

“Clean, Clear, and Connected”

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The late, great preacher George Buttrick said that our first beatitude for today, *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*, is the most inaccessible of all the Beatitudes. By “inaccessible” I don’t think he meant difficult to understand – I think he meant difficult to be, difficult to live.

And I agree – we live in a society and a culture that makes purity pretty hard to come by. We are fed an almost constant diet of easy violence, easy sex, easy classroom cheating, indifferent human relationships, and constant distractions. We are given very little quiet time for contemplation and self-reflection. We make little time for conversation about how God figures in our lives and why we value what we do. In fact, if we hear God’s name at all it is more likely to have been taken in vain, than spoken in faith and reverence. We see and hear words that were once found only in the washrooms of bus stations as standard fair in the popular novels we read and in the movies and television shows we watch. Obscenity and pornography are hard put to find something shocking enough to get below the common levels of depravity. I agree that in the time

in which we live it is almost impossible to be “pure in heart”.

To make it even more difficult, I don't think that purity and innocence is a virtue that we particularly admire. To be a Polly Purebread or a Dudley Doright, it to be viewed as someone who is out of touch with reality – who sees the world through rose-colored glasses and is more than a little ineffectual in dealing with the “real” world in which they live. I once had a woman in one of my churches who was constantly telling me that I was too innocent. And she didn't intend her comment as a complement. She was telling me that in her view I was blind to the behaviors and the intrigues of people around me, too trusting of people who in her opinion who did not deserve my confidence, and therefore incapable and ineffective in confronting the challenges facing the church. To be innocent, to be pure, to try to see goodness and to celebrate the best is not always something that we hold up for admiration.

I have to confess to you that I am not nearly as innocent as that particular woman thought I was. I know I have my times of ineffectiveness and that I sometimes struggle to change anyone's mind about anything. But it's not because my heart is too pure.

More often than not, it's just the opposite. I struggle to have a clean heart.

Just this last week, I had an experience that allowed me to see just how impure my heart can be. It happened in my office here at church. I was sitting at my desk, reading a book, trying to get my thoughts together about an upcoming meeting when a man walked into the outer office. Beth came and told me that he wanted to make a long distance call to have some transcripts sent to the church so he could register for classes at COCC. I told her that was fine. The man went to the phone and made his call and I thought he would leave.

But instead, when his call had been made, he came over and sort of lingered outside my door. He was talking to Beth about a time when the church had helped him before with some money for some medicine he had needed. But I know that he wasn't really talking to her. He was talking to me – and ready to make the plea for some more assistance.

Before I could do anything, the man moved into my office and sat down in one of my chairs. And I really didn't want to listen to him. I resented his intrusion into my office and his forwardness in disturbing my train of thought. And I felt absolutely

no compassion or interest in him. I just wanted him to leave me alone.

The man continued to talk about how we had helped him before ... how he knew other people that the church had helped ... how tough the economy was ... how his work as a plumbing apprentice had virtually vanished this last year ... how he was going back to school to get financial aid that would help him get some decent housing. But I wasn't really listening to him. Instead I was thinking: "Way to go, you managed to manipulate yourself past Beth so you can bother me. And you want me to help you so you can manipulate the college to provide your housing." I heard him say something about needing twenty-five dollars so he could begin registering for classes. I heard him say something about the church he attended and how they were putting their faith into action by helping a woman repair and paint her home. And I found myself, "If you're active in another church, why are you here ... why don't you go ask your pastor for the money instead of me?"

When the man stopped talking I didn't respond to anything he had said. I just said, "We don't have any money. It's the end of the month and our funds are gone."

There must have been something in the tone of my voice, because Beth was immediately at my door, reminding me that there was an important phone call that I needed to make right away. The man got up from the chair and started to leave. And that's when the first pang of guilt stabbed at my heart.

