

## Finding Ourselves in Funhouse Mirrors - August 29, 2021

If you were to describe yourself in a few words what would you say? What do you consider your identity to be?

When I think of who I am and the multiple identities I hold I can say that I am a thirty year old, a student chaplain, a friend, a daughter, a sister, a mental wellness worker, a writer, and a traveller to say a few things. I am biracial of mixed Eastern European and Asian decent, a native English speaker, and a Canadian citizen born a Windsorite. I also am a wannabe Scottish lass. These are all things that give you a glimpse into who I am, but there is one aspect that overshadows everything else: I am a Christian. I am someone who follows Christ, who wants to be more like Him, and who is training to be in ministry because I want others to know they are also known and loved by God.

In today's Scripture passage from the book of James, two questions are brought to our attention. The first one is Who is God? And the second one is: Who are we in relation to God?

We will begin first by looking at who God is. The book of James refers to God as the creator of heavenly lights in whom there is no shifting shadow. This references the fact that God made us and knows each one of us personally. God is invested into our daily lives and wants to be part of our world. This verse also mentions that God does not change - that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We all change and these changes can bring with them new identities. For example: first you were single, and now you might be married. First you were an employee, and now you might be a supervisor or project manager. First you were young and then you got older. At one point in time you might have worked and your identity might have centred around job roles and responsibilities, and now you may be retired. For a large chunk of your life you might have self-identified as a student, and now you may think of yourself more as a professional who continually learns and grows on the job. Many of us face major life changes at various points in our lives: the birth of a child or grandchild, our own children or grandchildren getting married and having a family of their own, moving to a different geographical location, changing careers, discovering a new hobby or interest and so on. When these changes occur we stay the same person but our identity grows and develops, but God who is perfect always remains the same and some of God's identities are listed to us in the Bible.

Many of us grew up with the understanding of God as our Father and this is true, but the Bible also describes God in many other ways including as a friend, a comforter, a healer, a restorer, redeemer, companion, and teacher to name a few. At various times in Scripture God refers to characteristics such as love, patience, faithfulness, and steadfastness.

This shows that God can also have many identities and yet still be one person, yet God does not change in the way that humans do. A person can decide one day that they no longer want to be a painter, a writer, a poet, or a musician and just put their gifts and talents away, but God can't do that. In fact, in 1 Timothy 2:11-13 we read,

“Here is a trustworthy saying: if we died with Him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with Him, if we disown Him, He will also disown us. If we are faithless, God remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”

Now that we know how God is described in the Bible, the question is: do you see yourself as you truly are? The way God sees you?

When I was in Scotland I met a brilliant minister who described the concept of identity to me like being in a fun house. If you have ever visited a fun house you know that there are various types of mirrors. Some mirrors may make you look taller or shorter, some might make you look thinner or bigger (guess which one most of us would choose), and some might even make you have funny faces. When we look at the mirror we can laugh because we know that this is not really who we are - it is a distortion of what we actually look like, but sometimes in our own lives we easily forget that. We let other people define us.

When we were younger we might have had a teacher tell us that we weren't good at drawing or painting and even as an adult we might still believe that we are not artistically gifted. We might have had someone tell us that we couldn't carry a tune so in our adult life we might be self-conscious to make a joyful noise. We might even have had someone tell us that we weren't going to do well in university and so we should just consider joining the workforce. As an adult we might still believe that we are incapable of doing something or that we aren't a strong learner. Believing these negative things that others have said to us can really hold us back from doing the things that would truly be life-giving to us.

Instead of letting others define us, though, we can choose to listen to the ways God defines us. In the book of James we are told that we are the first fruits of God's creation. If you have ever picked your own apples or other fruit at a farm, you know how exciting it is to take the fruit right off the tree or vine. Yet, in Biblical times, first fruits had even greater significance because it meant that a greater harvest was yet to come. This is how God sees us. We belong to God, we are claimed by God, and we are wanted by God. God sees our full potential even if we don't. God knows that we were created for even more than we believe we are capable of. God is the great gardener who plants, tends, and waters our souls so that we can produce beautiful flowers and bear fruit in our own lives that will help others.

The second half of the passage asks us a new question: Who are we in relation to God? What James is asking here is really pointing to the difference between religion and spirituality.

We probably all know someone who is very religious: they likely make sure to carefully keep all the rituals and traditions, they never miss a Sunday at church, and they are always quick to correct someone else who they feel is living their lives all wrong. These people may have a head full of Biblical wisdom, but the question is: do they have a heart full of Christian love?

Then we have people who are spiritual but not religious. They may claim no religious

doctrine at all, they may not even hold a belief or faith in Christ or a recognized Higher Power, but they believe that there is something greater out there and they try to live a moral life and help others.

Somewhere in between these two extremes lies the true Biblical lifestyle. When someone is fully living for Christ, they do not merely concern themselves with Biblical commands, nor do they create their own version of belief, but instead they look to how they can demonstrate Christ's love to others through outward acts. They have a sensitive spirit, and they wish to relieve others from unnecessary suffering. In Aramaic the word "Spirituality" actually translates to "true ministry" and these are the people who really want to minister to others for the right reasons.

