

Inside And Out

Texts: **James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-23**; Carrying A Mirror from *Venus Plus X*, by Theodore Sturgeon

There it was, just peeking out from behind the leaf, all innocent and unashamed. I only noticed it at all because of the white sprinkle-like things that dotted its back. It was well disguised in its green overcoat, tucking itself neatly into its bed of green leaves, as it clung menacingly on the vines, but those white sprinkles betrayed it. It was a caterpillar. A fat one. And it was eating my tomato plants at our old house in Batavia. More than that, it was not alone. I understand that what happened next has already been written up in the caterpillar history books as the infamous “slaughter of the seven monkeys” affair - an exaggerated tale of the plucking and the stomping that I engaged in to rid my precious tomato plants of their pestilential foes.

It’s not just caterpillars and other clever creatures who take on disguises, who try to appear on the outside that they aren’t what they really are on the inside. This week I received an urgent call seeking the whereabouts of one Joseph Smith, who had left my cell phone as his contact number at a store. I received the automated call three times before I pushed “one” to indicate I knew where Joseph Smith was, just so that I could speak to a person, who came on the line instantly. I told her that I did not know where Joseph Smith was, and they could stop calling me. Some chameleon disguised as a person had obviously made a purchase that they didn’t intend to pay for, under the pseudonym of Joseph Smith and had then just faded into the background, as chameleons are wont to do. But I’m sure they’ll catch him. I mean, how many fake Joseph Smiths could there be?

It all reminded me of the time years ago that the guy across the breezeway in my apartment complex got robbed. Someone broke into his apartment, bypassed the stereo and the TV that were sitting in plain sight in his living room, and spent time rummaging through his bedroom dresser drawers to find my neighbor’s wallet and credit cards. The thief got away cleanly. Or at least, he would have, if he hadn’t gone to the store with the credit cards immediately afterwards to purchase – what? – the very same stereo and TV that he had just left sitting in my friend’s living room! But he still wouldn’t have been caught, except that the salesman, who apparently could have sold ice cubes to Inuit and arrows to Native Americans, convinced the thief to buy the extended warranties on his new stereo and TV and without thinking, the thief had filled in his own real address on the warranty cards. On investigation, the police drove straight from the store to his home and arrested the guy, as he was watching Cops on his new TV. Okay I don’t know what he was watching, but the rest is all true.

People, as well as bugs, can disguise themselves for their own purposes - sometimes well and sometimes poorly. In our gospel lesson today, it’s the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law, who had come up from Jerusalem to see Jesus. As commentator Brett Blair says, they came not on a “fact-finding mission”, but on a “fault-finding mission,” and they managed to find fault in Jesus’ disciples – surprise, surprise! The disciples didn’t wash their hands before eating.

I know, I know. It’s disgusting, it’s vile, it deserves the harshest censure. Sheol itself was created for such dirty-handed diners. And yet, in the great scheme of things, I think it’s just possible to concede that there are worse things that one might do. Perhaps like abandoning one’s mother and father in a time of need and claiming that the money you would have given to them has just recently been devoted to God as a temple gift, and that you are sorry but they are out of luck. “If only you had asked last week ...” That might be worse.

Jesus, spotting their white speckles poking out from behind their leafy camouflage, calls them out on it. “You hypocrites! Get over yourselves!” Okay, maybe not that last part, but certainly the hypocrites part. Now, in Greek, the word *hupokritai* doesn’t mean hypocrite, or at least, not exactly. What it usually means is a play actor, someone playing a role, putting on an act. And *hupokrisia*, from which we get our word *hypocrisy*, is simply the art of acting. Neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky tells us that actors rehearsing a very stressful scene all day, will have all the physical signs of stress showing up in their bodies, when later tested - elevated heart rate, organs shutting down, stress hormones and adrenalin coursing through their veins, and so forth - whereas actors rehearsing a happy scene will not. In other words, if you play a role, your very body will start to change to conform to that role. You start to become who you are playing, and that seems to be what has happened to these Pharisees and these teachers of the law. They have been working at being outwardly righteous for so long that they have lost something on the inside that they used to have, they have lost a genuine love of what is right and good and just and from God. They can no longer tell the difference between the traditions that have evolved to help people with a good heart keep the law, and how people with an actually good heart do keep the law.

