

**Pentecost 20, Year C,**  
**Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh**  
**27<sup>th</sup> October, 2019**  
**Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22 CEV / Luke 18:9-14 NRSV**

When you look in the mirror, what do you see?



Are you happy with the reflection looking back?

Do you think, man, what an attractive guy?

Or do you see something in need of improvement,

like eyebrows that are too bushy, eyes that look too tired,

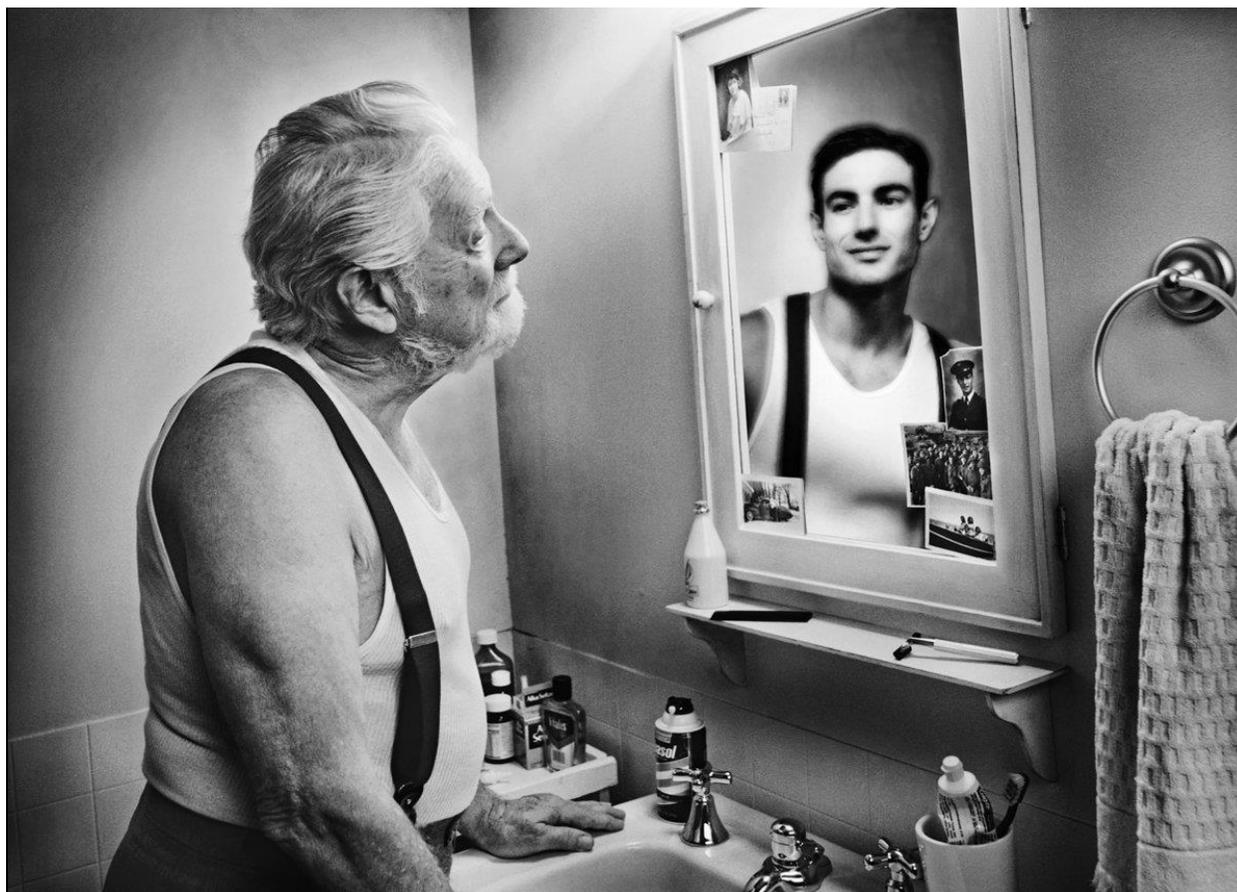
or for those of us in the ongoing struggle against gravity,

bags and sags, dimples and wrinkles?

What we see in the mirror can greatly affect not only how we feel about ourselves,

but also how we view others around us.

For some, when we look at that image, we see the best possible reflection.



We see the best possible reflection of ourselves,

often from a time past when we were more youthful, in better shape,  
and had the world at our feet.

We see what we think the ideal image should be.

This is the perception of the Pharisee in our story gospel lesson today.

He is very proud of what he sees in the mirror.

He goes above and beyond what the idea image of his time consists of.

In Torah law, you were only required to fast one day a year,  
on Yom Kippur, yet he fasts twice every week.

He gives ten percent of all his property,

not just his earnings as required by the Torah.

And now he's at the Temple for his daily prayers,

like a good observant believer should be.

He's living the observant dream.

And is there anything wrong with that?

Shouldn't we be proud of our achievements,

particularly when we are successful

In living up to the expectations of the faithful

as outlined in scripture?

Absolutely we should.

Jesus isn't saying we should be ashamed of personal piety and generosity.

The problem occurs when we let that pride in ourselves

affect how we relate to others,

when we compare our perceived achievements

to our sisters' and brothers'

apparent lack of similar accomplishments.

