

August 30 B 2015

I was building on the Habitat House last Friday with Tom and Ron. During opening prayer, the site manager told us that a crew from the Department of Corrections would be joining us shortly. Huh? Sure enough, a few minutes later, a white van pulled up and out came a dozen men, all dressed in khaki jumpsuits and work boots. They had lots of tattoos. They were not from Gethsemane Lutheran Church. I confess to you my prejudice. I was a little uncomfortable working with them. I became aware that I checked my wallet several times...just in case some of the guys were pickpockets. Several times, I wondered if various tools at the worksite might be stolen and smuggled into the prison and used as weapons. I worked mostly with three of the men. There was Ivan...a big guy...bald head...thick Russian accent. I would not want to meet Ivan in a dark alley. But I'll tell you this: He worked hard. He would climb up the ladders and pound on those nails. He would carry the wood sheathing over. He would organize some of the other guys and explain where the nails go. As my arms tired with the work, Ivan led the charge with the heavy lifting. As the morning went on, my comfort level increased...as did my respect. Towards the end of the morning, I was working with another guy. He asked me, How can I help? He was very respectful. He had a servant's heart. I explained a couple things...he said he could do that. And he offered two other ways he could also help...Yea, that would be great. I asked him his name. He told me: Isaac. Isaac? A good biblical name. I have a son named Isaac. Good name. As we worked, I began thinking about his family. I realized that this man was somebody's son...he was somebody's brother. I believe that God was speaking to me through Ivan and Jeffrey and Isaac and the other men from the Department of Corrections work crew. These men were teaching me...about respecting others...about working together with people different from me...about seeing the gift that is each person in spite of our brokenness.



Interesting...that mirror image makes its way into our New Testament reading.

The writer of James says,

"Picture yourself standing in front of a mirror. Do you see who you are?"

Ordinarily, standing in front of a mirror might mean that you see yourself as thin or overweight...wrinkled or scarred...young or old.

But that is not what James is getting at.

James is not interested in your physical appearance.

That's just not what's important to him.

He's interested in your spirit...in your heart.

He's interested in what lies deeper...what lies at the core of your being.

James teaches you: Look in the mirror. Do you see you who are?

Any serious self-examination leads you to see, first of all, the eight parts of you that are chicken, phony, slob.

That's part of who you are...but not all of you...and maybe not even the most important part of you.

James says, Look deeper. Do you see who you are?

As Christians, to answer that question, we always begin with God.

The reading from James begins not with who people are but with who God is.

In the first two verses, there are at least three descriptive terms for God.

God is identified, first of all, by what God gives.

Every perfect gift is from above, verse 17 says.

The gifts come down from our heavenly Father.

We begin with the giving from God.

The people to whom James writes are those who have received gifts from God, spirit from God, life from God.

Without this, there would be nothing further to say, since people have something to give precisely because they have received from God.

Do you see who you are?

You are the one who has received gifts from God.

God is identified, secondly, as the Father of Lights.

In the Bible, light is, above all, the source of life.

It is what nourishes the crops.

It is what gives order to the world.

It is the summary of all the goodness that God has caused to happen in creation.

Do you see who you are? You are one who receives life from the Father of Lights.

Thirdly, in the opening two verses, James talks about the fulfilling of God's purpose.

Life is not just one blamed thing after another.

It is part of a plan.

This plan revolves around Jesus the Savior.

The Son was sent into the world to accomplish our salvation.

To be saved means to be forgiven.

To be saved means to hold to the promise of heaven.

To be saved means to know peace and wholeness today.

God's purpose has been fulfilled.

God's plan has been fulfilled for you.

Do you see who you are?

You are someone who has been blessed by God's gifts.

You are someone who has been brought to new life through Jesus.

You are, in James words, a first fruit, set aside as someone who belongs to God.

Look in a mirror.

That is who you are.

What happens when you forget who you are?

Life can often take you on a different course.

If you forget how much you have been given, why would you give anything to others?

If you forget how much you have received, then life is reduced to a quest to get whatever you can while you can.

You may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable (1:27), but conclude that just the way the world is, and you should just take care of yourself first.

James reminds us.

If you truly see yourself in the mirror, you have to be doers of the word, and not hearers only.

If you truly see yourself in the mirror, then you have to live as Christ wants you to live, to care for the vulnerable, to serve others, and not live by the world's values of money, power, and pleasure.

Do you see who you really are?

Martin Luther made critical remarks about this book, calling it an "epistle of straw" in his commentary on it.

And yet, the book retains a significant place in the canon of Scripture.

I think because it is challenging.

The writer is aware that people sometimes confine their understanding of faith to a simple series of truth claims—something limited to their heads or their words.

For James, that just doesn't work.

Throughout this letter, the faith that counts is the faith that is actually operative in a person's life.

People might say they believe one thing and yet do something completely different.

James insists that true faith is whatever is actually operative in your life.

Faith that is not active is not faith at all.

Look in a mirror. Do you see who you are?