

August 8, 2021

*“Blessed are the Pure in Heart”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 5:1-8

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Today’s beatitude has an element of excitement and anticipation, don’t you think? For who doesn’t want to be assured that they will indeed see God? I’m sure we all do! But apparently, from what Jesus is telling us, there is a condition. Something about a heart that is pure – a pure heart. So let’s talk about the heart for a moment.

First of all, in very practical terms, the heart is basically an engine. Perhaps the most reliable engine on our planet. It’s a wonderful device that keeps on pumping night and day, 24/7, whether we’re awake or asleep. Our heart works unceasingly and untiringly, with no vacations and no rest periods. And when we think of how critical our heart is to keeping us alive, we realize the magnitude of this gift that the good Lord has given to all of us. Praise be to God, the Master Scientist, Master Creator indeed. But in addition, our heart has an almost mystical connotation as well. Because it seems to be the driving force behind our every human emotion. For example, we feel affection with our hearts, and we describe our best feelings by using the term... heartwarming. We describe some people as being “big-hearted” or “goodhearted” or having a “heart of gold.” Others we describe as having deceitful hearts, conniving hearts, cold hearts, hearts of stone, or even being heart-less. Things that hurt us result in a broken heart. Things that thrill us are heart lifting. Yes, our hearts not only give us life, but seem to describe our life – all our feelings and emotions.

So what does it mean then, to have a pure heart? Well, before I go any further, let me assure you that being “pure in heart,” does not mean, as many of us might think, that we are blameless or perfect or good in every sense of the word. Far from it. Someone once even called Jesus “good”, and he responded, “No one is good except God alone.” And that’s exactly why Jesus came to earth in the first place – to teach us that goodness and perfection is something we are constantly to strive toward. But then he went to the cross to die for us because he knew that goal is effectively unattainable for us mortals. So how then, might we define a pure heart?

Well, I think Jesus gives us a clue in our first scripture reading today. Those verses pertaining to the little children. And rather than me just reading them again, I want you to hear them as they are woven into a short story by author Edward Wagenknecht. Listen closely. *Andrew was a little Jewish boy who lived in Palestine in a small city called Tiberius. His father Reuben was a fisherman and he had two*

*much older brothers, Joseph and Judas. They had a hard life and struggled to get by. Still, Reuben was a proud man. But for Andrew, losing his mother early in life and being the youngest did not fare him well. He was often left alone and he became timid and withdrawn and detached. With no one having the time to nurture or teach him, he was not very much help to his father and brothers. In truth, he was a burden to them, and often even an embarrassment to Reuben for having such a weak son. One day little Andrew heard that the teacher, Jesus, was coming to Tiberius. Now the entire region had heard of Jesus and all the wonderful things he had done. Especially how he was a friend to the poor and the broken. So Andrew wanted to see this teacher for himself, and maybe talk to him about his feelings if that was even possible. But Reuben forbade him to do so. You see, Reuben was going to ask Jesus to bless his nets, and he did not want Andrew to interfere or humiliate him. The next few days were the worst Andrew had lived through in his whole life. Since he wasn't allowed to see Jesus, he felt he was without a hope in the world. Finally the day came when Jesus arrived. The crowds gathered as Jesus sat and began to teach. Little Andrew watched in awe from afar, straining to hear as Jesus taught. But after time, Andrew could contain himself no longer and he rushed forward and cast himself at Jesus feet and put his arms around the Master's knees. His father Reuben had never expected that. He was more angry than he had ever been in his life at Andrew, for children needed to know their place. His son had disgraced him in the eyes of all the other men. Now how could Jesus be expected to bless his nets after such a thing as this had happened. Reuben came forward quickly, yet out of respect for Jesus, he held back the harsh words on his lips from turning into curses. He seized his son roughly by one arm and dragged him to his feet and put out a hand to strike his son. But Jesus rose with the boy, and began to speak. Now Jesus was not a very tall man as height is measured, but at that very moment, it appeared to everyone in the crowd as if he was going to strike his head against the sky. It was not anger, for the Master knew that when men do wrong it is either because they cannot see the light, or because they lack courage to follow the light. The hand that Reuben had raised never descended. The world would never forget Jesus' words, for they are written for the ages... "Let the little children," ... "Let the little children come to me... and do not stop them... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. For whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it." And with that, Jesus drew Andrew close to his breast, holding him tightly, and looked directly into his smiling face.*

There you have it. Jesus uses the example of a child to illustrate his point as to who will see God. For who has a heart more pure than that of a child? And so, to enter the kingdom of God, to see God, we must become like a child. In a sense, you and I... we, are to grow down.

For consider little children. Older ones learn quickly the ways of the world. But what are some of the characteristics of little ones. Well, probably first and foremost, children are desperately needy. And they know it. And in many ways, they are happy to be needy – there is no shame in that. They feel loved and cared for – “Mom can you help me with this. Grandpa, can you fix that.” And as their loving parents and grandparents, don’t we have an innate desire to provide for them. We want to guide them and help them grow. And yet, how many of us grownups have that same attitude toward our heavenly parent – God. Aren’t we more apt to want to be independent? Do things our way. And with this attitude, our heart is focused more on self than on God.

Second, children trust. Children can teach us some important lessons in this regard. Probably the most important is that they don’t tend to worry much, do they? Why? Because they leave the things that bring worry to us, their parents. Children don’t typically worry about where their next meal is coming from, whether there’ll be money to pay the electric bill or rent, whether they’ll have sufficient clothes to wear or a warm place to sleep. And when they are afraid or uncertain about something, they trust that, no matter what the circumstances, mom and dad will somehow - somehow provide, and everything will be okay. Jesus told his disciples to take note of how God cares for the lilies of the field and the birds in the air. And he assured them how much more God cares for them, for us. And with that promise, we are to trust completely in our heavenly Father.

Third, children are great examples of humility. And we need them as an example because we all struggle mightily with that vice called pride, don’t we? In fact, pride really is the underlying force behind all the sins in our world. Yet children by their very nature are humble beings. They know where they stand in the scheme of life. A child is not big, strong, or powerful. A child does not exert authority. By essence of just being a child, that little one is humble compared to one who is grown. And Jesus teaches that we must have the attitude of humility, represented by a small child, if we are to see God.

Yes, children, through their dependence, their trust, their humility, have a purity of heart. A purity of heart that brings them close to the kingdom of God. You know, in Celtic mythology there is this notion of “thin places,” thin places in the universe where earth and heaven come into their closest proximity to one another. And aren't we all here today to seek such “thin places”? Well, perhaps we have all taken the first step to discover that our thin place, is right here, within your heart. Yes, “Blessed are the pure in heart... for they shall be happy when they see God.” Amen.