

Sermon: Acting Our Way into Belief

Year B, Proper 17

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

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The letter of James is one of the last books to make it into the New Testament. There were a number of Christian churches at the beginning who finalized the collection of sacred writing, the Latin church based in Rome, the Greek church based in Alexandria in Egypt, and the Syrian church based in Antioch.¹ And none of them were quite sure what to do with this letter.²

In part because it's got a very particular format. It's not really a "letter". It's more like a list of sayings. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Pretty is as pretty does. Beauty is only skin deep. These are all sayings about beauty. But to make my point, I have to put together some kind of argument and then pull out those sayings to support it. James has the sayings but without much of the argument. And frankly, James doesn't talk much about Jesus, what he taught or what he did or what his death, resurrection and ascension mean for us. So you can see why the early church leaders struggled with the letter.

Take for instance the bit in today's reading about the mirror. *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.* (James 1:22-25) Is this about a mirror or about the law of liberty and are we supposed to look or listen or do or what? And wasn't a major thrust of the Protestant Reformation about justification through faith, not works? That no matter what we did, it was God that saved us? No wonder Martin Luther called James the epistle of straw.³

Now this may be a girl thing, not a guy thing, but I have a mirror in my brief case so I can touch up the little make up wear if I need it. There's an ideal of western female beauty. I may not come close to it in a bunch of ways, but I like to have darker lashes and redder lips than I have normally. So I look in the mirror to see how my make up is holding up against that ideal. We can argue that the ideal of western female beauty can be very destructive, particular for young women. But as someone who has struggled with an eating disorder, part of recovery from the damage also involves a mirror. A mirror allows me to remember what I actually look like, which, when combined with love and compassion allows me to let go of some of the destruction that ideal has caused me. A mirror can be a great metaphor for memory and model.⁴ And in the ancient world, those were two key characteristics when a mirror was used metaphorically.⁵

If we understand a mirror as a way of connecting an individual to memory of what they are and what they might become, then we can see how the law of liberty, God's law, could be used in the

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 3-6.

² Barclay, 6.

³ Barclay, 7.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Mirror of Remembrance (James 1:22-25)." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1988): 640.

⁵ Johnson, 644

same way. It would have been nice if James had been a little clearer about that, but we can see the path there.

So what about hearing and forgetting vs. doing and acting? We have this idea that belief is separate from action. And yet we live with other creatures created by God where they are clearly connected. And in fact, belief often flows from action.

When I first got my cats, I did all the things the books said to do about food and toys and litter box and introducing them to a new space. I did all those things and I fell in love. When you first bring a dog home, you don't love them yet. You're willing to love them. You want to love them. But you don't know them yet. And then you feed and water and walk and throw the ball and lay on the sofa and watch the Red Sox together. And then you love them. It's like the love is there already, implanted in us with the power to save our souls (James 1:21) but it takes action to make us believe in it. And once the love is there, you do all the feeding and watering and walking and ball throwing and watching baseball together because you love them.

It's important to me to have a Blessing of the Animals every year because they bless us every day. For some children who have abusive dads, telling them that God loves them like a father is not a reassuring thought. But telling them that God loves them the same way they love their pet and their pet loves them, now that is a love which will drive us to all kinds of actions. We get to live with creatures, even the wild creatures in the woods all around us, which show us that action can lead to belief. We love the eastern cotton tail and the wolves and we are willing to change our behavior so they can continue to thrive in our corner of the world. We are willing to work on reducing our carbon footprint so the coral of the Great Barrier Reef will make it through to the next generation.

So look into the mirror of love that the creatures you live near hold up to you. Let that mirror show you the memory of your intentions to leave the world more abundant for life than when you found it. Look into that mirror and see a model of unconditional love that they are offering you. That love is also a mirror, of God's love, for all of creation. Don't glance into it and forget what you've seen. Act because of the love that surrounds you every day. Believe in the love your actions are leading you towards. Accept the blessing that the animals are offering you.