

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

"Glance vs. Gaze" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (09/01/2024, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

It is always a stunning fact for me to consider that no one in history, no person in the history of the entire world had seen the earth, our planet, our home, until the 1960s. It's extremely, extremely recently in human history that we actually see our own home. And so, you know, there were some rudimentary satellite photos in the 1940s and 1950s, but in the 60s we finally saw the planet for the first time in color and what it's called a full disc photograph, the whole thing. And that photograph is right here behind me. And this was caused for a shift in perspective. It was caused for some really lovely reflections on what it meant to be a citizen of this planet amid a season of great turmoil. In 1948, someone said, once a photograph of the earth is taken from the outside and is available, a new idea as powerful in history will be let loose. Others said this, Hubert Humphrey, as we begin to comprehend that the earth itself is a kind of man's spaceship hurtling through the infinity of space. It will seem increasingly absurd that we've not organized better the life of the human family. And then finally, from Michael Collins, who was a Gemini 10 and Apollo 11 astronaut, he said, I really believe that if the political leaders of this world could see their planet from a distance of 100,000 miles, their outlook could be fundamentally changed, that all important border would be invisible, the noisy argument silenced. Tiny globe would continue to turn, serenely ignoring its subdivisions, presenting a unified facade that would cry out for unified understanding for homogenous treatments.

And I'm so happy to say that it worked, right? We saw the planet from the outside, it worked all human division and war ceased and here we are. Now we know that didn't happen, right? But what did happen is that the people who did themselves actually witness this did have an experience and their lives were changed and they could never think or see the world the same way again. This is called the overview effect, this altered consciousness that results from this experience of seeing the earth from space, for the ones who have experienced that it was wholly transformative, it caused their perspective to shift completely and entirely for the rest of their natural life. Now have you ever had an experience like this? Not saying that you have been up and seen the planet from afar, but something that was beautiful or life giving that fundamentally shifted the way that you approached your own life or your understanding of how you fit into the story of your own life and of God's story with you. It can't happen, you know, often we hear about the trauma effect that it can have on the pathways in a person's brain, it rewires our brains, trauma, it causes us then to try to protect ourselves in ways that are often subsequently unhelpful to us. But I think it's nice to know that we can have other kinds of experiences that shift our perspective in positive ways, things that give us something to hold on to that's profound and beautiful. In the letter of James, James is encouraging his siblings in Christ, these earliest of Christians to think about something that is perspective shifting and that's what I want to talk to you about today. First, they wanted them to consider that the faith in Jesus was something more than what the Greeks called Threskoss and what the Romans called Religio and what we typically translate today as religion. What most people in James's time thought of when they heard religion was something more like what we might call patriotism or even school spirit today. It had to do with cheering for the right team, something to do with a lot of outward displays of support. You might show up at the temple of Athena with your Athena t-shirt on and you would worship the gods in public, you would burn incense, you would pour out your libations, you would make an elaborate public display that showed to others that you were a good citizen. You performed your religion quite literally. Your civic

duty, you fulfilled your obligation and it was very important for people to see you doing that. James in writing this letter is following the example of his brother, Jesus, who corrected the Pharisees in our gospel passage for today. In both cases they are emphasizing some sort of inner life, some kind of inward transformation and understanding that the outward displays of civic and religious duty are ultimately meaningless if there's not a corresponding inward change. The inner life, Jesus and James, both affirm as the key to the outward life, not the other way around. And so looking back at ourselves from space is one thing, but looking within our own selves can be much, much more challenging in fact. St. Augustine, the great Christian thinker, about 1600 years ago, is credited with creating the autobiography as we know it. An autobiography is not merely a diary, it's not just the list of all the things that you have ever done. An autobiography is an interpretation of your own life. You know this, your memories are not always as reliable as you think they are and we only make sense of the things in our past by interpreting and reinterpreting them. Go back and say, wow, if I had dated that person instead of this person, I would be in this place in life or if I had gone to this college or made this decision, gone into this profession, my life would be different. And so it's a way for us actually to make sense of our lives, of the story of our lives. And so he wrote his down and shares it with us to this day. So Augustine's autobiography called Confessions, he was trying to trace the finger of God and God's influence throughout his own life. And he was trying to reckon and to come to terms with this inner struggle that he had had his whole life, between faith and doubt, trust and suspicion, grace and mercy and love, over judgment and fear and hatred and especially for Augustine guilt, the guilt that he shared from early experiences in his life. One of the great things about this autobiography in particular is that it's full of questions, it contains over 700 questions, I counted them all last night, just for you all. But there are over 700 questions, he asks of God in his autobiography, he is asking God, what did this mean? Who are you? What are you trying to do in my life? He's trying to make sense of his life, he's trying to understand his own story,

