

Sermon
February 3, 2019
Epiphany 4C
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Jeremiah 1.4-10
Psalm 71.1-6
I Corinthians 13.1-13
Luke 4.21 - 30

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13.12).

For a number of years, I taught an honors course at the University of Denver called “Pets, Partners or Pot-roast”. In it, we delved into the complex relationships we humans have with our non-human neighbors (. . . and I’m more than happy to talk about it more at another time). One of the issues necessary to address at the beginning of the entire course was “What is it that sets humans apart from non-human animals?” We began by looking for answers in philosophy, religion and science. A critical consideration emerged, having to do with self-awareness: Does a non-human animal know itself as a “self”?

How self-awareness developed in humans could be determined scientifically. In one experiment, known as the “Rouge Test”, a baby would be given an opportunity to gaze at itself in a mirror. Then a spot of rouge would be applied to its forehead or cheek, and the “gaze” would repeat. When the baby reacted in a certain way, researchers concluded that it recognized that the “rouge baby” was not itself. Why not, then, apply this test to non-human animals? So, over the course of the last several decades, the experiment has been conducted with a wide variety of animals — and not all “pass”. The list of animals that DO recognize the difference, however, is quite astounding, from Asian elephants to bottle-nosed dolphins to magpies and ants! Their look into a mirror revealed their individuality.

Also in that course, in the class session immediately following February 2nd, I would show the film clip from the most recent “revealing” of Punxsatawney Phil, and the accompanying prediction of the next six weeks’ weather. [So, what happened yesterday? Early spring!] And we would talk a bit about the origins of the ceremony, and its connection to the other festival on February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple (also known as the Feast of the Purification and /or Candlemas). Candlemas, and Groundhog’s Day, are both 40 days after Christmas, as well as half-way between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox — that is, half-way through winter. The candles of Candlemas were blessed by the priest for use during the second half — the next six weeks—of winter!

Of course, the conversation about Punxsatawney Phil’s predictive ability (by the way, he’s only right about a third of the time — he is just a rodent after all) . . . the conversation usually strayed pretty quickly to remembrances of the Bill Murray / Andie McDowell 1993 film, “Groundhog Day”. That movie has become one of those classics, part our cultural lexicon. Even if we’ve only seen it once, most of us will immediately recall either the scene of Bill driving with the groundhog, or, more iconically, the “flip” of the old mechanical digital clock to 6:00 am, accompanied by Sonny and Cher singing, “I’ve got you, babe” (sorry for the ‘ear-worm’). A bit more thought and we might recall the bare bones of the plot: Bill Murray’s character is caught in a time-trap, a sort of purgatory out of which he has to extricate himself. The deeper part of the plot, however, is that the trap is one of his own making: his self-absorption has “dug the hole”. Everything he tries to do for a LONG TIME to get out of the trap, and, at the same time to get Andie McDowell’s character to fall in love with him, is doomed to failure. It’s doomed to failure because every attempt, every strategy, is aimed at satisfying

his own desires; even his efforts aimed at benefitting others only really serve to make him look good. Without giving away the end of the film (if you've not seen it), I'll only point out that the primary issue with both Phil the groundhog, and Phil the weatherman, has to do with them seeing their shadow — literally for the rodent, more figuratively for Bill Murray.

A different fictional character, whose name has also entered our cultural vocabulary, suffered from much the same problem as did Phil the weatherman. This character was so in love with his own beauty that that self-love doomed him. The character, who appeared—most famously—in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was Narcissus. Various versions of the "Narcissus" legend can be found, but in all of them, we find that Narcissus—both enamored with, and confident of, his own beauty—saw not his shadow, but his reflection in a pool of water and, not recognizing that it was a reflection of his own face, fell in love with "someone" as beautiful as he. Of course, that love could never be satisfied, and so Narcissus, in the more "gentle" version of the story, fades away into the gold-and-white flower that bears his name.

All of these accounts—ancient or modern, fictional or scientific—came to mind when I read 1 Corinthians 13 this week. The phrase from verse 12 with which I began, "see in a mirror dimly", as with some of the more iconic moments in "Groundhog Day", has also entered our cultural lexicon, but completely detached from its original context (much like the whole of 1 Corinthians 13, which through its use in weddings, has lost its theological moorings). Lost, in the repetition of the phrase, is its context, found in the preceding verses, and specifically in verses 9 and 10: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end". "Seeing in a mirror dimly" is followed by "seeing face to face", that is, by having a much more accurate view of oneself, "when the complete comes".

