

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Quick, Slow, Angry and Own a Mirror"
Dr. J. Dent

September 2, 2012
14th Sunday after Pentecost

I think all of us have mirrors of one kind or another in our homes. If you don't, I'd like to speak with you about that. We have large mirrors that show a significant part of your whole body and small ones that fit in purses.

Mirrors used to be only used by those who could afford the expensive tin or bronze or silver plate which would reflect back an image. In the 16th century they became more affordable and more widely used when a method was developed to coat glass with tin and mercury. In 1835, a method was discovered to coat glass with silver in a vacuum. And later still other ways of coating glass have been developed, all of which give a fairly faithful reproduction of what light goes into the mirror, including our self image.

If you think about it for a moment, what would you think you look like without a mirror? You would have the same problem of the blind folded scientists with the elephant; some thinking it was a building, others thinking it was a snake, others thinking it was cardboard or leather; depending on whether they felt the torso or the tail or the ear. It would be hard to imagine what we look like without the mirror. And some of us might rejoice in that. This may be because the mirror faithfully shows us the changes that are happening to us, whether we want to see them or not.

As I mentioned to the children, coming to church is like looking in a mirror. We have a perspective beyond our own, that gives us a sense of who we are, beyond what we can discern on our own, or by ourselves. God helps us see ourselves in line with the reality that He sees. Sometimes this is deeply comforting. Other times this is very challenging. The Scriptures help us see ourselves, others and the world from God's point of view. This is why it is critical for us to pay attention to what the Bible has to say, both here on Sundays and on a daily basis of reading and studying.

There are many perspectives given to us day by day. There is the news and other informational broadcasts on the radio, TV, print media and internet. There are our co-workers and fellow students. There are our family members and friends and neighbors. All of these and more contribute to our perspective. But God gives a special revelation of what life is like through

the teaching, history and perspectives of the human authors of the 66 books that make up the canon of Holy Scripture.

That's why we take time, week by week, to listen to four passages of the Scriptures and take time to understand at least one of them. I know it would be good to understand each of the four passages, but we don't make the time to do so. Perhaps we should make longer services and longer sermons. You certainly can give me and the elders feedback on this issue.

James takes us to the heart of how we are following Jesus with our lives. In effect, he asks us what attitudes we are quick to take up and which ones we are slow to embrace. Many of us are quick to anger, impatience and unkindness. I am. I wish it weren't so, but I often find myself flustered and annoyed, particularly when driving. I don't like admitting this, but it is true.

I am also quick to respond to what others say. I find myself talking over others sometimes. This is not what James recommends. But he does recommend a personal inventory of what we do do. He asks what are you quick at doing? What makes you react to others' behaviors or words?

He invites us all to consider the root causes of why we are so quick to speak and slower to listen. He encourages us to be quick to listen, because our whole lives give us an opportunity to learn from others, to learn what to be like and what not to be like. But in order to do so, we must first be learners and listeners.

A lot of us are slowing down. We don't remember in the same way we used to remember. We don't function in the same way we used to function, physically, emotionally, intellectually, in a number of ways. It is not just memory lapses. And I wonder if God hadn't designed us this way.

Some believe that we become more like ourselves and by the time we make it to the last few years of our lives, whether in our own homes, or in an institution, we display more of who we have been all along; with the possible exception of dementia, etc. Others believe we are always changing, incrementally, and that we are indeed difficult to predict, even if our spouses disagree with this. What do you think?

James encourages us to become slower at getting angry. May I suggest this will only happen as we seek to talk with each other about why we become

angry. For some of us, getting angry is a daily occurrence. For others, it is left often. In any case, we need a place where we talk freely about why we do get angry. Finding that place in itself can be difficult, particularly if you get angry with those who are closest to you; the ones you talk to about everything else in your life. But if you can find a group, a Bible Study, a 12 step programme, a counseling or therapy group, where you can talk about what happens to you, this is a good first step to dealing with your anger.

James notes that anger does not produce the righteousness that God wants. That word "righteousness" can also be translated "justice" or "just attitudes" or "just actions." In other words, our anger does serve a purpose. That purpose is to give us a warning of something going on inside. This is most likely something we should give our attention to in terms of how we are feeling; i.e. feeling cheated, unfairly treated, etc. But when we continue in our anger, we can choose to hurt others and ourselves by staying in that negative feeling mode, rather than using it as warning light that something is going wrong inside.

We cannot control how others treat us and speak to us. We can control how we react to what they say. But to do this, we must explore the uncomfortable area of the fact we get angry, how long we stay angry and how we act when we are angry. This approach also applies to us when we are sad or anxious or fearful or all kinds of other emotions. But James mentions anger specifically, so I am concentrating on that.

Part of the process of being willing to look at what we are like involves having the courage to accept what God says about us. James uses a gardening image. He says we need to take in what God says, read the Bible, like we take care of a plant in our room. You need to make sure the plant has sunlight, water and that the soil continues to be nourishing, transplanting it when the roots outgrow the pot. In other words, taking care of yourself includes listening to God, staying close to what God has to say about you and spending time at it. Otherwise, if you neglect the word, like a plant, your spiritual life can wither and shrivel to nothing. On the other hand, the Scriptures remind you that you are saved as you trust Jesus Christ as your Manager, your Boss, your King, your Director, your God.

James goes on to give some of the simplest and most difficult teaching in the whole of Scripture. He says, "Don't just read Scripture, don't just talk about your faith, although both those things are good; but please act on what you

believe.” For this we need help. Because we are sinners and rebels to what God says is best for us. We need God. We need God's revelation. We need each other to help us grow in our faith, like that plant in your room.

We encourage you to join a Bible Study or the Mission Group, or the choir, or Seniors' group, or the quilting or sewing or knitting or one of the many groups where you can meet with others, and serve others and talk to others about your faith and what's happening in your life. Now you've heard this before and you may say to yourself “I don't need that.” Or perhaps, “I don't have time for that.” But right now at the beginning of another school year, it's a good time to look in the mirror and say “yes, I need to make time for one group a month; or one group a week.” I need that for my spiritual growth and for my mental and other health. And if you feel you can't make any of the current group times, talk to me and we'll see if we can't start something for you.

Because we come here week after week and year after year, we think we know what we need and don't need; what we do and don't do. A long time church member said they've never been in a Bible Study before...but it's not so bad once you start...in fact, it's great. It's hard to start new things, but it is worth it. A small investment of time pays great dividends in spiritual things.

So consider anew your schedule. And you know looking in the mirror is more than about your schedule. But it is about the whole of who you are, and who God is in your life. What is God saying to you as you look in the mirror? Be sure to ask God that question. Be sure to hear God's love and care. Be sure to hear what God wants to say to you, and ask trusted others if it sounds right or off or whatever.

The beauty of what God is doing in our lives is that we can trust God and trust others in this journey we are on. This life God gives us is truly a gift, whether we are quick or slow, angry or looking to a mirror.

Let us pray.