“I'll get to the phone call when I'm done here. It can wait that long,” I said to Beth. “Tell me more about the work your church is doing for this woman,” I said to the man. He sat down again and it wasn't thirty seconds before he was asking for the money again. And I was thinking, “You fool, Thom. Beth gave you the chance to get rid of this guy and you blew it. He's a manipulator and you know it. His story is bogus and if you help him now, he'll be back asking for more.” I could hardly look at the man, let alone listen to him. After a few more minutes I finally said, “I'm sorry, I can't help you. I've got to make that phone call now.” And the man left my office and the church.

And I was relieved to be rid of him. I really was. But I didn't feel very pure in heart. From the very beginning I resented him. I didn't really want to listen to him. I eventually lied to him and manipulated him in much the same way he had manipulated me. I felt no compassion for him. And

my behavior didn't really seem very becoming for someone who claims to be a follower of Jesus, a Christian. It especially didn't seem to be very becoming for a pastor.

I struggle to have a pure heart – to stay focused on what God want me to do and be. Instead of being completely God's person, I let myself get in the way – my need for gratification ... my need for power ... my need to be in control of the things that happen in my life ... my need to have what I want when I want it ... my need to do thing my way. I agree with George Buttrick. Purity of heart is the most inaccessible of the Beatitudes and sometimes I don't feel as if there's very much hope for me.

Except that sometimes, in spite of the condition of my heart, I see God. And other people, too, in spite of the condition of their heart, they see God, too.

Richard Selzer is a surgeon who, in his book, *Mortal Lessons*, writes about seeing God. He writes:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The sugeon had follwed with

religious fervor the curve of her flesh, I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say, it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles.

“I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works ... I hold my breath and let the wonder in.

Walter Wangerin is a Lutheran preacher, who in an essay titled *And Through the Night Watch O'er Your Beds*, tells about the loving ministry of two sisters as they care for their sister dying of cancer. In the sister's dying hour, one sister sits by her bed, gently holding her hand, massaging her cuticles with

a linen handkerchief, making her nails shine, making them beautiful, assuring that she is still lovely and loveable even in this moment of dying. The other sister, in a voice low and throaty, and absolutely confident speaks her faith to her sister. “I know that the Lord Jesus is in this place. I know he has not let you fall. I know the long, abiding love of our Savior for you, because I have felt it in myself.”

Wanegrin writes: *For nearly twenty minutes Irene sang on and on in the ear of the dying, never a sob, never a broken note, but altogether assured.*

And I gasped.

These were the angels. These were the ministers of the Lord, one accounting for an earthly need, the other for a heavenly one, moved unknowing by the presence of the Almighty, sitting side to side of a tomb going empty between them. I leaned far, far forward, not to miss a thing that the Lord was doing, nor a word of his love in Irene’s mouth, and this is the time when I wept, but for gladness. He was not absent. He was here in these two. And I saw them fleshy at the loss, soft in the sorrow: but through them I saw the ascent of the messengers of God and heard angelic motion toward resurrection.

“Greater things than these will you see -”

I saw the love of God at work: “Rabboni!” I have seen the Lord.

I have had similar visions of God, too. And of others too many to tell. In spite of the condition of my heart – its lack of purity, its persisting uncleanness, I have visions of God’s presence and the power of God’s love, especially as I watch people like you lift up the needs of others in prayer, as I observe you take care of each others needs in times of sickness, and injury, and discouragement, and dying, as I witness your commitment to bringing peace to the world and establishing justice for all, as I experience your encouragement and your forgiveness and your acceptance of me as your pastor despite the imperfect condition of my heart.

I know that I have seen God – which restores my heart, which gives me reason to hope. I may not be pure in heart – but there must still be some goodness in me yet. And if I can think, first, with the wisdom of God, the cleaner my thoughts will be. And if I can stay more focused on God’s love for all the world, the clearer my vision will be. And if I can reach out for God’s strength in times of temptation and failure, the stronger my connection will be. Clean, clear, and connected – the purer my heart will be. Yours, too. Your heart can be made pure, too.

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in his wonderful face,*

*And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.*

Jesus Christ is God's wisdom ... is God's love ...
is our strength. Given half a chance, he captures us
completely. And with him we get the singleness and
the wholeness in life that makes for purity of heart.
Seeing him, we see God and our hearts are filled with
the music of heaven. Amen.