

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/30/2011, The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 5:1-12  
Purity of Heart

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8, KJV)

When Christ calls us, he wants not only our conduct, but also our hearts. He wants us whole, he wants us entire. His call is comprehensive such that he does not hesitate to call even for the divine discipline of our desires. He seeks a pure heart. Take his preaching about adultery, for example:

<sup>27</sup>Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: <sup>28</sup>But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already *in his heart*. (Matthew 5:27-28, KJV)

In the heat of temptation, it often feels to be quite an accomplishment simply to wrestle lust under the control and to not yield to it. And if you have managed to do that, I say, “Good for you! Very good for you! I believe that you have pleased our Lord Jesus.” And yet, Jesus wants even more than this. He wants not only that we should refrain from adultery, but that we not even lust in the first place. And that is going to require quite a change in us.

Again, take our Lord’s teaching about the enemy. He asks for something extraordinary. He asks for something almost new under the face of the sun. He asks for love toward the enemy:

<sup>43</sup>Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. <sup>44</sup>But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

If it seems that Jesus is asking for a miracle here, maybe it seems so to us only because we have underestimated our own hearts. We have shortchanged ourselves. Our conception of our natures is too meager. We suppose that our hearts are fixed and that we are simply stuck with them. But Jesus comes along and preaches willy-nilly to anyone who would be his disciple: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

The Christian faith is a heart religion. It seeks the greatest of adventures for us: that we should leave behind the familiar landscape of lust and anger, covetousness

and jealousy, and move into a new world of purity of heart.

Let me begin this discussion of purity of heart with a clarification: I *am not* saying that our faith asks us to forsake all desires except for the desire for Jesus. Why, even Jesus seems to have taken joy in the ordinary pleasures of food and drink and the companionship of friends, such that it was even complained of him that he was a glutton, a winebibber, and a friend of sinners.

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. <sup>19</sup>The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. (Matthew 11:18-19, KJV)

And it is natural to think Jesus enjoyed such pleasures when he had them. It is just that for him, all of those other desires were subordinate to his chief desire, which was simply to do the will of his heavenly Father. And so, when he was out saving a soul, like the soul of the Samaritan woman at the well, for example, there we find that his true “food,” more fundamental than ordinary food and drink, was love for God and love for that woman before him:

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. (John 4:34, RSV)

So, this is not a sermon against desires and passions. In way, I want the reverse: I want us to enjoy our passions even more deeply, more innocently, more purely.

Take last evening’s Cabaret, for example, here at Immanuel. It was put on by our Choir, and it was fabulous! I am very grateful to every Choir member. They the Cabaret to raise money for our church roof fund here at Immanuel. I tell you a year in advance that if our Choir puts on another Cabaret next year, be sure to make it! I bet anyone who was here last night will tell you the same thing.

Now, a great thing about the Cabaret was the joy and the passion of it all. The talents on display last night reflect delight in music and dance and theatre. A lifetime of devotion to music and years of working at their craft, combined with such good and generous hearts, permitted our choir members to put on a great, fun show last night and lifted our hearts.

Such passion for music and theatre is good. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” our text says, and I believe that passions are compatible with purity of heart. In fact, purity of heart can make us even more passionate, for many of us are tempted to squander our passions and our talents by turning to lesser desires, whiling away the hours, dripping away the minutes, keeping us from our real loves.

So, when you love, love passionately. You husbands and wives and engaged couples, love whole-heartedly and whisper a prayer of thanks to God for your beloved. And when you cheer for the Knicks or the Super Bowl teams, cheer passionately. It is just that within and under and permeating all your passions and

desires let there by the fundamental desire for Christ, such that your other desires have both strength and innocence about them.

“Blessed are the pure of heart” is not simply an observation about those lucky few who happen to have pure hearts, that they are blessed. Rather, the beatitude is a call to each of us who would follow Jesus, to get our desires under control and to seek a new heart so that we will have some chance to be rid of lust, to love even our neighbors, and to enjoy our daily desires with some innocence.

Perhaps it is the penitent who best understands this beatitude. That one who has committed sin and has come to have heartfelt sorrow for that sin is perhaps best suited to understand the blessing of a pure heart.

“Blessed are the pure in heart” means much indeed to someone who would sure love to have a clean heart again. The possibility of purity of heart means much to the one who feels his heart to be guilty, who feels her heart to have gone wrong. Perhaps it is the one who looks up and sees the world soft and unfocused, because he or she is looking through tears of repentance, who is closest to this beatitude.

It was only when King David at last saw the enormity of what he had done that he could cry out for a pure heart:

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Only when he had been humbled by the prophet and permitted to see the terrible crimes he had committed against Bathsheba and her husband, could he reckon with the truth that he had not only hurt them, but also offended his Maker:

<sup>11</sup>Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. (Psalm 51:10-11, KJV)

In a way, this particular beatitude, blessed are the pure in heart, is the start of it all, for when Christ calls a man, calls a woman, that is his chief aim: that our hearts should become pure.

Last Sunday, I pointed out that when Jesus called the fisherman, he was not content to leave them as he found them, but meant to change them:

<sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and *I will make you* fishers of men.” (Matthew 4:19, RSV)

Today, that principle is raised to the highest pitch. For Christ desires not simply to change our vocation, not simply to change our conduct, but something grander as well: to change our hearts.

