

“Faces in a Mirror”
Rev. Andrew Harris · August 29, 2021

James 1:17-27

¹⁷ Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created.

¹⁹ Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. ²⁰ This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

²² You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. ²³ Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. ²⁴ They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

²⁶ If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. ²⁷ True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

⁷ The Pharisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. ² They saw some of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eating without first ritually purifying their hands through washing. ³ The Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat without first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the rules handed down by the elders. ⁴ Upon returning from the marketplace, they don't eat without first immersing themselves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down, such as the washing of cups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?”

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote,

*This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far away from me.*

⁷ *Their worship of me is empty
since they teach instructions that are human words.*

⁸ You ignore God's commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you.”

¹⁴ Then Jesus called the crowd again and said, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵ Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God's sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person.”

²¹ “It's from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: sexual sins, thefts, murders, ²² adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from the inside and contaminate a person in God's sight.”

This morning's Gospel reading scares me. Although I've read it many times, I never quite got all the way down to the terrifying truth of it. When I studied this passage, I always wound up focusing on what it meant, the significance and the implications of Jesus's new teaching, which actually wasn't really new, but was rather a back to basics understanding of practice and ritual, stripped away of the overly strict rules and regulations characteristic of the Pharisees.

As Christians, we often read this passage through the lens of our own tradition. We think, "This is the part where Jesus tells us it's okay for us to eat bacon cheeseburgers." After all, Jesus says nothing outside of a person can contaminate a person in God's sight. We see this as a turning point, where Christianity diverges from Judaism. Where Jesus shakes off the dust of Pharisaic tee-totaling and heads off on the bold new path of Christianity, where things like keeping kosher and circumcision and ritual handwashing are left behind in favor of a direct personal relationship with God through Jesus. No more worrying about all the rules and all the outside stuff. It's what's inside that matters.

For certain, there is an important message there, although hopefully without the Christian supersessionist undercurrent - the dangerous notion that Jesus makes Jewish practice and belief obsolete. Now that is a scary concept that has caused a lot of harm throughout the centuries and continues to rear its ugly head to this day, but that's not what scares me so much about this passage.

What is terrifying to me is that Jesus reveals the source of evil to be inside the human heart. Evil isn't some external force, it's not the devil that makes us do it. Evil lurks within us. That scares me. But I'm also scared by how easy it is to gloss over Jesus's grim and terrifying revelation that all evil comes from inside the human heart. I'm scared at our own ability to turn a teaching like this into a sermon about rule following, because that's exactly what Jesus is speaking out against. He condemns the Pharisees for being sticklers about following external rules and regulations, like ritual handwashing, and ignoring the obvious and more harmful sins that take place before their very eyes.

In the words of James, the pharisees were like “Those who hear but don’t do the word... Like those who look at their faces in a mirror, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like.” This condemnation strikes at me as well. I thought this passage was a justification to eat a bacon cheeseburger while conveniently ignoring the fact that evil resides within my own heart.

Now, the fact that evil things come from inside the human heart does not mean we have to let them out. Jesus says, “the things that come out of a person contaminate a person,” that is our actions, our behavior, our words, our deeds. We all have the potential, perhaps even the propensity, for sin, to do evil, but that does not mean that we must perpetrate it. The source of evil may be the human heart, but that doesn’t mean we have to turn the spigot and let it all out. But knowing that evil lies within each of us, bubbling like a dormant volcano, frees us from the temptation to judge others, for we know that very same evil lies within our own hearts as well. It’s important to remember that any of us, under different circumstances, could easily fall victim to the evil within us.

For the past few weeks, we’ve been confronted with an image of evil in the form of the Taliban. The scenes from the airport in Kabul have been horrific - mothers trying to hand their babies over the wall to be taken away from the cruel, violent, authoritarian gangs that have re-taken control of their country. Shootings and bombings have left many killed and many more injured. I heard an Afghan filmmaker weep as she said, “there will be no more films, no art, no poetry in Afghanistan for decades.” A generation of children went to school, they had hopes and dreams, and now a shadow of evil has descended over their lives. It is truly heartbreaking.

What we’re witnessing is evil born from the human heart. We can lament it. We must stand in opposition to it. But we cannot pretend that the very same evil doesn’t lurk within us. There’s not a unique and special defect to these rural Afghan men turned into violent extremists. They weren’t born this way any more than all humans are born with this potential within us.

It’s difficult for us to imagine the circumstances that could lead to this kind of evil because it’s difficult for us to imagine the circumstances in a place like Afghanistan. The people have long

been victims of their own geography, living in an extremely mountainous and rocky desert. The land possesses no valuable natural resources. Only 12% of the land is suitable for agriculture and yet agriculture is the primary source of income for 70% of the population. In 2004, on the human development index, Afghanistan ranked 173rd out of 177 countries, ranking near the bottom in nearly every development indicator including nutrition, infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy. The poverty and suffering in Afghanistan are immense even compared to other poor and desperate third world countries.

