

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
August 23, 2015

We've all done it. We all have checked ourselves in the mirror. Before a big day at work or a night on the town, we adjust our clothing, check our hair, and make sure everything matches. "How do I look?" we wonder. Sometimes we look damn good; and other times we just hope to pass. We hope our client is captivated by our personality enough to overlook the massive pimple. We pray that our bad hair day doesn't turn into a bad date. We hope that the black clothing really does make us look a bit slimmer. Mirrors have this way of reflecting back to us reality. They can be unforgiving, and sometimes they enlarge or distort reality, but generally they're reflecting back to us a glimpse of the world.

In today's reading from James we're reminded that we sometimes look in the mirror and immediately after walking away we forget what we're like. And I think Jesus makes that point today too with the Pharisees. You see the Pharisees were religious leaders, and they are calling out Jesus' disciples for not keeping the received tradition of the elders. This tradition was to wash their hands before eating. Now, ritual cleansing was held as important for priests before entering the temple, but there isn't an explicit command in the Bible to wash before eating. However, it was a tradition that was passed down.

And here Jesus takes on a reflective quality and plays the role of the mirror. Jesus calls out those religious leaders. He says something like this: "Gentleman, I believe you're being a bit judgmental here. You see, the real important thing is to respect the command of God, namely to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Yet, you silly willies, you have made your tradition more important than that commandment. You've made it so important that you're taking your wealth, calling it an offering to God, and failing to care for your parents. So, dearest gentleman, check yourself." With that interaction Jesus challenges the religious authorities to think about how their tradition contributes or hinders their mission. Jesus challenges them to look beyond action into meaning. Jesus invites them and us into a deep self-introspection.

And I identify with those religious authorities today. I think it's more than just the fact that we're both curators and cultivators of ritual and tradition. Actually, I think it's because I'm a hypocrite. I think we're all hypocrites. We look down on others for not eating right, not working out enough, for judging others, for being racist, and for lacking open-minded thought. In the same breath we turn right around and binge on pizza, skip the gym, gossip about another, get frustrated by "those people" who are different from us, and generally we don't work to understand another's perspective. We're all hypocrites. So I get those hypocritical religious authorities.

I also connect with the Pharisees focus on tradition. Sure, at first I was like, well what's the big deal about washing hands? #getoverit After all I'm sure my doctor would

approve the practice. But then when I thought about it, don't we all have routines, traditions, or ways of doing things that we don't question. Maybe it's the way your family gives Christmas gifts or even the way you purchase groceries. We'd push back a bit if one of those traditions were changed even a little bit. Yet, do those traditions have substantial influence? Does hauling gifts around at Christmas make us really feel connected and loved? When we purchase cheap groceries flown and trucked into Chicago, do we really care for the environment and our bodies? The traditional way of doing thing often goes unchallenged.

And that's true to for our congregation. What would happen if we cancelled worship every fourth Sunday so we could go serve our neighbors? What if we took out the pews to make more flexible space for other groups to use during the week? I imagine we'd have some push back. For traditions have a tendency to lend to our sense of stability, but they don't necessarily push us deeper to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

And so on this day we get a chance for some self-reflection. Sure, we can look in the mirror see the clogged pores of inadequacy, the pimples of hypocrisy, and the scars of immortalized tradition. Yet, can we hold that with the ultimate truth?

The ultimate truth is that we've been given many gifts, all of which are gifts from our God. While we *are* screw-ups and don't deserve them, we *do* receive these gifts from our God because of whose we are. Today's gospel reminds us that it isn't over with our tradition-loving, hypocritical, and self-centered selves looking in the mirror. Rather the Jesus of Mark let's nothing stands in the way of communicating that we're not alone and that God loves us. When we look in the mirror we also see a different reflection – we see that we are a child of God. God's grace is what extracts the black head of judgment. God's love blends in our hypocrisy. We are set free to love God and serve our neighbor.

So this week take a moment to look in the mirror - I suggest that foggy mirror after a shower. Then be honest with yourself in the mirror, as we are honest with ourselves during confession. Be honest that you've got blemishes and you're not perfect. *But* don't let that be the only word. As the mirror begins to clear, see yourself more fully. See yourself as God's beloved child. And as the mirror's fog clears, and perhaps the water droplets begin to run, remember your baptism. Remember our God who loves you so much. Be reminded that you're standing at a holy mirror - a mirror where you can hold that you are both blemished *and* beloved. Stand there, hold it, and remember you're not alone. Thanks be to God for this holy mirror. Thanks be to God for God's good gifts. Thanks be to God that we are both blemished and beloved. Amen.