



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

March 5, 2017

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Cleaning the Mirror

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

The Bible tells stories of vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, and sometimes particularly blessed and powerful situations; decisions they face and make; ugliness they uncover or beauties they discover. Hear what the Spirit may say. {Read Matthew 4:1-11}

Chief Inspector Gamache knows about humans at our best and not. With kind eyes, compassionate heart and calm demeanor, careful questions and wise intuition he solves murder mysteries in Quebec province. I savored two more novels while fleeing with his Canadian compatriots, Minnesotans and Michiganders on the Gulf Coast a week ago. Beyond good writing and gripping plots, Louise Penny infuses stories with reflection on being human, wrestling with faith. Scripture quotes, prayers, church history and monastic life. Four simple phrases that open us to wisdom: I was wrong. I'm sorry. I don't know. I need help. Questions like: can people change? There's forgiveness amid brokenness. Rich characters face their idiosyncrasies and imperfections. They find unexpected grace and beauty. For Gamache, more than facts and evidence, truth lies in the human heart. Beyond what, ask why? Question motivation. His heart lays bare as he forms misfits and cast-offs into the best team, confronts corruption, and limps alone at the head a funeral cortege for six of his officers. Recovering from lethal injuries to his heart and mind as much as body, he looks in a mirror to see a jagged scar on his temple, and his beard now hiding others on his formerly handsome, clean-shaven face. While his deputy and dear friend gazes into his own

eyes, mirroring exhaustion, fear, drug addiction, trying to be hidden, yet ever mercifully observed by Gamache.

Mirrors. Mirrors can seem to expand the place we're in. Mirrors help us peer into mysteries and beauties of deepest space. Mirrors give us another angle on what's before us or around the corner, even help magnify small details to be seen more clearly. Mirrors help us see ourselves and our world in ways otherwise impossible. Faithful Christians across the ages say scripture acts like a mirror. We see reflections of human life with God. Through careful questions wrestling with our experiences, what new angle comes into view, what new insights do we perceive about ourselves, our world, and God?

More than historical fact or scientific evidence, Genesis tries to probe mysteries of the human heart, to express our best motivations and our worst tendencies. Just before today's reading, the Holy Creator makes us "very good," in God's image. Just after our reading the Holy Homicide Investigator faces the first murder mystery—Abel slain by Cain. In the portrait of Adam and Eve, how do we glimpse very human realities of goodness and evil inside us all? How do we find God or be found by God through it all?

The story we read today pivots on perception and motivation. Of course, Adam and Eve's eyes worked before. The serpent gets them to see the world and themselves differently. "You will be like God knowing good and evil," the serpent seduces. In tragic irony, fruits of their selfishness distort their nakedness; they feel far more distant and unlike God, in fact, out of close communion. Mirror, mirror on the wall, doesn't show what's good in God's eyes. Now it's sullied with insecurity, clouded with shame, cracked by fearful anxiety. They hide what seems vulnerable, not perceiving what's beautiful. They patch together a few fig leaves. Could be a bit of Hebrew

humor—far from lamb’s ear, it’s probably like sandpaper for underwear! We know how sin continues to grate, cut, and cause pain even if unseen. No, they don’t die literally. Yet in our selfish insensitivity, our pride and anxiety, our arrogant attempts to “know” like God, to deem glorious, or to condemn ... what divine goodness in our lives decays? What grace in our relationships erodes? What sense of peace perishes? The rest of the Bible reveals a story of human attempts and failures and God’s steadfast loving persistence to run to the prodigal while still far off, to clean up the mess of selfishness; to regain that intimate communion of creation. It’s a story of spirits tormented, of hurts and betrayals, of grace and hope.

According to Matthew Jesus is vulnerable. He’s been in the wilderness without eating for forty days—about as low as you can go on Maslow’s hierarchy. It’s the Deceiver’s best chance to get Jesus to focus on egotistical perceptions and priorities. It’s “the last temptation” in T.S. Eliot’s eyes, “the greatest treason, to do the right thing for the wrong reason.”ⁱ The Deceiver quotes scripture. And in fact, all the temptations foreshadow what Jesus later does in a way. So it’s not inherent vice. It’s about intent. In, through and beyond our hungers and needs, value Holy Love. Through all our challenging moments to come, trust the power of Grace, more than testing or trying to prove faith. And however good something seems, keep humbly seeking Divine purposes even beyond personal desires or best-laid plans. You see, friends, life doesn’t always add up. We know we don’t always get what we deserve for better or worse. Darkness and light, kindness and hurt, sadness and hope swirl inside. I believe what matters most, what determines goodness or evil is the motivation. More than just what we do, the meaning, the reason why we do it, what we express through it makes a difference.