The problem occurs when we trade humility

for self-aggrandizement and self-adulation.

By contrast, we have a quite different image that the tax collector sees in his mirror.

Instead of seeing his ideal self, he sees that absolute worst he can be.

He sees all the negative attributes

that the Pharisee and people like him assign to all tax collectors.



We've talked before about how the tax collectors  
were considered the bottom of the barrel by their fellow countrymen.  
Often we think of their dishonest practices in gaining wealth  
by cheating those they collected the taxes from.  
But it goes much deeper than that.  
They paid a fee to the Romans for the privilege to hold that position,  
then had to collect the taxes owed to the Romans.  
In order to turn a profit, they had to collect not only the taxes,  
but enough extra to recoup their loss for the initial fee,  
and then tack on extra in order to make any money.

In addition, they would also employ “collection agents”  
to shake down their clients

to get the money they desired from them.

We often see it from the Jewish perspective as robbing their own people,  
which they did,

but they were also responsible for collecting Gentile taxes as well.

Which meant they regularly interacted with Gentiles in their homes,  
making them ritually unclean as well.

So not only were they collaborating with the oppressor, t  
hey were intentionally defiling themselves  
in the homes of Gentiles as well.

Yet the tax collector in our story isn't wallowing in the pride of his accomplishments.

Quite the contrary, he is repentant to the point that he can't even raise his gaze,  
only able to beat his own chest in anger and self-loathing.

He certainly doesn't need to be reminded of his transgressions.

He is painfully aware of his shortcomings.

Yet here he is, at the Temple in prayer before his God seeking forgiveness,  
seeking grace.

So is Jesus saying we should wallow in guilt and self-pity for our failures?

That certainly is not an uncommon message in some Christian circles.

Or are we being called to be honest with ourselves about who and what we are,  
imperfect human beings.

Human beings capable of making bad choices,

errors in judgement that lead us to places in life  
that are less than ideal,  
that go against our God and our neighbor.

It's all about humility.

It's about being frank with ourselves about our shortcomings,  
but also lifting up our strengths.

The important part, however,

is that we confine our analysis solely to that reflection in the mirror.

That is the error the Pharisee made.

He expanded his perspective to compare himself to those around him.

While much of the Bible teaches to consider others before yourself,

this is one of those rare times that it's all about you:

your weakness and failings, your strengths and positive qualities.



So what does your reflection look like? How do you paint yourself in the mirror?

Are you a Pharisee or a tax collector?

Be honest with yourself.

Most of us would shudder to think we judge others like the Pharisee in our story,  
but there are many ways we may find we are just as guilty.

For some, it may be highlighting the mistakes of others.

I've heard a lot of this in my time spent working in church kitchens.

When we point out the flaws of others,

the implication is that we are better than those we talk about,

that somehow they are so much more flawed than ourselves.

Yet the same Jesus who tells us to be humble in this lesson,

tells us in another that only those without sin

can cast the first stone.

Another way most of us have probably strayed down the Pharisee path

is somewhat the opposite of his vocal criticism

of the tax collector in our story,

which is to fail to recognize the existence of those

whom deep down we see as being beneath us.

Who among us hasn't walked by someone down and out on the street

and not even made eye contact,

averting our gaze so we don't even see them,

much less acknowledge them.

It's something I still struggle with,

something I seemed to pick up inherently

as I matured in our culture.

Jesus' example of the unjustified Pharisee

should prompt us to at least see our neighbors for who they really are,  
not just for who we think they are.

People who have lived different lives than us,  
made different choices that we ourselves  
could have just as easily made.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor writes to the practice of encountering others  
as an act of faith,

seeing them as strangers in whom Christ is being presented to us.

According to Taylor, we don't have to start with the most difficult folks  
or the most challenging situations,  
we can warm up, work our way along,  
as we simply notice the folk who are right in front of us.

She says: "The next time you go to the grocery store,  
try engaging the cashier.

You do not have to invite him or her home for lunch or anything,  
but take a look at their face  
while they are trying to find 'arugula'  
on the laminated list of produce.

Here is someone who exists even when he or she  
is not ringing up your groceries...

He or she is someone's son or daughter,  
maybe someone's father or mother as well.

They have a home they return to when they hang up their apron,

a kitchen that smells of last night's supper,  
a bed where they occasionally lie awake at night  
wrestling with their own demons and angels.

"You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at Grocery Outlet today',  
they say looking right at you.

All that is required is that you look back.

Just meet their eyes for a moment when you say "Thanks."

Sometimes that is all another person needs to know

that he or she has been seen-not the cashier but the person."

In each situation in our day-to-day lives, are we being humble or proud?

Is the reflection we see an accurate portrayal, or skewed?

As we go out into the next week,

let's give some thought about how we see ourselves,

and how that affects how we see others;

and let's make it our intention to actually see others around us.

Whether it's the checkout person at the store,

the person camped out in front of the store,

or the one selling the \$2 papers,

let's meet their gaze and give them a smile if nothing else.

Humility is a perspective, but it's also expressed as an action.

I pray we can paint a different, more accurate reflection of ourselves in our own mirrors,

and see our Savior reflected in the faces of those around us. Amen.