

REFLECTIONS IN A HUMAN MIRROR

When you look at a reflection of yourself in a mirror, do you like what you see?

When you stare into a mirror to “check yourself over,” do you mostly see a lot of flaws and imperfections staring back at you? I know I do. Especially in the morning.

I get up after doing my stretching exercises and gaze into the bathroom mirror, and my attention is immediately drawn to the dark circles under my eyes. The cow licks in my hair. My sagging, gravity-challenged skin.

Sometimes I look into a mirror, and I wonder if the reflection I’m seeing is what I actually look like to the outside world. When other people look at me, do they see what I’m seeing? Do I really look like that? Sometimes I pray that my image in a mirror is a distorted representation of myself, and my appearance isn’t nearly as bad as it appears.

It can be painful, awkward and embarrassing to see yourself as you really are. But sometimes it’s necessary to take an honest look at our lives, warts and all, to be able to make the changes we need to make to become a better person.

Jesus often held up a mirror to people for that very reason. Take this morning’s reading from Mark’s gospel. Jesus was at the Temple, and he saw all these wealthy people dropping money into the temple treasury box. Then along came this poor widow, who gave her last two pennies as an offering to God. And Jesus invited his disciples to sit down next to him and look at themselves in the reflection that this poverty-stricken woman was casting.

“Look at her,” Jesus said. “See and compare what she did with what everyone else is doing. Notice the difference between abundance and genuine poverty, between large sums of money and two meager copper coins, between superficial sacrifice and real sacrifice.”

Now, it’s important to keep in mind that our Lord didn’t dismiss the gifts of the rich. He never condemned the giving of the wealthy or indicated that what they were doing was hypocritical or shameful. Jesus didn’t criticize their giving and say their offerings were unfit or not good enough in God’s eyes.

Jesus simply noted that, looking at the reflection in the mirror of the poor widow's life, the affluent people in the Temple were minor givers, while she was the major donor of them all.

And the poor widow is a mirror for us to look into, as well. When we look at the reflection she casts and compare our own lives and the sacrifices we claim to make for Jesus with her generosity, we can't help but see our own flaws staring us in the face. The poor widow's level of faith, and her unhesitant willingness to give her all financially, make her seem spiritually rich beyond measure. In short, she's out of our league. We'd be hard-pressed to do what she did.

Her reflection showed that something had taken hold of her life and moved her to be generous in her giving. We could even say that she was overly generous. I mean, what was she going to live on? How was she going to be able to survive after she gave her last two cents away? Surely God would have understood and had compassion if chose to hold on to those coins and care for herself.

Giving everything she had to God was a magnificent gesture of faith and generosity. And Jesus said we should pay attention and look carefully at her reflection, because there was something important to learn from the example of this socially unimportant woman.

Jesus was an expert at turning our attention toward people in the world that society considers unimportant—people like this widow—and showing us how their lives can be like mirrors that cause us to look at our own lives more honestly, even when it's painful to do so.

I recently came across a fable by a man named Robert Christian that addresses the importance looking at our reflections to see who we really are.

Once upon a time, a young tiger cub's mother was killed soon after giving birth. He sat by the body of his dead mother, crying. A little later a herd of goats came by. The goats invited the young cub to join them, and he did. The herd of goats adopted and raised him. They taught him how to be a goat. He ate grass and bleated like a goat. He became one of them.

One day when the goat herd was eating at the edge of the jungle, a great king tiger let out a mighty roar. The goats all fled in fear, but the young tiger cub just stood there. For some reason he didn't share the fear of the other goats.

The tiger walked over to him, looked him over and said, "Why are you acting like a goat?"

The young cub pawed the ground and bleated like a goat. The king led him to a pool of water. “Look down,” he said. “What do you see?”

He looked and saw his reflection. That’s when the tiger cub saw who he really was.

Christ wants us to see who we really are as people of God. And one way to do that is to see how other people of God live and act, and let what we see reflect who we could be as people of God.

I think that’s a big reason why the church exists—so that members can be like reflective mirrors of a faithful, Christ-inspired life, against which others can see and compare their lives.

I remember early on in my ministry, when I was a pastor up in East Millinocket, I was in the sanctuary getting ready for the service to begin. I was checking the candles and doing some other preparations when a young boy, probably five or six years old, walked up to me and asked, “Are you Jesus?” I was stunned, almost speechless.

His mother, looking quite embarrassed, said, “No, honey. That’s Reverend Gagnon. He’s the minister of our church.”

It was a case of mistaken identity. I did sport a beard at the time, and I was wearing a white alb and spoke an awful lot about God. No wonder the poor, confused boy was convinced in his mind that I must be Jesus.

Sometimes I remember that incident and wonder if maybe he was a little disappointed to learn otherwise. I mean, what an exciting thing it must have been, believing that he was in the presence of God.

If I could relive that event, with 33 years of experience under my belt, I’m pretty sure I would handle it differently. I think I would say something like, “No, I’m not Jesus, but I speak on his behalf. And I try to live my life in a way that others can see Jesus’ reflection in the things I do.”

If you’re ever on the receiving end of such a question—“Are you Jesus?”—you’ll discover that it’s a very humbling experience. Realizing that someone, for whatever reason, thinks you’re Jesus, makes you wonder about the kind of reflection you’re casting to those around you.

It makes you realize how important your words and deeds and attitudes are, because it could be that someone is getting his or her ideas about Jesus from you. And what a sad, regrettable thing it would be, to soil Jesus’ good name and stellar reputation.

“Are you Jesus?”

You know, that’s not just the naïve question of a small child. It’s a very profound and penetrating question that can rightfully be asked of anyone who claims to be a Christian.

Because as Christians, we’re disciples and followers of Jesus who speak and act on Jesus’ behalf; and we’re human mirrors who reflect Christ’s love and compassion and proclaim the same good news of the coming of God’s Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

So, I would ask, when others look at us, listen to us, and watch what we do, seeing how we spend our time, our money and our energy; when they observe how we relate to other people, particularly the outcast and the stranger in our midst, will they be able to say, “I see Jesus?”

Or will they at least be able to say that we’re like human mirrors who cast a reflection of Jesus in the world?

I pray that the answer to those questions is, “Yes.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.