

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Zack Nyein

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

2 September 2018



Disclaimer: I shared this vignette at the 5:30 service last week. So sorry if you were there, but I think it's a story worth sharing with the whole congregation.

My sophomore year at the University of Tennessee, I moved into the Episcopal ministry on campus called the Tyson House. It included a chapel and a residential space, where seven lucky students got to live each year. We took part in running the ministry and also shared in maintaining the building.

I can tell you that nothing will disillusion you to the ideals of of Christian community more than living in one. We went in with the highest of hopes, nearly utopian expectations. We were enthusiastic about sharing common meals, praying together, and working to make a difference on our campus. We couldn't imagine that we would ever fight. That lasted about seven seconds. Soon came the dishes left undone, dirty laundry, eccentric personalities. A few months in and you could cut the tension with a butter knife.

Then one day, I woke up early in morning around 11 and wandered into the bathroom to find written on my mirror in bold dry erase marker, the following message: You're lookin' like God today. I had just rolled out of bed and was pretty disheveled so I knew that wasn't a comment on my appearance. Later I found the housemate who wrote it. Turns out, she had written it on every bathroom mirror. When I asked why, she said it was because she wanted each of us to remember as soon as we woke up each day that we were each beloved children of God. Created in God's image. Beautiful and whole just as we were. Why don't we each turn to our neighbor and say, "Neighbor, you're lookin' like God today!"

That small action was the beginning of significant healing in our house, and it became something of a mantra. We still had our tiffs, but that simple reminder in that moment helped us to turn the corner. And what's more, quite unintentionally, it started catching fire with others involved with our ministry. One student randomly left a note on their roommate's car and received a text later that day that it was exactly what they needed to hear. Another wrote the phrase on the mirror in the dance studio where she taught classes for teenage girls who struggled with self-esteem. In ways we could not have expected, "You're lookin' like God today," became a source of encouragement, compassion, and renewal in our house and in the world.

James urges us this morning: Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. For if any are hearers and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

I don't need to tell you that we live in turbulent and polarized times. Times when it can be frighteningly easy to forget who we are. As a nation. As churches. As individuals. And we live in a time when the myth that we are products completely of our own selfcreation and self-curation is particularly insidious. With social media, more than ever, you can curate and broadcast whichever version of yourself you want with the click of a few buttons, causing many to suffer the sense of fragmentation that comes with living in the tension between a fantasy self and the vulnerability of real life.

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In contrast, both New Testament texts this morning grapple with what it means to live fully integrated and authentic lives as followers of Christ. Today in Mark, Jesus calls out the pharisees for their religious hypocrisy. You can imagine his frustration. Jesus and his friends have just returned from feeding the hungry and healing the sick, and all the Pharisees can see is their failure to engage ritual hand washing - which in this case has little to do with undefiled food and proper hygiene and everything to do with building walls between those humans considered clean and those rendered as defiled. But Jesus is more concerned with pure hearts than clean hands. For him, observance of the commandments should always cause the people of God to lean closer toward their neighbors, not further away. James echoes this motion, as he describes how Christians are called to speak and act: Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. True religion is this, James says: to care for orphans and widows.

Someone once said, refusing to go to church because of all the hypocrites is like not going to the gym because of all the out of shape people. Did you know that the word hypocrite comes from the theater? It literally means one who plays a part, and despite its negative connotations, it was originally a fairly neutral term. Thus amidst the myriad roles and identities we are called to assume in our families, professions, friendships and so on, we all act with some level of hypocrisy all the time.

But the truth we claim in baptism is that below all the masks and facades and labels that seek to claim us for better or for worse our first and primary identity is this: Beloved children of God. "Lookin' like God today." Not for anything we can earn or accomplish. Despite our very worst thoughts and actions. Needless of our best attempts to clean ourselves up. To keep our scars and wounds and warts and wrinkles from showing. Our status as God's own beloved is incontrovertible. It cannot be bolstered or diminished. It is the promise we embrace at baptism when we sign the cross on each one's head, saying "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever."

When we understand and act out of our baptismal identity... we become something like holy hypocrites. As we clothe ourselves with Christ. As we become actors in the unfolding story of God's healing and redemption of the world. And, as the baptized, we are called toward ever deepening relationship with our neighbors as we become doers of the word. Those who care for orphans and widows and all our neighbors, including those the world has called "unclean." Not in order to feel good about ourselves, or to earn spiritual accolades, but because as the more we understand ourselves and all human beings to be beloved children of God, the more we learn to see our neighbors not merely as objects of charity but as true brothers, sisters, and siblings - family we are compelled to embrace.

This church gets it. To share a little more of my story, I grew up at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Maryville, Tennessee, where I had the best priest ever growing up. Her name was Martha Sterne. She baptized me when I was 12. From time to time, I would hear her tell stories from the pulpit about this church. A church for All Saints' and All Sorts. And she would talk about this church that drew close to people living with HIV and AIDS and ministered to them when their families had disowned them. Those that rendered defiled. Those regarded as unclean. And she would talk about officiating funerals for those who died from the disease when few if any other churches would. And, do you know - just how powerful it was. As a young gay kid. Growing up in a small town in Tennessee hundreds of miles away. To hear about a church who wasn't afraid of difference? That believed and acted as though every child is a child of God. Do you know what kind of message that sent to know from the time I was ten that there was at least one church where I belonged? Who knows. This church might have saved my life.

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You may be know the term “Collateral Damage” used to describe the ripple effect whereby unnumbered and unintended victims suffer as the result of violence or abuse.

Well I would like to suggest that the baptized life is nothing more than an invitation to participate in collateral blessing initiated through small acts of quiet faithfulness. You don’t have to be Mother Theresa or Florence Nightingale to make a difference. It looks like a household healed through a message on a mirror. It looks like a young future priest filled with hope from stories of distant compassion. It looks like a world utterly transformed by those who are quick to listen and slow to speak. It looks like widows and orphans now family and friends.

You all get it. All Saints’ gets it. I think you know that. This is a special place. It is a place of collateral blessing - the kind of church this weary world needs. Our Rector encouraged us two weeks ago to become more of who we already are. Our world is desperate to know who it is. It is desperate to find itself loved and beloved back to life in so many ways.

So let us make haste to be doers of the word we have received, to go forth from this place as nothing less than Holy Hypocrites - ready to proclaim in word and in action to all those with ears to hear that “you’re lookin like God today.” And let the people say *Amen. Amen.*