

Sermon

“Clean Hands & Pure Heart”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 11, 2021

All Saints

Prayer For Illumination:

Lord God, you tell us that “Blessed are those with a pure heart, for they will see [you].” And yet we know that we are a people of less than pure hearts. Our sin causes us to “see in a mirror dimly,” so we turn to you as we approach the word read and proclaimed. May your Spirit help us in our weakness and give us ears to hear, and hearts to hold a word from you. A word that is pure. A word that has the power to effect change in us. A word which may convict — but which also is spoken in love. Speak your truth in love, that we may come to know you even as we are known by you and that we may grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, our Lord - in whose name we pray. Amen.

Eph. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been

destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Psa. 24:0 Of David. A Psalm.

*1 The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
2 for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.*

*Psa. 24:3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?*

*4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
5 They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah*

*Psa. 24:7 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

*8 Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.*

*9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

*10 Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory.*

- I. In that great theological odyssey *City Slickers* we find Billy Crystal (Mitch) and his friends out in the wild-country of the West driving a herd of cattle in fulfillment of their childhood dreams of being cowboys.**
- A. They, of course, are anything *but* cowboys . . .**
- 1. Middle-aged men in mid-life crises of one form or another trying to remain friends as they meet with the inevitable tribulations that come with driving cattle through the wilderness.**
- B. The trail-boss, Curly, is played by Jack Palance whose stoic silence and chiseled-face looks like something straight out of a John Wayne movie.**
- C. Late in the movie Mitch is complaining about his life when Curly turns to him and says,**
- “All you people come out here when you’re about your age. You spend years tying your life up in knots and you think that a few weeks on the range will help you untie them. None of you get the meaning of life.” “Get what?” asks Mitch. To which Curly simply lifts one finger.**
- Mitch says, “The meaning of life is your finger?” “No,” Curly replies a bit annoyed . . . “One thing! Just One Thing!” “What’s the one thing?” asks Mitch.**
- “That’s what you have to figure out!” responds Curly tersely and he rides off.**

- II. I kinda doubt the writers of City Slickers where trying to riff on the Danish theologian and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, but they were, if unintentionally.**
- A. Kierkegaard wrote that, “Purity of Heart is to will *one thing.*”**
 - 1. In fact he wrote a small book of 156 pages arguing that one thing.**
 - B. If Kierkegaard is right and purity of heart is to will — to desire one thing . . . then I imagine that most of us have some explaining to do!**
 - C. Kierkegaard, of course, meant that Purity of Heart is to will the same good that God wills.**
 - 1. To have the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus” as the apostle Paul urges in Philippians.**

III. In the biblical understanding of “heart” we find far more than simply the repository of sentiment.

A. As the author Henri Nouwen writes:

In our milieu the word heart has become a soft word. It refers to the seat of the sentimental life. Expressions such as “heartbroken” and “heartfelt” show that we often think of the heart as the warm place where the emotions are located in contrast to the cool intellect where our thoughts find their home. But the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies.

From the heart arise unknowable impulses as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart, too, has its reasons and is the center of perception and understanding. Finally, the heart is the seat of the will: it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus the heart is the central and unifying organ of our personal life.

Nouwen, Henri J. M.. The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers . HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

- B. When we aim to achieve a “pure heart” we are aiming to align our thoughts, our intentions, our hopes, and our expectations with the thoughts, intentions, hopes, and expectations of God.**

- C. In 2012 one of the retired pastors in New Hope Presbytery, Rev. Laura Dunham, who I knew from Seminary wrote a book, *Path of the Purified Heart: The Spiritual Journey as Transformation***
 - 1. I commend that title to you if you want to read on this subject.**

IV. Our Psalm today (Psalm 24) is very familiar to me.

- A. It is the “Invitatory Psalm” for the *Office of Vigils* on Sundays and Thursdays.**
 - 1. Vigils is the time of nighttime prayer and typically is prayed at 3 or 4 AM.**
- B. The Psalm is comprised of three sections:**
 - 1. Verses 1-2 remind us that God is the Creator of all that is.**
 - 2. Verses 3-6 describe what is required of those who want to approach God**
 - † Clean Hands & Pure Hearts**
 - and their rewards**
 - † Blessings and vindication**
 - 3. And then verses 7-10**
 - a liturgy of call & response that is likely a late addition to the psalm taken from liturgy used when the Ark of the Covenant was processed.**

D. I can think of no more urgent matter for disciples of Jesus in the 21st century than the business of seeking a purified heart — because without this we run the peril of engaging in a host of activities under the guise of faith - but doing them in ways that contradict the very gospel we hope to proclaim.

