

Series: Discovering the Heart of Christ
Today: Blessed are the Pure in Heart
Text: Matthew 5:8

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, March 9, 2008 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

For the last four weeks we have been making our way through the agenda for ministry which Jesus gave his followers in the first recorded sermon of his ministry. We have discovered that the word “Blessed” can be more accurately translated as “Happy” or “being on the right track;” that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are on the right track when we are poor in spirit by acknowledging that we cannot make it on our own but need the help of God. We are happier when we mourn; when we feel deeply the offense which causes us to be separate from God. We find more joy in life when we are meek; when we have a right sized opinion of ourselves for only then can we be effective in the world. We are following the right path when we are merciful rather than judgmental, for only then will we be able to receive mercy. And today in the 8th verse of Matthew 5: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

Our beatitude this morning is all about perspective. It deals with the perspective which the Christian uses to approach life; the bifocals of faith that a biblical person is asked to use when approaching both the problems and the possibilities which life brings.

I know that many of you have had the surgery which removes a cataract from the eye. Many more of us wear corrective lenses so that we can read the small print or see things which have become blurry at a distance. The almost universal report I hear from those who have had the surgery or those who have finally admitted that their eyes need some help is that nearly all of us had no idea things were as bad as they were until we

were on the other side. Suddenly, when we look through eyes which have either had the impediments removed or have corrected their vision; the common language we use is “*I had no idea what I was missing.*” When we become aware of a new perspective, it changes the way we see the world, doesn’t it?

I am reminded of a story about a man and his wife and I were as were sitting at a table at his 30th high school reunion. The man kept staring at a woman who sat alone at a nearby table and who had obviously had too much to drink. The man’s wife asks, ‘*Do you know her?*’ ‘*Yes,*’ he sighed. ‘*She’s my old girlfriend. I understand she started drinking right after we split up those many years ago, and I hear she hasn’t been sober since.*’

‘*My goodness!*’ said the man’s wife. “*You wouldn’t think a person could go on celebrating that long?*” So you see, our perspective on what we are looking at really does make a difference.

In our beatitude this morning, Jesus tells us that if we want to see God; if we want to see the world from God’s point of view; then we will need purity of heart.

William Barclay has observed that the Greek word for purity used in this beatitude has a variety of interpretations all of which add to the meaning of the phrase itself: 1) It can simply mean clean like dirty laundry which has been washed and is now clean; 2) It was regularly used in relation to grains of sand which had been sifted or winnowed and cleansed of all the chaff; 3) It was also used in relation to metal which has no alloy. The basic word which Jesus uses is **Katharos** and it means unmixed, unadulterated, unalloyed. (DSB p. 106).

As we talked this over at our Early Word Bible Study this week, most of us agreed that purity of heart is not a standard by which we wished to be judged. Few of us, if any of us, are able to act without a mixture of motives. Even the most generous among us knows that there is great personal satisfaction in seeing the outcome of our giving. When we give to the life of this church, we have the benefit of seeing the lives of young people shaped in our Christian Education and Youth programs. We have the satisfaction of knowing that the poor will be fed and clothed through our involvement with the Council of Churches. We get to hear great music, and we offer worship which is pleasing to God and facilitated by the money we give.

Even the most noble among us knows that even if our cause is not popular, people will admire us for the courage of our convictions. Why even preachers at their most sincere moments know that there is great danger in taking ourselves too seriously. When John Bunyan was told that he preached a particularly powerful sermon, he responded, “*I know. The devil already told me as I came down from the pulpit.*”

Yet lest we despair of ever seeing God based on the purity of our hearts, Roger Shinn reminds us that the best commentary on this passage may be the story of Nicodemus in John 3. If you have forgotten that story, Nicodemus is the Pharisee who comes to see Jesus in the middle of the night asking what he must do to insure that he goes to heaven. Do you remember what Jesus said? “*You must be born again,*” because he knew there was something missing in Nicodemus’s life.

In the Greco Roman world Nicodemus was what today we would call a ‘holy roller.’ It was assumed you had to be like him in order to think about God: 1) you had to be a man; 2) you had to be educated and intelligent; and 3) you had to be wealthy.

Women, children, and slaves were considered unworthy of God's favor. The ignorant and the poverty-stricken were likewise barred from God's presence.

In the world of Nicodemus, he appeared to have it all together in terms of spirituality, but Jesus challenged him to consider something more. He could have given Nicodemus a formula, and Nicodemus would have kept the formula to the letter of the law. However, Jesus is not interested in formulas. He is interested in TRANSFORMATION. He changes the order of things.

