

“Those who walk blamelessly, do what is right,
and speak truth from the heart may
abide in the Lord’s tent.” AMEN!

I think the last time I went into one of
those Fun Houses that they have at carnivals
was when we lived in Largo.

Understand, the Holdcraft’s aren’t
frequent fair goers, but this one was
so close we couldn’t refuse the children
a chance to go and experience the sights
and smells of a traveling
carnival or fair.

There were the familiar rickety rides
and unstable spinning contraptions.

We bought tickets for the “fun” house
(an interesting play on words), because it
seemed safest for our young children.

You go into this structure and have
the encounter with being lost
in a hall of mirrors.

There’s sloped and slanted floors that
makes walking even more difficult.

Sometimes the floor moves underfoot
as it rocks back and forth.

They can be a little spooky, too.

Fun Houses always have
those crazy mirrors.

Mirrors that make you look tall and slender,
short and pudgy, and
various mixtures in between.

It's a little like those apps you can
get on your phone these days that distort
the way your face looks.

It's funny to see how crazy (or upsetting)
you can make yourself look.

These apps and mirrors are good for a chuckle.

But, at the end there's a regular mirror.

You know the ordinary kind that, I suppose,
was there to reassure the fun house visitor
that all the parts (or heights or sizes) that
you entered with are still with you.

I remember not being very interested in that mirror.

In fact, most people hardly stopped
in front of the real mirror. (Pause)

It's part of our human condition, isn't it?

We don't take notice of ourselves in
the mirror like we ought.

We instead focus on what we don't like
about ourselves and then
spend time and money buying and
hiding things we don't like.

It's no wonder we call a sink
with a mirror over it
a vanity.

We can be vain.

Gazing at ourselves, sometimes thinking
too highly about what we see or
too degrading on the person we see.

If something's not to our liking
we might quickly turn away, or

worse (maybe) we might stare too hard at it

and dwell on it thinking it defines
everything about us.

Have you ever counted the number of mirrors
you have in your house?

Sure, the bathroom ones are obvious.

We have ones on the back of doors,
on tops of dressers and at
the bottom of the stairs, too.

One of the houses my dad owned when I was little
had a whole wall of mirror.

You might try counting how many mirrors you have.
(Pause)

I think that's what Jesus was doing in
Mark's gospel this morning.

He was holding up a mirror in front of
the religious authorities of his day.

They came to him with complaints about his followers.

You see, they weren't washing their hands
before eating.

Now, kids, if you're thinking Jesus made
a defense for you to not wash your hands
before eating a meal, think again! :-)

I'm willing to bet that Jesus wants us
to practice good hygiene so you don't get sick.

That practice is not the point here.

The point here is that Jesus was reminding
the temple and religious authorities that
practicing *religious* habits and rituals

can cause those people to be
exclusive and self-righteous.

Jesus was not asking the leadership to
throw out their all rituals and habits, but to
look at themselves in the mirror and see
what was really happening.

They were hurting their relationship with God.

They were damaging the relationships with
their neighbors because they wanted to look
the most important and most impressive
to other people.

Instead of seeing what they were doing,

they finger pointed and complained about
other people's issues.

They preferred the fun house mirror that made
them look tall and slender;

The ones that gave the illusion of perfection.

Were all the temple leaders like that?

Probably not, otherwise Jesus wouldn't
have wanted to be in the temple so often,

yet Jesus knew something important
needed to be taught,
something we all need to learn.

That while we are busy critiquing others,
pointing out their flaws,

Jesus taps us on the shoulder and whispers,
"You know, I still love them."

And when we are busy critiquing our own flaws,
or harshly judging ourselves in our mirrors,

Jesus taps us on the shoulder and whispers,
"You know, I still love you." (Pause)

It's interesting to note that
the traditions of hand-washing and
the rituals of washing cups, pots, and
kettles found in the First Testament
were directed to the priests as they
prepared to approach the altar and
the holy of Holies.

The Pharisees were fastidiously trying
to follow the necessary rules and
I can imagine they got pretty good at it.

It must have been extremely difficult,
to always remember the rules they'd followed
to honor God, but somewhere along
the way they decided everyone should
be doing what they are doing.

No one told them that the action of the disciples
and Jesus weren't disrespectful,
they were relational.

Well, Jesus told them.

In paraphrased words he said,

"I know you do lots of rituals and

you want to be clean for God.

It's kept you very busy, but in that busy-ness,
you have lost the time to love God
and you're missing
the experience of God's love for you.

In that pursuit you've let those things cause
you to not care for and
love your neighbor." (Pause)

St. Stephen, as we begin to ramp up
to the fall semester,
and return to faithful gathering,
what does it mean for us to live as
followers of Jesus?

We can become very busy with certain rituals, too.

Do they remind us why we are here or
are they things that just keep us busy and
allow us to feel really good about ourselves,
and then neglect other people?

In other words, are we seeking
pure hands or pure hearts?

Hopefully, it is the pure heart lesson from Jesus
that we are learning today.

James gave us a pretty good list of characteristics.

“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

In that we might become “doers of the word,
not only hearers that deceives themselves.”

Ah, then verse 23, “for if any are hearers
and not doers, they are like those who
look at themselves in a mirror and
immediately forget what they were like.”

Now I’ll paraphrase the rest,
“But for those who look and see an person
who makes mistakes, a child of God
that is broken, and still learning how
to walk the Way of Jesus and one

who is welcoming a continued process of growth
and love into perfection by a God that
shapes us and others,
then we can’t help but be doers of
pure and undefiled religion.

A purity that cares for the widow and
orphan in distress.”

This will ward off becoming apathetic and

lead us to become responsive to God's behavior.

A purity that leads us to never forget
about the sheer joy and delight of being human,
and not only human but a child of God.

AMEN!