Like the voice of the serpent in the garden, or the evil one in the wilderness, friends, how do twisted visions of selfishness lurk within us and among us? Are we tempted to guard against shame or shift blame, rather than face vulnerability and find beauty? How might we succumb to temptations Jesus resisted, even in the church—wanting ceaseless “bread” to satisfy desires without deeper commitment; or surface success and spectacle without real connection with the Divine; or simply trying to maintain power and privilege without the vulnerability and responsibility that accompanies it? How do we see these truths about being human in our selves, in how we live with our dearest relationships, in events of our community and nation?

Friends, we will do faithful work of multiplying loaves to feed many who are hungry, and changing the world to bring God’s reign of love and the order of peace more fully among us. We will do faithful work that tests the limits of our wills and abilities, if not risking our very lives. It will be good and necessary.

And throughout the season of Lent, God calls us to first center on the state of our hearts. In Lent we face what’s lacking or broken in our own lives and relationships, the scars and injuries we might otherwise try to hide. If someone were to sketch our portrait what might they see? We say I’m wrong. I’m sorry. I don’t know. I need help. We probe mysteries of being human, looking for Truth of the Divine. And then more than punishment, we find penitence and grace is really about mercy that returns us to Holy Purpose in the fullness of our life in all creation. We fill our hearts with love, so then we can address with humble confidence the ailments in our communities and world. Then we can radiate peace and cultivate life—the sanctuary God intends for all, from the Garden of Eden through all our temptations.

In Lent we make our way toward the end of Jesus' life. He will give disciples like you and me, bread and a cup to share. He will throw himself down or rather hang high on another tree of evil, not testing God but trusting in sacrificial service beyond self. And he will rise to the highest pinnacle of faith to reign in loving power greater than all the others, his most beloved recognize him in another garden.

"Then the eyes of both were opened." I suppose one way of seeing our journey of living faith is that we're ever moving from Adam and Eve's twisted epiphany of vulnerability, anxiety, and fear ... to the revelation of new life when the risen Christ was at table and took bread and gave thanks and broke it and their eyes were opened to see him most truly.

In Lent, we're reading together Richard Rohr's book *Everything Belongs*. Rohr inspires us to go beyond concerns, trials, anxieties in ordinary life. Holy Truth comes to us, he says, "when we are naked and free." When we see ourselves clearly as we really are, uncovering ways we hide our shame and insecurity, unfettered by fears and selfish desires, empowered by love as the ultimate core of life. We must clean the lens of our hearts, urges Rohr, "to get my ego out of the way." Or as Zen masters say wipe the mirror of anything that may distort our perceptions. Dear friends, through all our difficulties and doubts, keep cleaning the mirror of living faith to see, to understand, to accept ourselves in the security of a Divine Loving embrace that transforms even our greatest faults and regrets.ⁱⁱ

One of the most amusing characters in Penny's novels is Ruth, an old curmudgeonly bitter and caustic poet laureate of Canada. Her expressions of care are insults. Yet her insights into others remain ever clear. And depths of her heart get revealed when she adopts an orphaned pet duck. She loves

it into maturity and sets it free to fly away one winter, and then like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, she sits on a bench every day in spring looking to the sky for her return. Through a portrait of Ruth, an unknown artist in town becomes famous. Gamache stands with a prominent curator, studying it while sampling drinks and hors d'oeuvres at her opening show. As Penny tells the story, just maybe it could be what we see in the mirror one day. The portrait in front of them showed the head and scrawny shoulders of a very old woman.

A veined and arthritic hand clutched a rough blue shawl to her throat. It had slipped to reveal skin sagging over collarbone and sinew, like something nailed up and empty. But it was her face that captivated them. Filled with contempt ... here was a great spirit endlessly tormented. Then beside him Gamache heard a small gasp, "My God," and knew what it was: Ruth painted as the elderly, forgotten Virgin Mary. Angry, demented, the Ruth in the portrait was full of despair, of bitterness. Of a life left behind, of opportunities squandered, of loss and betrayals real and imagined and created and caused. And yet the portrait was radiant, filling the room from one tiny point of light. In her eyes. Embittered, mad Ruth stared into the distance, at something very far off, approaching. More imagined than real. Hope. Clara had captured the moment despair turned to hope. The moment life began. She'd somehow captured Grace.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (end of Act 1), 1935.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 19, 103-105.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted and abridged from Louise Penny, *The Brutal Telling* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2009) - <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7568155-clara-morrow-had-painted-ruth-as-the-elderly-forgotten-virgin> and *A Trick of the Light* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2011), 17-18.