

WGUMC September 8, 2013 "Welcoming Our True Selves"
Psalm 8 and John 7:53-8:11

Carl Sagan was an advisor to NASA on the Voyager I mission. When Voyager reached the outer edges of the solar system in 1990, Sagan asked that the camera be turned around to take a picture of Earth from 6 billion kilometers away. What Earth looks like from that distance is a pale blue dot in space. Remember, in astronomical terms, that's a close-up view. And just think, if our Earth is nothing but a dot in space, we human beings are barely specks on that dot. Sagan wanted to take the photo because he wanted us to ponder our place in the universe. So did the psalmist, who asks, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established: what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

But for the psalmist, human beings are not specks; they're spectacular. "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." Then the

psalm goes on to tell us how God has given us dominion over— responsibility for—all the creatures in the Creation.

Now Psalm 8 may sing of the glory and honor of humanity, but the rest of the Bible tells a different story, one of our vainglory and dishonor. Psalm 14 puts it: "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." [Psalm 14:2-3] And our reading from John's Gospel seems to agree. There was no one to throw a stone at the woman caught in adultery because there was no one in that angry mob who was without sin, no, not one.

Here we are reading along in our Holy Bible and we get caught between the awesome potential and the awful reality of our humanity. So the question is: How do we reconcile these opposite images that are contained in the same book?

It would be easy for me to argue that there is more empirical evidence for the negative view of human nature in John 8 than the positive one in Psalm 8, so we'll start in John. In this episode, I'm not as concerned with the woman as I am with her accusers. The woman does not deny her sin, but those who condemn her and want to stone her to death (letting her partner get off Scot free evidently), are those who have wrapped themselves in cloaks of righteousness. By asking Jesus to apply the Law of Moses in this situation, they want to sandtrap him. Instead, Jesus bends down and writes in the sand. Finally, he says to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

In a few words, Jesus has stripped them bare. And realizing that their souls are now naked and exposed, one by one, they slink away. By walking away, they admit their sin and they are none too anxious for anyone else to get a good look at it. In the end, they can't really condemn the sinner because

they can't confront their own sin. Likewise, they can't accept the Good News of Jesus because they can't accept themselves.

Last week, I preached a sermon about how we have to welcome the Word of God into our lives before we can welcome anyone else. But can we really welcome the Word unless we can welcome our self, in all of our honor and dishonor, our saintliness and sinfulness? We have to be honest, we have to be real with ourselves, if we want God to be real for us.

And that means that we are going to have to take a good long hard look in the mirror. Sounds easy, but we are really good at looking and not seeing what there is to see. French writer Malcolm de Chazal said, "Monkeys are superior to men in this: when a monkey looks into a mirror, he sees a monkey." But we have a habit of looking into a mirror and seeing everything but who we really are. We may see the person our parents or our spouse or boss want us to see. We may see the person we thought we were going to be or the person we failed

to be. There are times when we look into the mirror and say, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the biggest loser of them all?"

Parker Palmer tells a story about how long it took for him to see and welcome his true self. Parker started out in the 60's working on a PH.D. in sociology at UC Berkeley. He had the smarts, he had the credentials (he even had a college trustee convincing him that he would be a university president one day) but he couldn't admit to himself that he didn't have the discipline that you need to succeed in academia.

So, he took his 60's idealism, his anti-institutionalism, and he left Berkeley to work in community organizing. Again, he had the theories, he had the moral passion, he had a paid position, but he didn't have the tough skin and the perseverance that you need for that kind of work. So he quickly burned out. He became clinically depressed. He knew had to take serious time off.

For ten years, he lived at a Quaker commune where he had plenty of time to take a long hard look in the mirror. And what he finally saw there was not his failure to be an academic or a political organizer. What he saw in the mirror was that those things didn't fit him. What he finally saw was his true self: a gifted teacher and a spiritual director. I won't say that he is "little lower than God," but I've attended two of his spiritual retreats and a series of five by facilitators trained by him, and he's been a godsend for me throughout my ministry.

Too bad not everyone can go off to a commune, but every one of us can look in the mirror. What do we see there? You know, we like to play tricks with a mirror. Women put on make-up. Men comb over their bald spot. Teenagers cover up their pimples. Whether on our faces or on our souls, we like to cover up our blemishes, don't we? But for now, let's put away the cover-up, take off the dark sunglasses, and look straight into our own eyes. The eye, Wesley said, is the mirror of the

soul. We have to look into our eyes to see our true selves. If your eyesight isn't that good, remember that you have spiritual eyes. Use them.

There may be things there that you don't want to see when you look into your soul. Like the mob in our story, you want to walk away. But I beg you to stay. Because if you look long enough at the failures of your relationships, your mistakes in parenting, your lapses at work, your sins of housekeeping, you'll realize that they are no more "the real you" than the blemishes we call pimples, wrinkles, and bald spots.

To see past the surface blemishes to your true God-blessed self, toss out the cosmetic mirror and get yourself a God mirror. Cosmetic mirrors will show you what you look like in different types of light. But a God mirror shows you what you look like in God's light. And I tell you, you look a whole lot better than you think you do. God sees you at the end of a

long day and when you get out of bed in the morning and loves you anyway. Because God can see you just as God created you.

It's not that we now have no sin and can throw stones. It's that our sin looks a lot different from the perspective of God's saving grace. Most of us, when we look in the mirror, will not be able to see what God sees right away. Not today. Not tomorrow. Maybe next year. As Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." [I Corinthians 13:12]

But if we keep looking in God's mirror, God will train us to see God's glory reflected there. If we're honest with ourselves, if we show our naked face to God, God will do the same for us. If we look in our bathroom mirror, we are going to wish we looked like a super model or movie star. But if we look instead and keep looking in that God mirror, a startling thing happens: we start looking more like God. Paul puts it this way, "And all of

us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...." [2 Corinthians 3:18]

So "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" More than specks on a pale blue dot. Just look in the mirror. You, me, we—are made in the image of God, crowned with glory and honor. We welcome our true selves because there is an image of God in there somewhere. And when we can see it in ourselves, we will see it in others. And the stones that we would have used to condemn them, we can use to build a bridge so we can reach them and bless them. We'll be taking our little welcome wagon over that bridge for the next couple of weeks. Hope you'll come along.