

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

6th in 8-Sermon Series: ***Blessed are the Pure in Heart***

Psalm 24:1-6 ~ Matthew 5:8 ~ Matthew 6:22-34

10th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 9, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

What do these things have in common: an umpire calling a ball or a strike, a pastor pronouncing two people married at the end of a wedding, a judge issuing a sentence at the end of a trial, and a person saying, "I forgive you" to another? They are all what is called "unconditional performative language." Which means they are not just describing something that already is, but are bringing into being the reality they declare.ⁱ All of Jesus' Beatitudes are written in this same form of language. Now that we are 6 Sundays into this deep dive on each one of them, it's good to remember that Jesus' beatitudes are bringing into reality the truth about who and whose we are: which gives us our place and purpose within all of creation.

In today's beatitude, Jesus is bringing into reality a truth--that if we trust Jesus at his word, can help us to see each day, no matter the troubles or triumphs that may occur, as a ninth inning walk off grand slam, in the kingdom of God. First, we will hear the beatitude, and then from Chapter 6, in Jesus' sermon on the mount where he will teach us about how living in the light of this reality shifts our perspective on every problem we are facing, day to day.

Sermon:

Have you ever tried to take a selfie? It helps if you are under 35 years old, not only because your face has fewer wrinkles, but also because those of us who are north (or way north) of 40, are *all* digital immigrants. We are digital immigrants because we were not born into the digital age. Definitely some of us have assimilated better than others. But when it comes to selfies, Bob and I have learned a few tips from our millennial daughters. It helps if you hold your phone above your head. And in a group shot, be sure that your head is not in front of everyone else's. Even with these tips, let's be honest: how many of those selfies get clicked into the little trash can icon in the flash of an eye? Most of us don't like pictures of ourselves very much. I think it's partly because we look for and we see all the things we don't like about the way we look.

Did you ever wonder what God sees when God looks at you? I see the heart of this beatitude as a call to reset, or shift, or simplify our orientation into a single guiding principle, or lens through which we see everything: God, ourselves, and others. It's a good thing that this one comes after the beatitude that calls for us to be merciful, as God is merciful to us. Being "pure in heart" depends on mercy.

Let's look at that word "pure" for a moment. "*Katharos*" the Greek word translated as "pure" means clean, unalloyed, simple, unadulterated. Keeping that definition in mind, I will also offer a word about the meaning of "heart" in the Bible. It represents something a little different than it does now. In the Bible, the word "heart" is not so much about valentines and romantic

love, as a word that represents the center of our thought and conviction. So simply put, this beatitude calls forth a single-minded, simple, undivided devotion to God. As the title of Soren Kierkegaard's beautiful book captures it: *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.

If a part of you recoils from the word "purity" because it brings to mind the travesty of what is called "ethnic cleansing" or the horrendous practice of eugenics by Hitler and the Nazi's in his quest to create a superior, so-called pure race, I can assure you that Jesus' meaning of the phrase "pure in heart" is actually the very opposite. We know from Genesis 1: 27 that all humans were created in the image of God, in God's eyes we are all regarded equally important and equally, unconditionally loved. The root of equality is grounded in this unchanging personal relation between God and the individual. How God sees us: our original pure, illuminated selves. The closer we get to living that truth, where all of humanity in its glorious diversity experiences a world that is just, the purer our hearts become.

God sees you as a chip off the Divine Block. The Divine Spark is in you. The spark that calls you to step into the Infinite Curve of God's loveⁱⁱ. If you find it difficult to imagine what God sees when God looks at you, try this: Try to see yourself through the eyes of those people in the world who really love you. I read a Story about a tribe in South Africa who practice an unusual form of love for people who have acted criminally. They bring these individuals to the center of their town and for two days repeatedly tell them from a positive stance how they view them... how they love them. The outcome is often that the person begins to learn both about forgiveness and about self-love. They are reoriented by their community to see themselves as God does.ⁱⁱⁱ

In *Purity of Heart*, Kierkegaard weaves this idea into his theology like this,

"I do not know whether it is true that at each man's birth two angels are born, his good and his bad angel. But this I do believe (*and I will gladly listen to any objection, although I will not believe it*) that at each man's birth there comes into being an eternal vocation for him, expressly for him. To be true to himself in relation to this eternal vocation is the highest thing a man can practice, and as that most profound poet has said: "self-love is not so vile a sin as self-neglecting." (Shakespeare, Henry V, Act 2, Scene 4). There is but one fault, one offense: disloyalty to his own self or the denial of his own better self."^{iv}

God is calling forth the better angels in each of us and all of us. Our own self-doubt and worry are our own worst enemies. How do we mute the Light of God that is inside of us?