Part of the reason that these stories have so much power is that they tell our story: we are rarely eager to see ourselves as we really are, or as we really might even become. Think back to our first reading this morning. In it, we heard that the "word of the Lord" came to a young priest in an out-of-the-way town near Jerusalem. The "word" came not from a "dim mirror", but, rather from a Source that had a better understanding of the prophet-to-be than did Jeremiah himself. Caught up in his own view of himself, when hearing, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1.5), he objected: "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" (v. 6). The text doesn't tell us whether Jeremiah's hesitation was really because of his youth, or priestly "unimportance", or because of his hesitation to undertake the mission God had in mind. Regardless, the clear implication of the story is that God's vision of who or what Jeremiah might become is greater than Jeremiah's limited vision of himself. To use the metaphor from 1 Corinthians, Jeremiah's gaze into a dim mirror was countered by a "face-to-face" encounter with God . . . one that motivated him to leave his obscure ministry in "Anathoth in the land of Benjamin" (Jer 1.1) in order to prophesy to Josiah, king of Judah.

Jeremiah's dim view of his own potential being countered by God's call is a familiar story. We think, too, of Moses's objection to God's call because he had "never been eloquent, but slow of speech and love of tongue" (Ex 4.10). God resolves that by commissioning a partner, an orator: Aaron. Or we recall Isaiah's resistance to God's summons: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips . . . yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is 6.5). God's will, again, would not be shunted aside: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal . . . The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed . . .'" (6.6). Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah, all recognized that God's vision of their future was not only greater than their own, but was strengthened by God's own presence.

When we look at the Gospel reading, however, the tables are turned a bit. Jesus, you'll remember, had several experiences that have confirmed in him his mission: he was baptized and "affirmed" by the descent of the Holy Spirit (Lk 3.22); he successfully weathered his temptation and returned to civilization, filled with the power of the Spirit (4.14); and, as we learned last week, he proclaimed to the synagogue crowd that he, acting through the Spirit, would inaugurate Jubilee (4.18-22). Underlying that claim was an implicit invitation to his towns' folk: "Come, join me!" A good part of Jesus' mission, early on, was to re-engage Israel in its mission to be a "light to the nations" (see 2.28-32). And, while it appeared that his calling was addressed only to the lost sheep of Israel, things went fine. It was when that mission extended beyond Israel's, beyond Judaism's, borders to the Sidonian widows or the Syrian lepers, however, that Jesus' hometown audience turned on him. Jesus effectively held up a mirror to his own people, showing them who they might become in God's plan. They, however, were trapped in their own self-image—so much so that they couldn't see the possibilities before them.

I would imagine that all of these stories, as universal as they are, "hit home" for us. Sometimes something happens that rocks us back on our heels, challenging us to re-evaluate the image we have of ourselves. I can recall major disruptions in my life's journey: the addition of a child into my married life, the loss of a job, the deaths of family members, as well as some "mountain-top experiences" at various camps or conferences. It might, too, have been times, simply, when someone—a relative, a teacher, a mentor, a boss, or a spiritual director—told me that she or he saw potential in me that I had missed. My point is that "the complete"—that God—may come at any time, in almost any guise, holding up a very clear mirror, reminding us that our vision of ourself is often limited, and that there is so much more we can, and should be, doing.

This is, of course, an individual challenge: "In what mirror do I see myself only dimly?" And it is always worth spending time in self-reflection. But it is also a challenge to Good Shepherd. We need to be asking questions about our self-images . . . "images", because we have multiple ideas about who we are, we, as a congregation, and whether or not those self-images serve us well. We need to recognize that, at this time in our congregation's life, God is holding up a mirror for our gaze. Looking in that mirror, and recognizing that it may only hold a "fuzzy" view of us, we have to remember that "the Complete" has come, and now is looking past that mirror, looking at us face-to-face, and offering to us—challenging us to accept—the imperative to develop a continuing, yet also new and equally fulfilling, mission. We can't, like Phil the weatherman, continue to wake up day after day, to the same song. The invitation to us is to accept God's exhortation: "Do not say, "We are only a "little flock". You shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Amen.