Now what's interesting about this text is that James could have said anything when addressing the topic of spirituality and later on in the passage he does address some social justice themes, but he starts off with first drawing on personal character. James writes that anyone who truly wants to follow Christ must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry because anger can diminish one's ability to be an effective spiritual role model. The Message translation of the Bible reads, "lead with your ears, follow with your tongue, let anger straggle along in the rear."

Just for interest's sake, I decided to find a few fun facts about listening to share with you all. Did you know that 85% of what we learn is through listening rather than talking or reading something, and yet, after someone has shared we only immediately retain about 50% of what the person said and that is assuming that we found the topic interesting. An hour later we actually only remember 20% and 75% of the time we are distracted, preoccupied, and forgetful. This explains why sometimes you hear an inspiring sermon or powerful testimony and later on in the day you can't totally recall all the details. This is also why I personally like to take sermon notes.

Our world is constantly filled with noise and chaos, and yet there are not many people who truly listen to what we are saying. These past two weeks I took a United Church course from the Centre for Christian Studies and one of the topics we addressed was related to conflict. The truth is that almost all conflicts can be avoided simply by respectfully listening to someone, honouring their differences, and properly hearing their concerns, and yet too often people want to jump in with their own agenda and steamroll others. Sometimes in the midst of an argument it can be easy to think about our next comeback line rather than to take a moment to pause and reflect. There are times when we are in a group setting and are so emotionally attached to a topic that we can't even fully hear what the other person is saying because we are so excited just to formulate our own thoughts that we can't wait to share with those around us. At least this has been the case with me in my own life as an extrovert.

Being slow to speak is another challenge in our society. Today with so many of us using social media and technology, it can be very easy to just share everything about ourselves online and sometimes this is to our detriment. Sometimes in the heat of anger, it can be very tempting to send someone a nasty text and when we do not see the person in front of us we can forget that the person behind the screen also has feelings. The best advice I can give is that if you are seriously angry about

something, please hide your phone and don't log onto Facebook until you've been able to calm down a bit.

Slow to become angry can be a confusing request at first. After all, it is sometimes because of righteous anger that major changes have taken place in our society. It was anger that caused the Suffragettes to fight for a woman's right to vote, anger that caused abolitionists to stand up against slavery, and anger that caused people to care more about the environment. Yet the anger that James is describing here is not that type of anger - he is referring to resentments which eat away at us, cause us to lose sleep, and cause us to be generally unhappy people. James cautions that these attitudes can hinder our effectiveness as ministering people rather than promoting righteous purposes. Instead James urges us to be careful, thoughtful listeners, to carefully choose our words, and to be patient, reflective, and forgiving.

In the last part of the passage, James urges us to be doers rather than hearers and he uses the analogy of a mirror. When we wake up in the morning, many of us look at a mirror. We make sure we brush our teeth, that our hair is brushed, and perhaps we even put on make up. Now imagine that you looked at a mirror and you saw that you had a huge streak across your face, but as soon as you left the washroom you forgot all about it and went to the party looking like that. What do you imagine others would think? Perhaps they would point it out to you and you might become embarrassed.

This is how it is with God's children. If our desire is to be set apart from the world's agendas, then we need to spend time gazing deeply at the Bible which acts as our mirror. We need to ask God to reveal the things that we need to become conscious of. We need to be alert to times when we are given encouragement or even correction from others. In this passage being a hearer implies hearing instruction from God but then failing to internalize it. Basically hearing something convicting and letting it brush off us rather than applying it to our situations. This is different than doing which implies an active and continual obedience to God's precepts. In other words it's not a one shot deal. We might need to be reminded again and again of the same thing.

Here's an example: say that you were trying to have a healthier lifestyle. It wouldn't be enough just to eat fruits and vegetables and go for a long walk today after church and then eat chips and chocolates for the rest of the week and expect to have good results. We would need to apply ourselves daily, we would need to make the right choices every day if we wanted to see improvement by the end of the month. It's that kind of commitment that James is referring to here.

We began this sermon by considering how we describe ourselves and how we see our own identity. In Psalm 15 David asks "Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain" and he answers his own question with these words, "Only the one whose walk is blameless."

It is impossible for any of us to be blameless. We all falter and fail at various times. There are times when we need to rely on the help and support of others to help pick us up, and yet, we all are worthy of entering into God's presence.

We are invited to come into God's midst not because we have done all the right things, not because we always live out true spirituality, and not because we have all mastered the perfect balance between speaking and listening and never getting angry. Rather we are part of God's family because God sees us as His first fruits. He sees us for what we are capable of becoming. He delights in the harvest we bring in through reaching out and loving those around us. There are many ways that we can see ourselves and some of those ways are accurate and others are more like those fun house mirrors which seek to give us a false perception, but there is only one way that God sees us. God sees us all as beloved children, as worthy of love, and as deserving of His grace. It is only in claiming our true identity in Christ, that we will be able to serve and bless others.

May it be so. Amen.