

“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:8, Psalm 24

(10-25-20) Reformation Sunday

When you think of the word “Pure” what comes to your mind? Maybe you think of Dove soap, which we’re told is 99.44% pure, as long as you consider that any kind of soap, which is mostly made up of vegetable oils and animal fats, is pure. Or you might be thinking of a certain brand of bottled water. I googled the word pure and the first hit I got was for a Canadian TV series about a Mennonite pastor fighting drug traffickers in his community – I haven’t seen it either! The next listings were for a chain of pharmacies, organic beauty supply stores and nutritional supplement suppliers. There’s a local Vancouver painting company called Pure, a skin care and facial spa and even a radio station. After searching through a number of Google pages, I didn’t find a single hit on the word pure that would connect it to the heart. **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God, says Jesus.** So now, when you hear the words pure in heart, what images come to your mind? Probably not Mennonite pastors or at least Canadian content on television about them! I guess for some of us the word pure in heart may conjure up a desire to keep away from that which contaminates, that which is dirty or filthy. It might stir up images of moral conduct, that pure in heart means to keep away from evil thoughts, salacious behaviour, immoral acts. For others it might be about keeping the commandments, seeking to be faithful in our discipleship as followers of Jesus.

I remember hearing a lecture by Dorcas Gordon, former Principal of Knox College. She stated that there is a distance between the world of 1st century Mediterranean thought and our present North American context. Words and ideas had different meanings in that time, in that culture, then they might today, here in our culture and context. As is the case with all the other Beatitudes, we need to remember that Jesus would have used the words he used in the scope of his own context, as a Jew living in 1st century Palestine, as someone intimately familiar with his scriptures, our Old Testament. Pure, in that context, from the Greek word Katharos, can mean both clean, like a clean linen shroud, and also unalloyed, as in pure gold. Jesus, as a faithful Jew, would have been very familiar with the Psalms, including Psalm 24. In that Psalm we read, **“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.”** In that context it appears that pure in heart and clean of hands go together. So it seems that only those who are innocent, not only of moral failures, clean of hands, but also of evil intentions, pure of heart, because the heart was understood as the seat of the human will, **only they would be those considered innocent enough to be allowed to ascend the hill of the Lord, to stand in the presence of God, to see God.**

But if we took that line of interpretation, what chance would any of us have of ever seeing God? Some of us might be better than others in terms of clean hands. Some of us might even have the courage or audacity to say, my hands are clean, and in these days of pandemic hand sanitizing our hands may never be physically cleaner than they are now, but how many of us could ever say that our hearts are innocent of every evil, how many of us can say that we have never imagined anything whose intention wasn't pure? We know that there isn't anyone here who would qualify and there isn't any human being who has ever lived that would qualify if this kind of purity of heart was the criteria for seeing God. **Scripture says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so either the Psalmist is unduly optimistic about the perfectibility of human beings or pure in the context in which Jesus uses it means something other than moral perfection, both in body and mind.**

So maybe the word pure as Jesus is using it isn't about clean, being spotless, **but more about this sense of being unalloyed.** The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, **"Who is pure of heart? Only those who have surrendered their hearts completely to Jesus that he may reign in them alone."** Not too long after the beatitudes, Jesus goes on to say in the Sermon on the Mount, "No one can serve two masters, for you will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote a book entitled, "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing." For Kierkegaard, purity has to do with removing from the heart all of the elements that are contrary to the one thing we should will, which he named the Good. The basis for his book is the passage from James 1:8, which reads, **"For the doubter, being double minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."**

Each beatitude demands something of us except this one – **this one demands everything.** There may be nothing more difficult in all the world than to come to God pure and unalloyed, so full are we with things that distract us from being fully present to God. **Our hearts, if not willing to love God over all things, will love many things as a substitute.** It's difficult, but the invitation isn't to be perfect, but to seek to be faithful. **The purity of a heart isn't measured by the outcome, but by the intention.** There's a story of Jesus with Mary and Martha, the sisters, great friends of Jesus. During one of Jesus' visits with them, Martha welcomed Jesus into their home and Mary her sister sat at Jesus' feet, listening to what he was saying. Distracted by her many tasks, Martha complained to her friend, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me. Jesus replied, Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. **There is need of only one thing.** Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

