

August 29, 2021
“Worthless Religion”
James 1:17-27 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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You may be familiar with the ancient myth of Narcissus; Narcissus, of course, the Greek word from which the term “narcissism” originated – referring, as you know, to excessive interest in or admiration of oneself. In modern psychological terms, it describes a specific personality type marked by selfishness or self-centeredness involving a strong sense of entitlement, lack of empathy and need for attention and admiration. You may know such a type!

There are different versions of the myth, but the gist is the same. In the classic Roman story, from the poet Ovid, Narcissus is a handsome young man who spurns the advances of many who express love for him, including the nymph, Echo. After he rejects Echo, the gods – namely Nemesis, the Goddess of Revenge – punish him by making him fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Once he realizes that the object of his love is just a reflection, that the reflection can’t love him back, he dies from sorrow – wasting away by the banks of the water. Or in other versions, drowning or committing suicide. In Greek mythology, he’s said to still be admiring himself in the underworld.

The author of the book of James – traditionally understood as Jesus’s brother, James – essentially gives us the opposite of the Narcissus story. He writes, as Amy just read for us, “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 mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

Hearers of the word, as it were, see their reflection in the mirror, but not only do they not dwell on their reflection as Narcissus did, they forget it completely. They forget who they are, what they look like, as if they’d never seen themselves before. They forget the word, as if they’d never heard it before.

The Bible has a lot to say about the difference between hearing and listening – from the prophets to Jesus to the apostle Paul.

In Jesus's so-called parable of the sower, found in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels, he begins with an exclamation, "Listen!" And then describes a sower scattering seeds on different kinds of terrain. Some falls on a path where the birds come and eat it up; some on rocky ground, where the seeds quickly grow but get scorched in the sun; some among thorns, where the thorns just choke them before they have a chance to grow; and then some on good soil, which produce grain up to a hundredfold.

Jesus concludes as he began, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!"

If you know the story, you know that Jesus goes on to explain that the seed is a stand-in for the word of God. And remember, as we talked about last week, the word of God, in a word, is love. Jesus makes this point crystal clear through his teaching and his life, summed up as follows: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In case you forget what the word of God is, what the word of God is all about, let me break it down for you.

So those who scatter on the path, the rocky ground, among the thorns, are those who hear the word but for one reason or another, internal or external, don't allow it to take root in their hearts or their lives. They hear but don't listen. They hear but don't understand. They look in James's mirror and IMMEDIATELY forget what they see.

Only for those who scatter on good soil is the word able to grow in their hearts and so in their lives. The word, as James suggests in verse 21, is implanted in their souls. They hear and DO listen. They hear and DO understand. And that understanding leads to action, to fruit. They look in James's mirror and NEVER forget what they see. If you will, they never forget WHO – God's beloved – and WHOSE – God's own – they really are. And rooted in that identity, they are able to bear fruit. As the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi put

it, "As you live deeper in the heart, the mirror gets clearer and cleaner." We see ourselves more clearly and cleanly.

Our reading from James echoes the parable and Jesus' teaching more generally: "But be DOERS of the word, and not merely HEARERS who deceive themselves." Don't just hear and so deceive yourselves, listen. Don't just listen, understand. And don't just understand, act. DO SOMETHING. Do something, whatever you can, that reflects God's love back into the world.

To borrow another mirror metaphor, as American writer Edith Wharton once put it, "There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

BE the candle or BE the mirror that reflects God's love and light. Either way, bear fruit. James, like Jesus before him, reminds us that if our faithfulness is measured by anything, it's measured by our fruitfulness. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, . . . self-control" are some of the words Paul uses to describe the "fruit of the Spirit" in his letter to the Galatians. Bear fruit.

In another account found in Matthew (chapter 7) and Luke (chapter 6), Jesus shares a similar parable to make the point even clearer. This from Matthew's version:

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house." On what kind of foundation is your faith, is your life, built?

"But be DOERS of the word, and not merely HEARERS who deceive themselves." James goes on to suggest that religion – or more accurately translated, worship – is worthless without action. Faithfulness is worthless without fruitfulness.

“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. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” And then his big finish: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the (Creator), is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Orphans and widows also come up a lot in the Bible, highlighting God's preferential concern for those who are most vulnerable to social disconnection and the pain and poverty that so often go with it.

"The true measure of any society," Gandhi said, "can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." Jesus and the prophets said the same in driving home the need for compassion and justice. How we care for orphans and widows, for example, reflects our collective fruitfulness. Or the profound lack thereof.

To keep oneself unstained by the world is, perhaps, to avoid the kinds of pitfalls we find in the parable of the sower. To guard against the proverbial birds, the rocky ground, the thorns of the world that keep us unrooted. Without a strong foundation. To keep oneself unstained by the world is to look in the mirror and never forget who and whose we are as God's beloved. And so BE LOVE in the world.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the (Creator), is this . . .” Jesus takes on notions of purity and class in our other reading this morning, from Mark's gospel. The Pharisees are complaining, in this case, that Jesus's disciples are ignoring tradition and not washing their hands before they eat. And he reminds them, as he so often does, that purity is found in the heart, not in the hands; that faithfulness is found in the spirit of the law, not the letter. He says to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips (HEARERS ONLY), but their hearts are far from me (NOT DOERS); in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Enough with the self-deception. Spare me your lip service. Your faithfulness is measured by your fruitfulness.

James spins it another way, beyond our reading this morning: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? . . . So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, could well have been the author of James himself. Addressing the decline of religion in modern society, he wrote, “It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy . . . It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.” Worthless.

Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Corinthians: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but DO NOT HAVE LOVE, I am nothing.” Our faith, our faithfulness, is nothing without our fruitfulness.

Narcissus could only ever see and care about himself. Looking in the mirror, friends, may we see ourselves, but see ourselves as God's beloved. May we hold onto that fundamental truth as our spiritual foundation, in the midst of all that threatens to shake it or break it. And may we commit and recommit ourselves to be doers and not just hearers in our neighborhoods. To be fruitful in our communities. To become the candles and mirrors the world needs to share and reflect God's love, God's compassion, God's justice. Knowing, as James suggests, that we will be blessed in so doing.

May it be so.