This is crucial, for it is possible to walk a good long ways in the steps of Jesus, yet to remain basically unchanged thereby. That is the tragedy of Judas. He walked in the steps of Jesus for many a mile, many a month, yet in the end betrayed our Lord nonetheless. His heart seems to have remained too covetous, too

much in love with thirty pieces of silver. But Jesus wants a pure heart for us.

In the end, Jesus cannot compromise on this. Toward the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, when the times are becoming ominous for Jesus and opposition to him is growing, a lawyer asked him a question "in order to tempt him," the text says.

<sup>35</sup>Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, <sup>36</sup>Master, which is the great commandment in the law? (Matthew 22:35-36, KJV)

But Christ's back was never curved before any man, and so our Lord answered forthrightly:

<sup>37</sup>Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the first and great commandment. <sup>39</sup>And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt *love* thy neighbour as thyself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-36, KJV)

Alas, many of are going to fall short of this standard unless we somehow fetch ourselves a pure heart. Again, Jesus cannot compromise on this: he does not want simply our conduct, but he wants our hearts to be loving. He goes after not simply the streams of life, but the very source high in the snowy mountains from which the streams spring. He seeks purity of heart in us.

"You must be born again," Jesus ever preaches, and we dare not abandon that text to the evangelicals:

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered and said unto him [Nicodemus], Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3:3-5, KJV)

And so it is, that Jesus seeks not only a conversion of our manners, but a conversion of our hearts.

But preacher! one might say, This is too much. Isn't it hard enough that Christ would disrupt my ways of life, preventing from doing much of what I want to be doing, and urging me to do good that is not natural for me. But now he goes beyond my conduct to something that is deeper and even harder for me to get at. He wants me to change my heart. Why, he wants me to become new! I do not know that I am up to this.

And this preacher, for one, has much sympathy with this complaint. I have long agreed with the cry of Jeremiah concerning the human heart:

<sup>9</sup>The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

We poor human beings commit sins and sometimes they are quite terrible. They are terrible, but if we are pressed as whether we understood *from the very beginning* that they were terrible, sometimes honesty will require us to answer, yes. Yes! We knew we were doing wrong, even as we did it. There is something mysterious here, something having to do with the yearnings of the human heart that often go beyond our reckoning. It might take a therapist or a saint years to help us understand why we did the sin we did.

So, I am not saying that it is easy to change the heart in the direction of purity. I am simply saying that our Lord praises purity of heart, preaches that his disciples should become new, and offers an extraordinary promise to those of pure heart: they shall see God!

And the thing is, that without purity of heart, we will not see God, but will rather see whatever it is that has charmed us so much. And so it is that the covetous one will hardly even see the decline and weariness and aging of the factory worker in his shop, because his eyes are so focused on the figures and on the bottom line.

And the ambitious one will hardly even see the wreck and ruins of lives stepped upon and brushed aside in the pursuit of power. Discouraged and broken men and women lie in heaps this side and that of the great man's rise to power, and he hardly even sees them.

And the lustful one will hardly even perceive the broken hearts and betrayed spouses and diminished lives left in his wake, left in her wake.

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV)

This is an important matter, this beatitude about purity of heart. I want us to be encouraged to think that we can make progress toward purity of heart. I want us to have some confidence that we, even we, can come to treasure new things. Even that we can come to treasure God and our neighbor.

Many a Christian has sought purity of heart. It is sung about in the hymns of the Church. Take that haunting hymn we sang just before this sermon:

Jesus, priceless treasure,  
source of purest pleasure,  
truest friend to me:  
ah, how long I've panted,

and my heart has fainted,  
thirsting, Lord, for thee!  
Thine I am, O spotless Lamb;  
I will suffer nought to hide thee,  
nought I ask beside thee. *Jesus, Priceless Treasure*, LBW 458

If we can come to treasure Jesus like this, so that we count him to be for us a “priceless treasure” and we “thirst” for him, then we will have arrived at a new heart, a purer heart.

Or take the more simple anthem our Choir sang last week, and which was featured in the musical *Godspell*:

Day by day,  
dear Lord of thee three things I pray:  
to see thee more clearly,  
love thee more dearly,  
follow thee more nearly,  
day by day. *Day by Day*, Martin How (b. 1931)

Some of our brothers and sisters in the Lord have accomplished this: they have come to love Christ more dearly. Let us try to do that too.

So, I end with three humble recommendations to us in hope they will help us to come closer to have a pure heart.

First, let us remember our identity: let us remember our baptisms. Let us remember that we are Christ’s people, and that he is to be our highest treasure. Let us learn to question ourselves with this particular question, “But, what is my treasure here? What is my heart really after in this path I am considering? Does this amount to loving God? Does this amount to loving my neighbor? Or is my heart pursuing something else, something unworthy of Christ?” And whenever we find that our thoughts and reasonings and that wild heart of ours have betrayed us again, then let us seek Confession and Absolution, commence a life of repentance, and receive that wonderful saying of the Psalms about the far removal of our sins:

As far as the east is from the west, *so* far hath he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12, KJV)

Second, let us learn to read the Bible with more innocence, not imagining that we know in advance what it has to say, but rather waiting to let it teach us what God would have us to know. How else are we going to be instructed by the Holy Spirit and moved toward purity of heart if we imagine that we already know that the Bible has to say to us?

And third, let us pray more. The elderly Trappist monk Thomas Keating<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Keating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Keating)

teaches that Christian spirituality can help heal the wounds of childhood, that patient prayer can help us sort out some of the impulses of our heart and maybe help us to get them under control. And if nothing else, we can pray for a pure heart, “for with God, nothing shall be impossible,” through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.