The generative work of God within us brings together creation and re-creation. As we are told in Genesis 1, again and again, God created everything and saw that it was good. God created each of us and sees that we are good. One of the things I love about the metaphor of cleansing and purification is this: it reminds us that underneath, at our core: we are good. All the bad we do and is done to us, can be washed away, peeled back to the shining good that we were created of. Whether you feel like you are good or not. Whether you detest seeing yourself in a selfie or not. God sees the Good in you.

Perhaps the best known and loved psalm of mercy, Psalm 51, links together mercy with purification. Traditionally this psalm has been associated with King David after his sinful episode

with Uriah and Bathsheba. This psalm can help us too. No matter how low we go: God is there and stands ready to cleanse, to purge, to purify. God is in the cleansing business! This seems like an especially relatable metaphor in these Coronavirus inflected times. God is the washerwoman in the sky. And on the ground. And inside of us. Everyday is washday in God's kingdom. Spiritual "Purell" is never on backorder.

Did you notice how Psalm 24 pairs together "clean hands and pure hearts?" This Psalm is understood to be the biblical root from which Jesus formed this sixth beatitude. I want to offer you one spiritual practice, just a shift in perspective on something you already do many times a day. It's only a sink away: you could try it every time you wash your hands throughout the day. You could teach it to your children and grandchildren as well. Why count 20 alligators or sing the ABC's to make sure you're doing your 20 second washing, when you could be washing away those worries, those "Whatifs"^v every time you wash your hands? Tape this over your sink, and soon it will sink into your heart: Psalm 51:10-12

*"Create in me a clean heart, Oh God, and put a new and right spirit with in me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit." (NRSV)*

Or you might prefer Eugene Peterson's rendering:

*"God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.
Don't throw me out with the trash, or fail to breathe holiness in me.
Bring me back from gray exile, put a fresh wind in my sails. (TMB)*

Did you now that the word for "doubt" in Greek, *distazo*, literally means having two minds? The story in Matthew 14, where the disciples are out in a boat and see Jesus walking toward them-- then Peter, whose good and bad angels are so helpfully documented in our gospels, gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus, but then he gets scared and start to sink. Then he cries out, "Jesus, save me!" Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:22-33) Peter willed one thing there, for a moment, and then he doubted. His mind, like most of us most of the time, wavered. The clouds of doubt and worry, the "Whatifs" crawled inside his ear.

We get that. Maybe you may feel like you are sinking, or even *drowning*, gasping for air in a sea of "Whatifs" or "Whyme's" or a caught a case of "What'snext's" that keep you up at night and drag you down by day. This story assures us that Jesus stands with you, by you, ready to reach out his hand and catch you—doubts and worries and all—to keep you from drowning in them. Jesus' "Do not worry" riff in Matthew 6 teaches us to trust the end result, to trust the next day to God, remembering our call is all about the present process. When we do that, we too can walk on water, no matter the sea of troubles we may be in.

As Kierkegaard puts it, we are not eternally responsible for whether we reach our goal within this world of time. But without exception, we are eternally responsible for the kind of means we choose.^{vi} We all can do this, because everyone of us was created in the image of God,

and God saw that we were good. (Genesis 1). God sees the goodness in each of us. Oh, that we would see it too. Oh, that we would see the good inside our own selves. And in every other person on this earth. Just imagine how we could flatten the curve of the coronavirus, and champion the call to justice by willing one thing: God's curve of infinite love.

I will end with a prayer my husband Bob and I were introduced to back at the dawning of the digital age at a contemplative retreat we attended. Yes, this prayer has been a part of our lives since the early 80's. It was written by Charles de Foucauld, the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century French soldier, explorer and geographer-turned Catholic priest and hermit. It is called the, "Prayer of Abandonment." Let us pray it now:

Father,
 I abandon myself into your hands;
 do with me what you will.
 Whatever you may do, I thank you:
 I am ready for all, I accept all.
 Let only your will be done in me,
 and in all your creatures -
 I wish no more than this, O Lord.
 Into your hands I commend my soul:
 I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
 for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
 to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
 and with boundless confidence,
 for you are my Father.

ⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume VIII, Leander E. Keck, Senior Editor, (Abingdon: Nashville, TN, 1995), See footnote 116 on p.177.

ⁱⁱ The phrase, "the infinite curve of love" is from Poet Nate Marshall's poem, "Telling Stories." The full line is "I became convinced of the infinite curve of love." See: <https://www.wfae.org/post/finna-poet-nate-marshall-all-about-what-happens-next#stream/0>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cindy Senarighi and Heidi Green, *Yogadevotion: Practicing in the Presence*, (Credo House Publisher: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2017), Week 32.

^{iv} Soren Kierkegaard, trans. By Douglas V. Steere, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Feast of Confession*, (Harper & Brothers: New York, NY, 1938), p.120.

^v This word comes from the poem I used during Discovery Time by Shel Silverstein, "Whatif," from the collection of his poetry, *A Light in the Attic*, (Harper & Rowe: New York, NY, 1981), p.90.

^{vi} *Ibid*, *Purity of Heart*, pp. 188-189.