his own misguided youth, his own mistakes and failures and ultimately the greater grace of God that made everything new in his life. It was a perspective shift. So what might it mean for us to look at ourselves differently? How might it affect our lives, our relationship with God if we saw ourselves from a different vantage point? So James has this intriguing and perplexing image of someone who looks at themselves in a mirror and then forgets what they look like. And so they circle back again for another peak. So this could be an image of vanity, right? Someone who is so pleased with what they see in the mirror that they have to come back for more or it could be something like the opposite. Someone who sees something that disays or upsets them and as soon as they leave the mirror they can't stop thinking about it and so then they go back to the mirror and they look at it again and they can't stop thinking about it. They can't stop worrying about whatever it is that they see. I like the way one biblical scholar interprets this mirror image. However, they say this, like someone who gazes admiringly in a mirror, your self-understanding always requires booster shots of another peak, another day, whereas the one who looks into God's commands for self-understanding can perceive an enduring standard of who we are and who we should be. So here's the thing. There's a difference in other words between a quick glance, a very sort of human thing, right, and a long, sustained gaze. The quick glance only shows us how we view ourselves and I don't know about you all, but the way that we view ourselves is not great. It's inconsistent, it's hyper-critical, or it's the opposite, it feeds our ego in really unhelpful and unrealistic ways. We tend not to be the best judges of ourselves. We know this because when your spouse or significant other or best friends see something in you and points it out and says, do you know that you do this thing and you're like, no, I don't do that thing and then you realize you do the thing. Maybe you do the thing all the time and you're so angry because you have not been able to sort of have that outside perspective on yourself. You have not been able to realize how it is that you are moving about and what you are presenting to people in the world that were not the best judges of ourselves. We try to hide those things. We are in denial about those things. Gazing into

God's understanding of us can be life-changing. It can be a complete and utter shift of perspective. It can transform our inner being, gazing into God's understanding of us, shows us things that are so wonderful we strain to believe them about ourselves, that we are the beloved of God, that we are the treasure hidden in the field, that we are the son or daughter or child coming home for a long time away. The one whom God sees a far away off and rather than keep his arms folded with a long prepared lecture about where we've been and what we've been doing, God runs toward us in a completely undignified way. Arms flapping about legs, skipping a step, saying, my child, my child, I am so glad that you were home. Welcome. I guess to know the restless heart, the heart that glances into the mirror over and over again to gain the approval of the world, the applause of the crowd, the social advancement that comes with it. Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, a teacher of argumentation, an English teacher essentially, even though English didn't exist in his own day. That, by the way, was a profession that people actually cared about back then, and respected, and so Augustine did have, by virtue of being a teacher of rhetoric, he commanded a lot of social and civic respect. And this was in his former life before he came to know Christ, and so what he did is he helped people use language in artful ways to manipulate others into getting what they wanted. He helped people move through life by measuring their value and self-worth by the same standards he had always used himself, popularity, money, fame, attractiveness, all of those things that we might see when we only glance in the mirror, but they vanish, the longer we look. Dr. Karen Howells, I heard an interview with last week, she is a sports psychologist, and she studies the post-Olympic blues. Documents attend an athlete to have just achieved a significant life goal that they've been working for for years. When the games are over and they return back home, it is very difficult for these athletes to recover emotionally and psychologically from this high, and it's not just a high, it's the attainment of something that they've been working for for every minute, for every second, for years and years and years, and then all of a sudden it's gone, not there anymore.

She says this, it's more about making a map of how to get to a destination. Once you get there, it's like, now what? They're in a period with no plans and no spectators, and they don't know what to do, and they feel utterly and completely lost. Augustine experienced something very similar, and he diagnosed it as an essential feature of the human heart. He says, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. We place our trust, our faith, our hope, and things, external things that are temporary. As one person says, we fall in love with the boat rather than the destination, but our heart is built for another shore. Or as C.S. Lewis put it, he would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mudpies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased. Now, there are two ways to end this sermon. One is to say, don't do that. Don't look into the mirror and see what you want to see. Look, gaze into the mirror and see the image of God, the thing that God wants you to see. So I could tell you that. I could tell you to gaze into the law of liberty, to see yourself the way God sees you, to place your face in the things that last and not the things that are temporary. And I will tell you that. It is very good advice, and it's also advice that I myself have a lot of trouble accepting, and that Augustine himself struggled with as well. Gazing into that mirror also requires honesty. It requires us to acknowledge and be well, our manifold sins and wickedness. It requires us to admit to ourselves the God that we are having a tough time, that we haven't gotten it right. And it also invites the Holy Spirit, because of our honesty, to affect in each one of us this transformation, that we cannot bring about by ourselves. Look, that's why you're here, right? That's why all of us are here, is because we forget. We forget and we have to be reminded. And so at this table, in a few minutes, we will gaze into the mirror and we will see ourselves the way that God sees us. We come with empty hands and God fills them, and not with something that we possess, but something we bring into our various selves, his own body, his own blood, his own life,

living in us. And so I want to end with the way that one person has put this. I loved this. This is from an autobiography of Augustine. He says, when we're able to rest in the love of God, it doesn't squelch our ambition. It fuels it with a different fire. I don't have to strive to get God to love me, rather because God loves me unconditionally. I'm now free, free to take risks and launch out into the deep. I'm released to aspire to use my gifts and gratitude caught up in God's mission for the sake of the world. He says, when you've been found, you're free to fail. James knew this, St. Augustine knew this, and I pray that all of us know this. When we have been found by God, we are free. That is the law of liberty that James talks about. We are free to love, and we are free to fail. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Almighty God, we thank you that in your infinite love and goodness and wisdom you have made us for yourself, and so that everything that we try to do in this life to fulfill that ultimate longing will fail except seeing you. And so we pray, Lord, that you would give us that vision. Help us to see ourselves the way that you see us as the beloved, in your name we pray on them.