

***The Beatitudes' Worship Series: "Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:1-12)
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Verse 8)
Matthew 5:1-11; Genesis 32:24-30; Psalm 24:1-6; 1 John 4:12-16
Salem United Methodist Church; August 12, 2018
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Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins with blessings which summarize not only the sermon, but his entire ministry and mission. Each one of these blessings or Beatitudes names a human condition and a divine promise. Each Sunday during this worship series on the Beatitudes we are looking at one of them. On the sixth Sunday in the series, we are on the sixth Beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Have you ever experienced being pure in heart? If you have, what was that like? And have you ever seen God?

Doctors tell us to care for our physical hearts by eating low cholesterol foods and getting plenty of exercise so that we can keep our arteries and hearts clean from plaque build-up. We try to follow doctors' orders so we can stay healthy and live. Even so, our arteries can become blocked with plaque. Doctors can put stents in those arteries to facilitate the blood flow, and if needed transplant arteries around the blocked ones to facilitate the flow to and from the heart. Our arteries and hearts need to be clean of plaque in order to beat consistently and constantly to keep the blood flowing to every cell in our bodies. In comparison, our physical hearts need to be pure in order to provide us life, too. When Jesus referred to being pure in heart, he wasn't talking about our physical hearts, however.

From ancient times, the sacred traditions used the term, heart, to refer to the center for emotions, will, reason, and purpose. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the heart is our inner self, our spiritual center which connects us with God. With our spiritual hearts, we can not only perceive who God is, but we can also see God's beauty and radiance. The Psalmist understood this and wrote, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." All its inhabitants and the seas. A favorite vacation spot is visiting the seas. There is something peaceful in watching the rhythmic movement of the waves. We come away from the ocean with our spiritual hearts a little fuller because we saw God's beauty in the water. This is one of the ways we can care for our spiritual hearts.

Jesus doesn't describe how to care for our hearts in the Beatitude. He only speaks about its condition. The heart is to be pure. When something is pure, it is unmixed with any other matter, it is free from dust and dirt, and it is spotless and stainless. For something to be completely pure is nearly impossible. For instance, 24 carat gold is only 99.9% pure. Purified water is only 99.5% pure. Are we naïve to think that our spiritual hearts can be pure? The human condition named of having a pure heart may be difficult for us to relate. None of us are 100% pure in heart and there is very little in our culture that promotes us to even want a pure heart. If we were to ask each other what is our life's goal, probably few if any of us would say, to be pure in heart. Everything around us is promoting an impure heart. Lying or twisting the truth is a norm. Cheating on another, harming another through acts of violence, using drugs, alcohol, or sex to harm one's body, and using language that demeans another is not only in almost every movie, TV show, and video game, but these behaviors are the reality of our lives. Today a group of people in Washington, D. C. will openly demonstrate their hate for people who are different from themselves. Is it possible for anyone to have a pure heart in today's world?

My answer: About as possible as it would have been during the time of Jesus. The religious leaders of Jesus' time had a different view of purity. For them spiritual purity was about staying away from anything that would have made them ritually unclean, such as being around blood, dead or sick animals and people. One spiritual ritual was to wash one's hands. Little did they know that they were promoting good hygiene. Spiritual purity was about being physically clean and eating foods identified as clean. One could perform all the spiritual rituals and be deemed spiritually pure, yet have an impure heart. Jesus did not adhere strictly to these purity laws, nor did he require his disciples. The Pharisees challenged Jesus about not keeping the purity laws. His response to them was to quote the prophet Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their

hearts are far away from me.” Then Jesus says that it is not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God’s sight, but what comes out of the mouth (Matthew 15:1-11). What comes out of our mouth, that is, what we say, is what is in our hearts. If our heart is impure, we will say and do impure things. Impurity of the heart is the greatest sickness of humanity. And the purity of heart is our greatest single need.

King David understood this need to have a pure heart. He cried out to God to create in him a clean heart and renew a right spirit within him after he admitted that he had impure thoughts which led to impure deeds. David lusted after a married woman, Bathsheba. Then he used his position of power for his sexual gain, and had her husband, Uriah, killed. After these deeds, David really needed a clean heart. But how can hearts be purified? First, we have to acknowledge the need, as David did. This requires some self-examination that takes a hard look at what lies in the heart. What is clogging up the chambers of our spiritual hearts? What keeps the life-giving blood of the Jesus from pumping through our hearts? The plague build-up of self-centeredness, pride, hate, disrespect, cynicism, anger, busyness, envy, greed, wanting what is not ours are just a few. And what fights this plague build up? God’s grace. The next step to a pure heart is to allow God’s grace to move in and begin the job of removing this plague build-up. Sounds easy: Admit the need and allow God to clean up the mess. But the process of obtaining a pure heart is not that easy. Remember Jacob who wrestled with God all night? Jacob had a few things cluttering up his heart. Many years before he had tricked his older, twin brother, Esau, out of his birth right and his inheritance. In the morning, Jacob was planning to meet Esau for the first time since the incident. God and Jacob wrestled as Jacob struggled to let go of his pride, his envy, his greed, and his selfish ambition. After wrestling with God, however, Jacob was forever changed and claimed that he had seen God and lived. Allowing God’s grace to move in and begin the purifying process can be a type of wrestling match with God. We want to hang onto something near and dear and God says, “Let it go! It’s taking up space that your heart needs to function as I created it.” The purification of human hearts is an ongoing wrestling match with God. No matter how much we hang on to what we think matters, God never gives up on recreating our hearts to be like God’s.

This human condition of having a pure heart seems unobtainable and the promise of seeing God seems unreal. If we have a pure heart, then we can expect God to suddenly appear in front of us? Not exactly. However the more one has a pure heart, the more one will know God, and the more one will see God at work in one’s life, in the lives of others, and at work in the world. The more one knows God, the more of an expert one will be at seeing God because experts view the world differently. For instance, the casual observer can look at the night sky just see stars. An astronomer will look at the same sky and be able to identify planets from stars and be able to name both. A gardener can tell the difference between a flower and a weed, but a botanist knows the name of all the plants and can identify that what is a weed in one place actually has a benefit if it grew somewhere else. Doctors can sometimes just look at patient and be able to identify an illness. Experts see the world differently. And so it is for those who are experts on God. They can see using the eyes of their heart to see God in every aspect of their lives. God will always be a mystery and incomprehensible to our finite minds, but we can come to know God’s love in our hearts. God yearns to dwell deeply within us. God’s love can be made complete in us, even perfected in us and we may just get a glimpse of this love as we love each other.

Reflection Questions: Have you ever experienced being pure in heart? If you have, what was that like? And have you ever seen God? Since all of us are in the process of being made pure of heart, take a moment to do some self-examination. What kind of plague build-up do you have in your heart? Can you allow God’s grace to come in and clean out all the yucky plague and replace it with divine love for God and God’s people? Then open your eyes to see how God is working in you and in the world.

Resources: *The Beatitudes and Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* by William Barclay; *Blessed to Follow* by Martha Stortz; *Beatitudes from the Back Side* by J. Ellsworth Kalas; *God’s Psychiatry* by Charles Allen, *Blessings that Make Us Be* by Susan Muto; *Foundations for Reconciliation: The Beatitudes* by Ray Ragsdale