

Proper 17 B Sermon
James 1:17-27
August 29, 2021

True Religion
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of God's own purpose we were given birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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*May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts together
be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock,
our redeemer, and our friend. Amen.*

How many of us own a mirror? How many of us sometimes wish we didn't?! In our reading from the Letter of James, the author uses the metaphor of a mirror to talk about remembering, or forgetting, our religious identity.

A popular story about mirrors from the ancient Greeks tells of Narcissus, who, after an unhappy love affair wandered into the forest and stopped by a crystal-clear pool of water. He knelt down to drink and, looking into the water, he saw the most beautiful face—eyes wide and curving lips, and a noble nose. He forgot his thirst and, so drawn to the face in the water, leaned ever closer to kiss it. Every time he tried to touch the beautiful face, the surface would dissolve in the stirring of the water. So Narcissus knelt there by the pool, longing for one he could never have.¹

Like Narcissus who didn't recognize himself in his own reflection, the author of James cautions readers not to forget what they look like—who they are. Unfortunately, I believe that the decline in mainline protestant Christianity is, at least in part, due to an institutional and individual identity crisis in the face of a changing world. 50 years ago, our identity as Christian communities was simple: churches provided a place for people who shared a denominational affiliation to gather for worship and to educate their children in the faith. As denominational lines become increasingly blurred and fewer families seek a religious education for their children, many churches simply don't know who they are any more. It's tough to attract others or to minister effectively in our communities if we don't know who we are and what our purpose is to be.

Some how, nearly 2000 years ago, the author of the Epistle of James got that when they cautioned readers not to forget who they are or what they are to be about in the world. “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers,” they call out to us across the millennia. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in

¹ Martha Sterne. “Looking in the Mirror.” Day1.org, August 30, 2009, http://day1.org/1406-looking_in_the_mirror

their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” In other words, the author tells us not to simply listen to words about faith on Sundays, but to live the faith every day. Real religion, they say, is reaching out in love and caring for the people on the margins. Living our faith—that’s true religion. That’s our identity. That’s the real deal.

Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once told this story:

Once upon a time, there was a land inhabited only by ducks. Every Sunday morning, the ducks got up, washed their faces, put on their Sunday clothes, and waddled off to church. They waddled through the door of their duck church, proceeded down the aisle, and took their familiar places in the pews. The duck minister entered the pulpit and opened the duck Bible to the place where it talked about God’s greatest gift to ducks—wings. “With wings we can fly. With wings we can soar like eagles. With wings we can escape the confines of pens and cages. With wings we can become free. With wings we can become all God meant us to be. So give thanks to God for your wings. And fly!” All the ducks loudly quacked, “Amen.” And then all of the ducks waddled back home.²

True religion motivates action, motivates living our faith—and if the ducks in Kierkegaard’s story had true religion, they would’ve flown home instead of waddling!

At its very best, religion is a veritable well-spring of encouragement and boundless comfort, inspiration for the arts, sister to the sciences, mother to innovation, midwife to great acts of love and charity, and driving force behind human achievement and human unity. At its worst, however, religion is a source of limitless guilt and boundless contention, friend of apathy and the status quo, enemy of the arts, the sciences, and innovation, midwife to monstrous acts of violence, and driving force behind hatred and human division.

² Campolo, Tony. “Let Me Tell You A Story.” W Publishing Group, 2000. Pgs. 81-82

So, how do we, as a community of faith, ensure that “our” religion looks like religion at its best? According to the author of James, two things: first, know who you are as a person of faith. Know who you are as an individual person of faith. And know who we are as a community at New England Congregational Church. This point might seem obvious, but on your way home today, try telling your partner, your child, or even yourself who you are as a person of faith—who we are as a community of faith. It’s not as easy as it seems!

Secondly, the author of James tells us to live our faith. Like James said, we need to know who we are, but it’s not enough just to talk about it. We’re called to live it. A radio personality (Garrison Kiellor) once said it this way: “Anyone who thinks sitting in church can make you a Christian must also think that sitting in a garage can make you a car.” It takes action to make religion—to make faith—real.

So there you have it: James’ recipe for religion at its best. Know yourself and your faith community. And live your faith. I’ll close now with these words from another whose religion was truly religion at its best, the fourteenth century Islamic mystic Hafiz:

And love
Says,
“I will, I will take care of you,”
To everything that is
Near.³

May love indeed, be our identity and may love be our act of faith in the world. Amen.

³ Translated by Daniel Landinsky. “The Gift: Poems by Hafiz.” Penguin Books, 1999.