this part of his teachings of “doing the word” in these words: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God...is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27). This verse is an indication that we are to put the Word offered to faith into action. In so doing we are to live toward truth and to seek to avoid lies which impair our souls and deprive us of leading legitimate ethical lives.

I am tired of living in a kind of house of mirrors, a panic state of being, perhaps you are too. I suggest that we all seek an exit from the enclosure of self-images which is driving us to accept lies, falsehoods, and distortions of truth as acceptable ways of living.

I am tired of “fake news,” of false claims, no matter their source, which appear to dominate the society and world in which I live. I, and I think you do too, crave truth as an unmovable, unchangeable goal toward which we all should aspire, in which we may dwell.

I can hear James today loud and clear when he reminds us that our faith remains in the God of lights in whom “...there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (James 1:17)

We change, the world changes, we see things differently as the world changes, to be sure, but truth abideith forever. There are, as I have observed, other claims to truth, but the claim upon us is reflected in the gospel proclaimed today anew in the Book of James.

To employ another image, amid the rampaging storms of change and upheaval we need a changeless anchor in order not to be swept away into a life of untruth, deception and lies. The house of panic-filled mirrors, thank God, does have an exit; it is the door of the truth of God’s love, which is also a “bulwark never failing,” the truth which gives us a place to stand, hope and work amid the lies.

S.D.G.
Amen.