

John Sampson
"Through the Looking Glass"
Text: Luke 18:9 - 14
Preached at KVCC
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today I find myself asking a question, which I've asked before, right here, among all of you, right here, standing in this place.

I've asked it before, but I find myself having to ask it again. Because I feel like this moment is demanding it.

So here it is.

Who are we at this moment in history?

How are we showing up right here, and right now, in our lives, and in our world?

If we were like the woman in the painting by Picasso, which we find on the cover of our bulletin, what would we see when we look into our own mirror?

Would we simply see a reflection of ourselves, of a person who is deeply familiar to us?

Or might we see something surprising? Something unexpected? Might we actually see a person who seems less familiar than we would have thought, or hoped for? Maybe if we look deeply through the looking glass we might see a stranger standing before us. Not completely alien, but certainly not who we might imagine ourselves to be.

Who are we at this moment in history?

Look, look into the mirror and see.

I don't know about you, but I have been transfixed by the impeachment inquiry that the House of Representatives is conducting regarding President Trump. The allegations are simple: President Trump required two things from the President of Ukraine. First, to publically declare an investigation into a Ukrainian company which the son of his political rival, Joe Biden, worked with, in the hopes that something could be found that could be used to damage Biden's candidacy for president in the next election cycle. And second, to confirm that the foreign meddling in our 2016 election didn't come from Russia, but from

Ukraine. All future support for Ukraine from the United States government, including desperately needed military aid, would be dependent upon Ukraine doing these two things. The President is also accused of circumventing the official departments of the United States to make these demands of Ukraine, by enlisting the help of a shadow group of envoys, who were not career officials who specialized in Ukraine, and only answered to the President.

We'll see what comes out of the House's investigation, and whether or not these charges will be formalized into articles of impeachment.

And although I am personally mesmerized by the current impeachment proceedings, as your pastor, I am concerned with where this moment in our national history might be tempting us to go in our hearts.

Look, look into the mirror and see.

I've been watching the impeachment inquiry unfold on both MSNBC, and Fox News, on both liberal and conservative media outlets, and there are moments when I wonder if they're even talking about the same event, and the same players, and the same private testimonies given on the Hill, because their perspectives can be so different.

But one thing I feel both these news outlets ask of me is to move beyond considering people on the other side of the issue as being factually wrong. I feel that I am asked to no longer see them as people. I feel like I am being invited to hold them in contempt, and disdain, and that I should want them to suffer some kind of humiliation. And I feel that I am being told that these feelings stirring in my heart are good and right. This is different from wanting justice to be done, from wanting the facts to come out in the investigation, and the law and the Constitution to be upheld and enforced. This is the work of dehumanization, and of alienation. I feel that on MSNBC there's no one more inhuman than President Trump and Rudy Guiliani, on Fox it's Adam Schiff and Nancy Pelosi.

Do you feel that in some way you've been invited, just like me, to move past a legitimate desire for truth and justice, and to corrode the humanity of the people on the other side of the impeachment debate? Do you, just like me, look into the mirror of the impeachment inquiry that is gripping our nation, something that has only happened three other times in the history of the US, and find unexpectedly something like hatred mixed with a sense of personal superiority living in your own heart?

Who are we at this moment in our history?

Are we like the woman in the painting by Picasso who looks into the mirror and sees someone different and unexpected staring back at ourselves? Look closely at the painting and you'll see Picasso could reveal through his playful abstraction a truth more real than what is captured through a painterly realism. He shows us that there is often a disconnect between who are, and who we imagine ourselves to be.

When we look deeply into the impeachment inquiry, past the phone records, and witnesses, past the rebuttals by the White House, and the leaks of testimony, when we look within ourselves, and within our hearts, do we recognize who is it that is staring back at us?

These are questions each of us can only answer for ourselves.

The gospel books of our spiritual tradition, the books of good news about the life and message of our teacher Jesus, are not simply biographical histories of a man. They are opportunities to be held accountable to who we say we are, and they are manuals of transformation for those of us who wish to change in the face of what is reflected back to us. These books of gospel are good news because they are our spiritual mirrors that contain God's invitation to us not to settle for who we already are, but to risk everything for who we could become.

In today's reading Jesus addresses those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Perhaps he is addressing us. I know he's addressing me. And I know he is addressing the people of our nation in general at this particular moment in our history.

In this story of a Pharisee, of one particular Pharisee and not of all Pharisees, of one particular Democrat and not all Democrats, of one particular Republican and not all Republicans, we see an image of someone consumed by the righteousness, by a sense of their own rightness. We have an icon of someone who stands by himself in his own purity, and who takes away the humanity of the tax collector who is not as pure, and as right as he is.

And here's the kicker. The Pharisee is right. The tax collector wouldn't have been as pure and upright as the Pharisee. The Pharisee lists out his spiritual accomplishments, and the tax collector has nothing to say back. He's more than aware of how he is not as in the right as the Pharisee. This story that Jesus tells us never takes away the truth of the tax collector being a man who colluded with Roman rule, or over charged his neighbors. Jesus never takes away the truth that adulterers in his society were religious criminals, or that thieves were guilty of stealing. It's all true.

Perhaps the impeachment inquiry will also prove that it's true that Trump ordered a shake down of the Ukrainian president for his own political gain. Perhaps the investigations on the Hill will confirm the ways Guiliani and others were the conduits of this impeachable offense. Perhaps every new detail that is leaked day after day in our 24/7 news outlets is true.

But in this morning's parable Jesus asks us not to be so worried about everyone else, about what others are doing, or not doing. The courts and the laws and the judges and the House of Representatives and the Senate will, or will not, take care of all of that. Our teacher asks us instead to look into the mirror of our own hearts and to remember the great commandment he gave us – that we are to love God with everything we've got, and we're to love our neighbors in the same way.

The problem with the Pharisee of our story is not that he is wrong about the tax collector not being upright. It's that he has forgotten to add love to his commitment to living according to the Law. It's that he has allowed his heart to curdle so that he looks down with contempt and inhumanity on this man, that he is so repulsed by the tax collector that he must physically separate himself. The issue is that he can no longer see the other man as a human child of God.

I was recently in New Hampshire and as I was driving down the street I saw one of those signs that read "Hate has No Home Here." But the owner of the house had crossed out the word hate and had replaced it with Democrats. Democrats have no home here. I've also driven past signs that say Trump supporters not welcome here.

The stories we've inherited from our spiritual ancestors are not asking us to give up justice, and to give up holding each other responsible and accountable for our deeds and actions. They ask us instead to always mix our allegiance to the Law with love, and mercy, that we never allow ourselves to engage with each other in inhumanity, and contempt.

Who are we at this moment in history?

When we look into the mirror of our hearts what do we see reflected back to us?

These are questions for today. They are really questions for every day.

Amen.