

Roll Down Justice

The Mirror Is Broken

[Mark 1:9-13](#)

In one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, there's a young woman who is disabled. She's a daughter, and she has lived with her mother's disappointed expectations all her life. The mother's resentment comes out sideways, of course—a sort of indirect meanness, steady criticism. “Cripple. Misfit. Hopeless.” Those are the names this young woman hears herself called in the way her mother talks to her, treats her. Finally, over breakfast one morning, the daughter reaches the edge of what she can take in. She shouts at her mother, “Did you ever look inside yourself and see what *you* are not?”¹

Occasionally, when we are paying attention to our own growth, we look deep inside ourselves to try to see the truth of who we are. But much more often, other people are the mirrors we hold up to see our reflection. We know our best features—that we are funny, or clever—in their approval of us. Our shame is knowing that we wouldn't look nearly as attractive in someone else's eyes if they knew us completely. This is natural, human. *Everyone* needs a mirror, someone we can keep coming back to to create, and then to validate, our sense of who we are. When you're a child, a parent, or maybe a grandparent, mirrors back to you not only who you are, but what you can become. At adolescence, it's friends. Later in life, this is how we choose a spouse or partner. We choose the most important people in our lives not only for who they are, but for who we are in their eyes. They reflect us back to ourselves—by their facial expressions, their tone of voice, the attention they give us.

The problem is, many of our mirrors are broken. The reflection they return to us is not always the truth. The people in whose eyes we see ourselves—they're flawed too. Their vision is distorted—just like ours is—by fear, or competition. Their own pain or insecurity. Just like us, they see incompletely. And so, our good features get exaggerated. And so do our inadequacies and flaws.

Sometimes we look for too many mirrors; our heads turn in this way and that. Our identity gets caught up in trying to win the approval of more other faces than we can possibly satisfy.

The spiritual life—a path to wholeness—begins with a decision to stop letting broken mirrors tell you who you are. It's to realize, finally, that there is only one Significant Other who can offer you a truthful and life-giving reflection. Only one face that can be depended on to look back at you with absolute love and uncompromising truth. Only in God's eyes will you find your best, most fully human self.

The season of Lent typically begins with the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, just before he began his ministry. But that story only makes sense if you know that just before he went out there, Jesus was baptized. He came up out of that water and saw an open face, and it was looking straight at him. “You are my beloved child,” a voice said. “You make me happy.” He was given a name: Beloved child. *This is who I am*, Jesus took in. *I am chosen. I am loved by God*. This was the reflection that gave him an identity that defined and directed the way he lived.

Immediately, Mark says, there were reasons to doubt that identity. Jesus spent forty days out in the wilderness. He got hungry and lonely and afraid. There were other voices, and every one of them

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Good Country People*

began, “If you really *are* the Son of God...” Like us, Jesus was tempted to look over and catch a glimpse of himself in other, less truthful mirrors. Those mirrors are everywhere around us. Advertising—that tries to convince us that buying something new will make a better version of us. Ambition—for some success or power that will make us appear shinier. Charming people—powerful enough to pull us toward a vision of ourselves that is both bigger and smaller than who we really are. We can lose ourselves. And sometimes we do.

In one of the tribal languages of Ghana, there’s a word—*sankofa*—that means to ‘go back and get it’. To remember, or recover something that has been lost. Even yourself.

In the story *Blood Diamond*, which some of us have seen as a movie and some of us have lived through, a Mende village in West Africa is attacked and destroyed during the civil war in Sierra Leone. It is a true story that young boys were taken from their homes and renamed ‘soldier’, trained to fight alongside the rebels. In the movie, a boy named Dia, the twelve-year old son of a fisherman named Solomon is taken by the rebels, separated from his family. The whole family is lost to each other. Solomon, Dia’s father, is forced to work in the diamond fields. One day, as he is working, he finds an enormous, flawless diamond. It is rare. It is worth a fortune. Dangerously, he hides it.

In this scene, Solomon has come back to find the diamond. He will use it to pay smugglers who will help him re-unite his family. He makes it all the way to the field where the diamond is hidden. His head is down. He is looking for the precise spot. And then he looks up, and sees his son, Dia, who is now a rebel, an angry soldier. Dia, who holds a gun that is pointed at Solomon’s head.

Film clip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygU3F1ho3gg>

“I am your father who loves you and you will come home and be my son again.” Your name is my son. I reclaim you. *Sankofa*.²

The world has a way of misnaming people. This is what creates injustice. Society too loses its way, sees itself in a broken mirror. Our society—*we*—have learned to prop up and bolster our own reflection by arranging the image in the mirror so that some people are always underneath us. In the mirror, they look small. Their image is distorted. We give them names: “the poor”, “illegals”, “criminals”. “Takers”. “Dangerous people.” And just like us, they become the names they have been given.

It’s only when we have a true image of ourselves—when we see ourselves in the eyes of a God who says “You are my beloved child”—that we can feel big enough, secure enough, loved enough, to release others from our society’s pinched view of them. This is the work of justice: to release others—*every other*—from the misshapen, hopeless picture that has been drawn of their lives. To call them by their God-given name. To say, “I see you, child of God.”

This is who you are, people of Campbell United Methodist Church. You are loved by God. And just like the One who has given you your name, you are doers of justice. The name you have been given—*who you are*—draws you, compels you, to pull others with you into that waterfall where God’s love and justice pour down like waters. Until we are all drenched in it together.

² From Terry Hershey, Sabbath Moment, at TerryHershey.com, February 26, 2017.