



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 6, 2026
EXODUS 12:1-14; PSALM 149; ROMANS 13:8-14; MATTHEW 18:15-20

BETTER MIRRORS

***Romans 13:8-14** [Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.]*

Mirrors aren't always flattering. Ask anyone who's ever been in a fitting room. They capture sides of us we don't want to see. The good news, though, is that they're not completely accurate. The lighting, the shape of the glass, the smudges on the surface – all of these can distort the image and make us look either better or worse than we actually are. We're also typically not the best ones to judge what we see in a mirror; we often find what we expect to find. If we expect to find beauty, we're likely to find it there somewhere. If we

expect ugliness, we'll likely find it there too. So, here's my question: Can we train ourselves to look for beauty, and what might happen in ourselves, and in our world, if we succeed?

I've been pondering this in light of our Scriptures today. It's said that the Bible doesn't just reflect God to us; it reflects us to ourselves. And sometimes, what we see in that mirror is not pretty. Consider today's psalm. We can put it in context, remind ourselves that it was likely written

during the Babylonian exile over 2500 years ago – when the writer and their audience were so thoroughly defeated that they didn't have swords to wield. Their king, their temple, and their self-respect were gone. The God of the Passover who delivered their ancestors from slavery had long ago left the building, or so they feared. It seemed ridiculous to claim that God “takes pleasure in the people and adorns the poor with victory.” Claiming joy in our Maker under these circumstances, reminding ourselves that we are still made in God's image, and finding beauty there regardless - these can be deeply faithful acts well worth singing out loud.

From there though, we can admit that the psalm goes off the rails. Boasts from our War Department notwithstanding, how can the praises of God legitimately be in our throat while a sword is in our hand wreaking vengeance? My colleague Adam aptly reminded us last Sunday that vengeance is not and never will be our job. Claiming God's prerogative as judge does neither God nor us any favors. It so distorts the image of God within us that

no one can be seen clearly – certainly not God. So, while the second half of the psalm does not reflect God to us, it does reflect us to ourselves. Our thirst for vengeance when we've been injured and our propensity to justify it in God's name - that is part of who we are. And until we can see this ugliness for what it is, we're likely to keep doing wrong to our neighbors, near and far. There has to be a better way.

There is. Paul names it in our reading from Romans. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” That feels liberating, at least at first. At last, we're given a lens, a filter, by which to screen everything else we read in the Bible – a standard we can actually live by. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

The law of love - it seems so simple, until we try putting it into practice. I know I don't always feel love for all my neighbors, whom Jesus clearly describes in the parable of the Good Samaritan as anyone in need (Gentiles and tax collectors included.) And after taking a good, hard

look in the mirror, love is not necessarily what I feel for myself either. Thank God, love is not fundamentally a feeling; otherwise, the effort to force our feelings into such a narrow box would consume all our energy and leave us paradoxically self-focused, when the point of love is to cast our vision outward. Love means wanting and working for another's good, even when we're not sure what that might be. It means seeking and serving Christ in all people, including ourselves, whether we see the image of God reflected back to us or not.

I wonder how we might put this law of love into practice. I wonder if we could start by looking for beauty. This tracks with how a seminary professor of mine once described love as "taking delight in the concrete particularity of the other." If every last one of us is created in God's image, then beauty is part of how we're made. It gets distorted, of course, by

choices we make and by choices made for us; it gets obscured by circumstances we never would have chosen. We might need to look with more patience, more gentleness than we're used to in our born-to-be-a-critic culture. Our faith tells us that there is still God-given beauty there to be found. Some say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and if that's true – that no one else gets to define beauty for us and that we can shape what we see – then so be it. That's good news too.

All this to say, if all we see in our mirrors is ugliness, then we need better mirrors. Maybe we can be better mirrors for each other by letting love color what we see and what we reflect in return. And then maybe we can step back from our mirrors and get back to working for each other's good. Why else are we here? In the Name of the One who gives us the lens of love and expects us to use it, Amen.



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