It is not the privileged who will see God. It is the pure, and no one can make himself or herself pure by their own merit. Purity isn't something you can earn by being good, because even in the best of us there is a mixture of selfish ambitions and selfless desires. Purity is a gift from God and God alone. It is given to those who acknowledge that they want and need a new way to see the world; a renewed set of eyes or a new prescription in their glasses. It doesn't come from our intelligence, our education, our money, our privilege or our power. It is a gift which God gives to those who humble themselves and recognize that their motives are mixed at best and that what they need is a change from the inside out; a renewal of God's authority which is more than a list of rules and regulations. It requires a change of heart.

I read a story in the newspaper about a young man who is alive today because his doctors took a huge risk. They replaced every ounce of blood in his body. He had a severe case of hepatitis and his liver was nearly destroyed. The doctors drained every ounce of blood from his body and substituted a saline solution. They lowered his body temperature to 85 degrees. For 10 minutes he was, for all intents and purposes,

physically dead. The doctors then flushed the saline solution out and filled his veins and arteries with new, healthy blood. A medical miracle took place, and his life was spared.

Jesus said that if you want to see God, in effect you need a spiritual transfusion. You need to ask God for the spirit of Christ to flow through you, cleanse you from within and transform the way you are involved in the world. You need to be given a new heart to respond to the heart of God. Then and only then will you be able to see God.

Just in case you are wondering if this kind of effort is worth it; in case you are wondering when we might see God, perhaps it would be helpful for us to think the way Matthew thought: think Hebrew.

Jews didn't expect to see God in some mystical and miraculous vision. The Jews saw God in the activities of daily life. Jews didn't need a miracle to prove God's creative power; one need only observe the mystery of the leaves changing color in the fall; or the beauty of a sunset; or the fragile beauty of a spring crocus; or the elegance of a summer rose. God's judgment and tender mercy did not need some mystical event. It could be observed in a parable of a prodigal son who ran away from home and squandered the family fortune on loose living, and is welcomed home by a father who forgives him.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," says Jesus. Do you wonder what it is like to see the face of God in this day and age? If what we have said about our text this morning is the truth, it would be good if we stopped looking for the face of God in the ups and downs of a political campaign, or the ups and downs of the stock market which whips us from pillar to post. God is not so much interested in wealth, privilege, or power. It is hard to find the heart of Christ when we are looking for the wrong things.

So if you really want to see God, perhaps the place to look is in the play of children; or the vulnerability of the terminally ill who have their priorities straight; or in the efforts of couples who are trying to make relationships work and who know that long-term marriages require more than determination; or in the struggle of a single parent to provide a secure home for their children while balancing the agenda of their own needs.

If we are trying to see God, perhaps we need to stop looking for the mystical presence and more for the real presence of a God who is right in the middle of what we consider to be the pressure of our daily lives. Instead of problems, perhaps we should look at the possibilities those problems present.

Most of us have been around long enough to know that financial crises come and go. Even the Great Depression lasted only about ten years. So perhaps this latest economic downturn is an opportunity for us to look at spending patterns and see what is really important. If you are experiencing difficulty in your marriage, maybe it is time to rediscover your relationship and step out of the ritual of routine you thought marriage was supposed to be about. If you are stagnant in your job and you are just putting in your time for a paycheck, maybe it is time to discover what you really want to do and go after it before it is too late. If you are threatened by the challenge of aging, maybe it is time to discover what you really want from these last years of your life and go after it. Seeing the face of God means looking at life through the eyes of God; seeing the possibility rather than the problem and working to make that possibility a reality.

Do you remember the story of the father who had twin sons? One was a hopeless pessimist and the other was an eternal optimist. Wanting to temper the attitudes of both of them, the father came up with a plan.

He put the pessimist in a room filled with toys, and he put the optimist in a room filled with horse manure. He returned after an hour and found that the pessimist hadn't moved a muscle. There he sat in a room full of toys saying over and over again, "*There has to be a catch here someplace.*" When he went into the room where he had put the optimistic boy, he found the boy racing around the room, throwing the horse manure over his shoulders, and shouting at the top of his lungs, "*With all of this poop, there has to be a pony somewhere!*"

If we want to see God, perhaps we would allow ourselves to be converted to the human needs of this world and the possibilities those needs present for us to create with God a new order of humanity. It is all a matter of perspective, isn't it? *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*