To be pure in heart is to be needful of only one thing, to will one thing, to love God with all that we are, with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. It's always instructive to me to hear the Great Commandment, that we are to love God with all that we are, but that we are also to love our neighbour, the other, as we would love ourselves. **This connection of loving God and neighbour as self is never lost.** Being pure in heart means that we are right in our relationship with God, but also with others. Tom Long says the pure in heart are "those whose faith is genuine, people of integrity whose words are backed up by their convictions, **whose outward deeds match their inner commitments.**"

Why is it important to connect love of God and love of neighbour in the pursuit of the one thing? **Because if we are to see God now and not wait until the life to come, if we are to see God in this life, in this gift that God has given to us, we can only see God as it relates to that which is outside ourselves.** Those who are pure in heart turn their lives towards God as best they can, working at spiritual practices, both inner and outer, loving and serving God. They strive for a better life, for themselves and for others. **And they see God everywhere they look.**

What does it mean to see God? We know from scripture that Moses was told that he couldn't see God directly because to do so would mean death. Instead God revealed himself to Moses through a burning bush. **What would it mean for you to see God?** Because it's impossible for us, at least in the context of this life, to "see" God, to see God in a visible manner, we need to understand the Beatitude in a non-literal way. Maybe it's about seeing Jesus, who is God made flesh and blood, one of us, **or maybe it's about seeing in the way Jesus sees.** Maybe it's about seeing through the lens of unconditional love, with compassion, mercy, grace, peace. Maybe it's about recognizing the image of God in all people, in all creation. **Where have you seen God lately?** If we find that question difficult to answer, could it be because our focus is blurred? Clarence Jordan once said that **when people attempt to live a double life spiritually, that is, to appear pure on the outside but are not pure in the heart, they are anything but blessed.** Their conflicting loyalties make them wretched, confused, tense. **And having to keep their eyes on two masters at once makes them cross-eyed and their vision is so blurred that neither image is clear.** If we haven't seen God lately, could it be due to our conflicted loyalties? Jesus speaks of those who can't see God in the face and in the need of neighbours when he says, when I was hungry you didn't feed me, when I was thirsty you didn't give me something to drink and when I was naked you didn't clothe me. In response to those who insist that they would have done all these things **if they had seen Jesus,** his reply is that whatever you did not do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did not do for me. **If we want to be pure in heart, we need to have better vision, or better yet, we need to have a clearer focus on God, on the one thing that truly matters, to be less distracted by**

many things that don't matter, so that we act to help and to love and to serve, not because we think we see Jesus in the deserving, but because we know that Jesus is to be seen in all who bear his image and are created in his love.

1 John 4 says that those who say, **I love God and hate their brothers or sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.** Our ability to "see God" begins with a single focus on loving God with all that we are, **but that love is made visible in how we love our neighbour, as we love ourselves.** I never thought that I would ever do this, but I want to quote you from a song by Billy Ray Cyrus called, "The Face of God," that nicely speaks to this beatitude: "And why am I filled with unshakeable faith, when I look at that child so fragile and sweet? There's something eternal I see in her face, something much more than her mother and me. Maybe I'm looking at the face of God. Makes me think I may be looking at the face of God. And He's smiling back at me. Why do I feel like the smallest of things when I try to count all the stars in the sky? When I see the world that we're in at its worst, why do I feel like it'll all be all right? When I look at the beauty around me, and the love that surrounds me maybe I'm looking at the face of God. Makes me think I may be looking at the face of God, and He's smiling back at me." Billy Rae Cyrus! And you thought he was only good for his achy, breaky heart!

To be pure in heart is to will one thing, it is to choose the better part, it is to love God over all things and not settle for any substitutes that don't last and don't satisfy. It is to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbour as ourselves for in loving the other we see God. We don't have to wait to see God, **we need better focus.** Peter Rollins, the Northern Irish philosopher, author and theologian said that when God called Moses in the desert, Moses saw God in the form of a burning bush. When we are pure in heart, when we seek God above all things, we will see that all creation contains the image of God, its creator, our maker and we will see that every bush is burning.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.