1. Thomas Merton put it this way in his typically terse tone of voice:

“Those who attempt to act and do things for others . . . without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom and capacity to love, will have nothing to give others. They will communicate to others nothing but the contagion of their own obsessions, their aggressiveness, their ego-centered ambitions, their delusions about ends and means, their doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.”

Thomas Merton Contemplation in a World of Action

E. Our well-intentioned *doing* must grow from the fertile ground of purified hearts.

V. As the Psalm suggests there is a critical connection between what is in our hearts and what we *do* (Clean Hands).

A. After a year of obsessive hand-cleaning because if a world-wide pandemic, we *might* be tempted to think of clean hands as simply trying to avoid touching dirty things.

B. But having clean hands points to the things we *do*

1. It points to an integrity between our doing and the purity of our intentions.

C. While Sarah and I lived in Fargo we discovered a Christian song-writer who lived not so far from us in Minneapolis / Saint Paul.

- 1. Her name is Sara Groves and she wrote a song “Know My Heart” which captures what I think the Psalm is asking us to wonder about as we approach God:**

Why do I pray-do I pray to say I prayed an hour?

Why do I love-do I want you beholden to me?

Why do I help-do I want to hear my name called out? Why do I sing?

Chorus: *Search me and know my heart, oh God.*

See if there is any wrong thing in me.

All I have ever really wanted are clean hands and a pure heart.

Why do I tithe-do I tithe so I can get a blessing?

Why do I praise-do I praise to do the right thing?

Why do I serve-do I serve so others will serve me? Why do I sing?

Chorus: *Search me and know my heart, oh God.*

See if there is any wrong thing in me.

All I have ever really wanted are clean hands and a pure heart

VI. In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus teaches:

Matt. 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

A. When John Calvin wrote his commentary on this line from the Beatitudes he saw in this statement of Jesus a word of caution for those of us who are *calculating*.

- 1. That is — we are not overtly evil or unkind.**
- 2. Rather, our sin consists in the ways we cleverly make our way through this world calculating the risk and reward of our behavior and who**

**imagine ourselves very clever in the the ways
of the world.**

† **We are not gullible**

† **We are not *like those* dolts who do not
know how to:
exploit the tax loop-holes
to manipulate the crowds
get our share of the world's resources and
*more than our share!***

B. Calvin writes:

verse 8. Happy are they who are of a pure heart. We might be apt to think, that what is here stated by Christ is in accordance with the judgment of all. Purity of heart is universally acknowledged to be the mother of all virtues. And yet there is hardly one person in a hundred, who does not put craftiness in the place of the greatest virtue. Hence those persons are commonly accounted happy, whose ingenuity is exercised in the successful practice of deceit, who gain dexterous advantages, by indirect means, over those with whom they have intercourse. Christ does not at all agree with carnal reason, when he pronounces those to be happy, who take no delight in cunning, but converse sincerely with men, and express nothing, by word or look, which they do not feel in their heart. Simple people are ridiculed for want of caution, and for not looking sharply enough to themselves. But Christ directs them to higher views, and bids them consider that, if they have not sagacity to deceive in this world, they will enjoy the sight of God in heaven.”

From — Calvin's Commentary on Matthew

VII. Friends, let us take Jesus and Psalm 24 to heart

**A. The world does not need any more clever people
who know how to exploit the loopholes for personal
gain.**

B. The world needs followers of Christ who have taken the time in prayer and in self-examination to ask,

“Is my heart pure? Do I have the well-being of all in mind as I take the next action? Have I kept God ever-before my eyes? Have I heard Curly and Kierkegaard when they tell me that the secret of life is to desire one thing — to know and follow the will of God?”

C. None of those questions will be simply or easily answered . . . but then again, Jesus never suggested that our discipleship would be easy.

Indeed, to the contrary, he suggested it would be a lot like taking up our cross and following him.