September 2nd – 9:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

The Man in the Mirror

I. The Man in the Mirror

I don’t think I could have imagined starting a sermon with a song that was written by Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett, but made famous by Michael Jackson. And yet, here we are. The song, Man in the Mirror, debuted in 1987, and the chorus is apropos for today’s lectionary reading, and it goes:

“I’m starting with the man in the mirror.

I’m asking him to change his ways.

And no message could have been any clearer

If you want to make the world a better place

Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.”

And this message transcends time, as we acknowledge that rather than initially judging the world around us, or arbitrarily making decisions, the work begins with us. It begins with looking in the mirror, in both a literal and metaphorical way, asking what we need to change, and trying to see where in our actions we can make the world a better place. And for me, that better place, that examination, means to really explore how, in what I listen to, do, and say – how the building of the Kingdom of God can begin with me, and you, and all the faithful followers of Jesus.

II. The Metaphor of a Mirror

In our main passage today, James talks about a mirror – about those who go and look at themselves in the mirror and see their reflection, but once they step away from the mirror, they forget essentially who they are. As I hear it, James is calling us to self-examination.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Who do you see? Look long, look hard. Move beyond the shape of your nose or the size of your eyes or the composition of your chin. What makes you – you? What makes me – me? What are the gifts and talents that God has given us that we are called to share with the world?

A helpful spiritual practice for this kind of thinking comes from St. Ignatius, who developed a self-discipline called Examen. Now, there’s a book as thick as the Bible about Examen, but I’m going to spare you that and give you the five method cheat sheet. Look in the mirror and go through these five movements:

1. Make yourself aware the God is with you, breathe in and out, kind of like mindfulness, when a distraction comes along, push it away.
2. Look at your day and review it with gratitude. What happened that was good today? What are you grateful for?
3. What are you feeling? In the world of hospital chaplaincy, we said that you have four chief emotions – mad, sad, glad, or afraid. What resonates with you today and why?
4. Pick something that happened today and pray about it.
5. Look forward to tomorrow – how is what you learned today going to affect the way you live tomorrow?

You would think that this is a long process, but examen can really be a five minute, fifteen minute, hour long process – it’s ultimately up to you and what you want to get out of it. But examen helps us to examine where God is working in our lives, what our gifts are, and how we are going to move from there into a new day.

One of the features of examen that I really like is that it puts you in a space that makes you see gratitude. Now, that isn’t looking in the mirror and putting on a happy and smiling face and saying that everything is okay and dandy. But, despite all the other stuff that’s going on, the news features that pull your heart apart or a relationship that is flux, examen points you back to saying – this good thing happened today, I’m grateful for it, I’m changed by it, now what am I going to do in light of it?

The call is to reflect. And I’ll be honest with you – even as a spiritual and faith leader, there’s some days where I push back and say, ‘there’s nothing good about today.’ Those days happen, but examen pushes us to find something, even if it is the smallest thing, to be grateful for and to see the gifts and movement of God in our lives.

And if we are operating from a place of gratitude, when our cup is full, that’s when we can take the Scripture we hear and actually do something from it. Henry Emerson Fosdick, in the 1950s, was a preacher at the Riverside Church in New York City. He observed this in his pastoral life: “Those who reflect upon their lives and conclude that they have received far less than they deserve – they tend to be among those from whom no great thing comes. Others, when they evaluate their lives, think they have broken about even, you don’t see much exceptional living coming from them either. However, those who readily reckon they have received far more than they deserve are among those who do indulge in great living.” When we start from a place of gratitude, that gratitude becomes a gift, and a gift and a light we share unto others.

III. After the Exploration

And then, after the examen, after we have looked ourselves in the mirror – what do we do next? Where are we called to act? By taking hold of acknowledging who and whose we are, we become better decision makers, architects of healthier relationships, and builders of the beloved community. Even us, in our individual actions, no matter how small they are – can become the nuts and bolts of building community. In gratitude of God’s gifts, how are we going to use our gifts?

IV. How Others Used Their Gifts

For James, it is about serving the orphans and widows in their distress, and to not be diluted by the ways of the world. We look at people who took this word seriously, from a Methodist minister, Sangster, who turned the deep cellars of a church into shelters during World War II, sleeping there five years and supervising thousands, putting service ahead of worshipping services. John Calvin contributed to his society by creating welfare institutions in Geneva and established the General Hospital, which was maintained by citizens as ‘workers of mercy’ in care of the poor.

Today, I will not ask you to supervise thousands, nor will I ask you to open a hospital, but I will ask you to take a look in the mirror. I will ask you to uncover your gifts and give thanks to God for them. I will ask you to not simply be hearers of the Good Word, but doers, as well. I will ask you to put into action all that you have learned from examining yourself and this world.

And while James doesn’t say this explicitly, my reminder in all of this reflecting and hearing and action, is that you have this community to do it alongside. When you can’t see the gratitude in your life, sit with one of your brothers and sisters and hear a story of gratitude. When you can’t sing, let the voices of this community lift you up. May God and this community help you and me to look closely at our reflection and go out and act in this world in powerful and beautiful ways. Amen.