The modern nation that we know as Afghanistan was delineated rather arbitrarily when, in 1893, the Durand Line was established, demarcating the border between Afghanistan and the British colonies, which would become modern day Pakistan. As was often the case with colonial partitions, the Durand Line cut right through the territory of an ethnic group called the Pashtuns, leaving half of the Pashtun people under British rule, and the other half in Afghanistan. It is here in this Pashtun region, thoughtlessly divided and carelessly dismissed by colonial powers, that the Taliban were born.

This arbitrarily created haphazard dividing line has become one of the most dangerous borders in the world. The rural, mountainous terrain makes it difficult to patrol creating a breeding ground for the smuggling of drugs and weapons, as well as for terrorism. Osama bin Laden, himself a Saudi national, was able to hide out in the mountains along this border for years despite being the most wanted person in the world. No Afghan government has officially recognized this boundary since 1947. It makes it impossible to engage in nation building when there's no consensus as to who the nation consists of or where it begins and ends.

The country's main industry is the drug trade. Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of cannabis and even worse, Afghanistan produces more than 90% of the world's heroin and 95% of the European supply. That's about \$4 billion - over half of the nation's GDP. This is a staggering number and really helps to frame so many of the issues faced by the country and its people. This is a place where it's more profitable to grow opium than wheat, and where the vast majority of the

money made from the sale of these illicit drugs goes into the hands of corrupt politicians, warlords, drug traffickers, and Western interests in both Europe and America who peddle the final product. The rural farmers, of course, see virtually none of it. The average household income in Afghanistan is \$378 per year.

To make matters worse, NATO and American troops have tried to limit the production and trafficking of these illicit drugs, which has the unfortunate byproduct of limiting the main source of income for rural farmers and villages and increasing animosity between rural Afghan farmers and the soldiers.

All this is to say, that over the past several weeks, and this week especially, I have found it difficult not to react with judgment, contempt, anger, even hatred for the extremists who perpetrate this evil against their fellow human beings. And at the same time, to respond with judgment, anger, and hatred is to give in to the evil within my own heart. It is to give in to the arrogance that I am somehow superior to those evil people over there, when I can't even imagine the conditions of suffering and hardship that foster such evil, such anger, and hatred, and violence, within the human heart.

I'm also cognizant today that the conditions under which we live here in the United States, here in Acton, have the potential to foster different seeds of evil within us. The evils of arrogance, greed, envy, complacency, and self-deceit. On the surface these seeds seem far less harmful than the evils of the Taliban and ISIS. But this way of thinking belies a refusal to accept our complicity in the evils that come from the human heart. To look at evil a world away without acknowledging the evil within is to be, in the words of James, "hearers of the word who mislead themselves... like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like."

We must look at our faces in the mirror and we cannot walk away and forget. We must look in the mirror. After all, it was American tax dollars that paid for the weapons to arm the Mujahideen when they fought the Soviet Union in the 80's, the same weapons that were then

turned against US forces in the 2000's. It was my tax dollars and your tax dollars that brought tanks and Patriot missiles and drone strikes into Afghan cities, towns, and villages, further destabilizing the country and leading to the growth of the drug trade. The drug and addiction issues which pervade Western nations such as ours, which fund so much of the illicit activity in Afghanistan, are a direct result of the way we, as a society, neglect and mistreat the poor and most vulnerable among us.

When Jesus tells us that the seeds of evil are within the human heart, we must look in the mirror and recognize that the evils in our hearts are the same evils that flourish in all human hearts across the world. Evil anywhere strengthens evil everywhere, and the evil that comes to bear in hearts a world away is intimately connected to the evil that festers in our own hearts.

My friends, I wasn't lying when I told you this message scares me. It scares the heck out of me. But there is good news. James writes, "every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above." It is the grace of God and only the grace of God that saves us from evil. The grace of God can transform our hearts, open our eyes to injustice, and inspire us to be doers of the Word; ones who stand against evil by letting all of our words, thoughts, and actions be guided by love, peace, compassion, charity, justice, and hope. James encourages us to "welcome the Word planted deep inside you — the very word that is able to save you." It is the Word that is able to choke out the weeds of evil that grow in our hearts. It is this Word that shines a light that overpowers the shadow of evil. It is this Word that emanates from our hearts, the very same complex and mysterious human heart with the capacity for so much evil, that, with the help of God, become vessels of grace and love. It is this Word, and not the temptation to answer hate with hate and violence with violence, that will conquer evil. Be doers of this Word, unafraid to reflect on our faces in the mirror faithfully, and may God's love guide you in all you do. Go in peace. Amen.