It’s the difference that David Chadwell was trying to get at when he asked, “Who would you prefer as a next door neighbor or as a friend or as a spouse or as a child: a person with excellent habits or a person with a good heart?” Sure, it’s excellent to have a very conscientious neighbor, a courteous spouse, a thoughtful child. But as Chadwell points out, when you are talking about good behavior, you are talking about the quality of a person’s self-control. When you are talking about a good heart, you are talking about the quality of the person. It is what is inside that counts the most, although the outside isn’t nothing. And that’s what Jesus is getting at in what he says to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law: It’s not what goes in that defiles a person, it’s what comes out.

Later, in private, his disciples ask him about that. Jesus, a little amazed that they don’t get it, starts off with a little biology lesson: what you eat doesn’t go to your heart, but to your stomach. “And from there it goes out of your body in the outhouse.” It has no more significance than that. It doesn’t mean poop - or rather, it does, but that’s all it means.

“But what comes out of your heart, that matters. From the quality of your heart comes your proneness to thoughts about immoral sex, about taking things belonging to others, about envying others. From the quality of your heart comes the likelihood you’ll be caught up in greed and arrogance and violence and foolishness. All these things are what make a person unclean. Not washing your hands before dinner or eating the wrong thing; that doesn’t make you unclean.”

Now, this is all very nice, and we can be smug and self-satisfied as we look down on the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. But then, of course, we wouldn’t be seeing ourselves very clearly at all, would we? We would be like caterpillars, like the Joseph Smiths of the world, hanging out in disguise, looking in the mirror, as James says in his letter, and then immediately forgetting what we ourselves look like – if in fact, we ever really saw ourselves clearly in the first place. James reminds us to be doers of God’s word, and not just hearers of it.

So far, sitting here, we’ve been able to be good hearers of the word, nodding in agreement with what Jesus says about hypocrites and play actors. But now is the time for God’s word to penetrate like an arrow into our own hearts and check on the qualities that we find there. It’s one thing to deplore greed; it’s another thing to be generous. It’s one thing to detest lying; it’s another thing to be completely honest when it counts. It’s one thing to want justice and mercy, another thing to do everything you can to ensure that real justice is done, and it is done while drenched in mercy.

When we look at all we think we should be according to the gospel, and we see what we all are instead of that, we realize that we fall far short. Indeed, it's an acknowledged truth that a man or a woman who lives up to the highest standards they've set for themselves hasn't set high enough standards. So we fall short. We all have a little bit of play actor in us - maybe more than a little bit - but a little bit at least. We're all a bit more hearers than doers of the Word sometimes. So now what?

Well, it may be true that nothing that goes into you can ever defile you, but that doesn't mean that nothing that goes into you can ever work the other way and change the quality of your heart. That's because the gifts of God have a way of getting into our hearts, like nothing else does.

When the Spirit enters, it is the Spirit of action, to empower us to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only. When we share our communion on Communion Sundays, it's just bread and wine that go into us, but they change us through the presence of Christ, camouflaged beneath the elements, but peeking out through the power of the Spirit. What goes into us does not defile us, but when it is the spiritual presence of Christ, it can define us. We go from being play actors to genuine actors, people whose faith leads them to do what is right, not to look good, but because we are good, because God has changed us.

Hear and do, take and eat, these are words that change us when we let them penetrate to our inmost being, when the Spirit comes in with them. Then there's no need for hiding or camouflage anymore. Our true selves are reflected back in the mirror, and we can go into the world without disguise.

Amen