

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 30, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Be Quick to Listen

Both of today's texts – from the Book of Deuteronomy and from the Letter of James - call us to self-examination. They call us to look in the mirror and see what we see. In Deuteronomy Moses is asking the people of Israel to look at themselves in the mirror in the light of the statutes and ordinances that have been given to them in the Jewish law known as the torah. We often think of the Jewish law as obligations and requirements such as those contained in the Ten Commandments. Some Christian writers emphasize that Jesus freed us from these obligations and requirements since we are “justified by our faith and not by our works.” However, Jesus himself says that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17). Therefore, it is important for us, today, to still learn about torah and to discover the ways in which the statutes and ordinances still apply to us today.

In today's Deuteronomy text, Moses gives us three reasons for following the torah. Deuteronomy 4: 6 says: *“You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the people...”* Therefore, Moses is not suggesting that keeping commandments is a way to earn God's favor, but rather as a witness to others of the effects of God's love on a community of faith. Chapter 4, verse 8 gives a second reason and that is to give witness to God's justice. *“And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?”* And the third reason from chapter 4, verse 9 is to *“...make them known to your children and your children's children.”* We are called today, to act morally and to follow God's commandment to preserve the faith and so that our children and our children's children will also be given the opportunity for their faith formation by experiencing God's love and justice. May it be so.

The Letter of James is also known for the author's emphasis on the importance of doing and acting. James 1, verse 22 contains the familiar imperative to *“...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...”* In writing about the Letter of James, biblical scholar Marcus Borg, says, “In Christian history, James has sometimes been controversial. Martin Luther called it “an epistle of straw” and wanted to excise it from the New Testament.” However, Borg asserts that Luther's emphasis on “justification by faith alone” led him to misunderstand James. Borg continues: “The kind of faith James castigated was believing something to be true, but not acting upon it. As James puts it, even the demons believed in God. (James 2:19)...Rather than being an epistle of straw, it is a fiery and passionate letter.”¹

¹ Evolution of the Word, The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written, by Marcus J. Borg. © 2012 Harper One, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd St., New York, NY

James 1, verse 23 continues: *“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; or they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”* I find myself intrigued by this notion of looking in the mirror. When working with people living with life-threatening and chronic illness, I learned a mirror exercise from spiritual teacher and healing Louise Hay. In the exercise, we used a hand mirror so that we could hold it up close to our face. In background for the exercise, we noted that most of the time that we look into a mirror we are looking to find something wrong with us: our clothes don’t match, our make-up is on wrong, our hair is out of place, or we notice flaws on our skins. In Louise Hay’s mirror exercise, we were instructed to look into the mirror, into our own eyes, and say three times, “I love you. I really love you.” When I first did this exercise, I was amazed by the fact that I had rarely, if ever, really looked into my own eyes. Louise Hay suggests that our eyes are the windows to our souls. I found this experience to be a powerful one and continued to practice it and to teach it for much of my career in healing work. I invite you to try it.

If it is too difficult to express such self-love, you could also try looking in the mirror, into your own eyes, and say the phrase, “God loves me, God really loves me.” When we look into the windows of our soul, we will find God there and we will not forget who we are and whose we are. Substituting this phrase, “God loves me” also brings us closer, I believe, to understanding our scripture texts today. Both Moses in our Deuteronomy text and the author of the Letter of James, are personally deeply grounded in God’s love; they are deeply grounded in their understanding that all that we are and have come from God; and they are deeply grounded in their covenant to God to proclaim God’s message of love for God’s people to future generations.

Let us look now at James’s focus on practical action. In today’s text the first bit of practical advice given to us is to *“be quick to listen, slow to speak, (and) slow to anger.”* (James 1: 19) Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger is difficult for me oftentimes and I imagine it may be difficult for many of you as well. As I read this text from James, this was the verse that spoke powerfully to me. I chose to use “Be Quick to Listen” as my sermon title.

I have a personal story to share from this past week. After deciding on my sermon title, I had a most interesting nighttime dream. In the dream, I was doing anything but listening. I was very busy trying to coordinate a wedding event. It seemed to be one of those destination weddings since some people in the wedding party were swimming at a beach and others were arranging for their wedding outfits, and mostly, people seemed to be completely unconscious of time. I found myself juggling food arrangements, planning the service, delegating responsibilities, directing people to the chapel, etc. etc. It was a most chaotic scene. I suddenly realized that there were only about 15 minutes remaining before the wedding was scheduled to begin. That caused me to get even more frantic in trying to assure that the wedding could start on time.

Suddenly, I was aware that many of the bridal party were sitting on the ground and listening to someone. As I got closer to this group to break them up, I realized that the person speaking was recognizable to me as Jesus. I sat down to listen. What I heard amazed

me. Jesus was talking about his own loneliness. He was sharing his personal needs with this group of people as though no one else ever really listened to him in this way. Jesus continued speaking until I was aware that we were already five minutes past the scheduled time to start the ceremony. I did not want to leave, but also could not fully let go of the expectation that it was my responsibility for the ceremony to start as close to on time as possible. Therefore I pulled the people away from Jesus. I remember walking away and glancing back to see Jesus with a look of sadness and abandonment. When I recalled this dream during my “awake” time the next day, I felt total embarrassment that I allowed myself to abandon Jesus – prioritizing the foolishness of keeping to a schedule – over this far more important opportunity to be in relationship with Jesus.

What do I make of this dream? Without assuming that the spirit of God or Jesus had anything in particular to do with this nighttime dream of mine, I do find meaning in this dream for me. The first meaning that I take is the understanding that as I study the scriptures, when I pray, when I seek to follow the path of Jesus, I am accompanying Jesus who may also desire my company. My dream seems to say to me that Jesus may have a need for me to listen to his words. I also take from this dream that I have a deep need to “Be Quick to Listen”. I am often far more “quick to speak”, or “quick to decide”, or “quick to judge” or “quick to take control of a situation and to direct others” or “quick to be overly concerned with time parameters” or finally, just “quick to allow concern for timing to override concern for relationship or for just being.” I share my dream lessons with you as a way to invite you to consider the ways in which you also may need to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

But clearly, the message of our text from James is not simply to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, we are being called by James to be doers of the word. What might that mean in our lives? Obviously, each of you individually have to decide what it means personally for you to be doers of the words. As a faith community, all of you present today are doers of the word by being in church. You are doers of the word when you share your time, talent and financial resources for the ministries of this church and for the world beyond this church. You are doers of the word when you bring your children to church, when you teach your children the stories of the Bible and when you witness to your children and to others about your own faith in God. This faith community has a long history of being doers of the word as exemplified by the joys we have shared in our history review. During this Interim Ministry, we are now seeking to live into the words of our mission and vision statement and be doers of our vision. In so doing, may we remember the concluding verse in today’s text from James: *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before Abba God, is this: to care for orphans and widows when they are in need, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”* (James 1: 26) It is essential that our vision reaches beyond our own four walls. It is essential that our life as a faith community is a light shining in our neighborhood and our community. It is essential that we use our resources wisely while also using our resources to reach out beyond ourselves to those in need for God’s care and for God’s justice. May it be so. Amen.