



**From the Pulpit: March 17, 2024**

Fifth Sunday in Lent—St. Patrick’s Day—The World Jesus Knew

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Matthew 5:1–8

***God’s Odd Benedictions, VI: The Unalloyed***

During Lent at Kenilworth Union Church this year we’re preaching a sermon series called “God’s Odd Benedictions” about the Beatitudes which Jesus launches “The Sermon on The Mount”. Today Mathew 5:8

One of the ways English-speaking people talk about the pure in heart is with the word ‘integrity,’ which comes, of course, from the same root as ‘integer,’ which is Latin for whole, entire. An integer is a

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”*

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus, “for they will see God.”

The word for ‘pure’ that Jesus uses here in the sixth beatitude means in Greek just what it means in English, as when we say, “Her heart was pure gold.” We mean that her essence is unalloyed, not contaminated with traces of zinc, iron, lead, or whatever it is that makes gold less than 24-karat.

Her heart is unadulterated, free from any hint of other color or substance, untarnished by any fleck of stain. There is only one thing in there, and nothing else, nothing else at all. No alloys, additives, preservatives, contaminants; nothing shameful, nothing false, nothing unclean. She is like Dany Targaryen’s troops: The Unsullied.

There is only one thing in there. And that one thing, in her heart, is God. For Jesus, God is One and God is All. That one thing—God—fills the pure in heart to overflowing surplus. There is room for nothing else.

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‘whole,’ or as they say in mathematics, a ‘natural’ number--1,2,3,4,5,6, and so on. An integer is undivided; it is not a fraction; it is not a piece of a greater whole. The hearts of the pure are unfractured.

Augustine puts it so beautifully: “While I turned from thee, the one good, I lost myself in a multiplicity of things.” That’s priceless. “I lost myself in a multiplicity of things.”<sup>1</sup> Does anybody here dance to that beat?

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote this slim, beautiful little book called *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. He talks about those who lose themselves seeking an endless variety of the world’s goods, a multiplicity of things. He calls those who seek the world’s good not the double-minded, but the thousand-minded.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.1, quoted by M. Eugene Boring, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), vol. VIII, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper, 1938), p. 58.

You know how it is with us: we want to see and know so many things. We want to see Paris, Bangkok, the Loch Ness Monster, the title to a Tesla, Mardi Gras, Taylor Swift, our name in headlines, a 4-handicap on the golf course, opening night on Broadway, the lights, the glitter, the action, the corner office. We are thousand-minded. Our hearts are filled with a thousand loyalties, but Kierkegaard talks about the “emptiness behind the manyness” of our loyalties.<sup>3</sup>

Let me take a brief tangent here, and say, paradoxically, a good word for a certain measure of hypocrisy and duplicity. Let me just admit that human commerce would be all but impossible if we were all excessively pure in heart, unalloyed, and unable to wear a duplicitous face. Certain flexible duplicities have an honored place in life.

In marriage, for instance. The British poet George Herbert once said, “All truths are not to be told,” and if you’re married, or even if you’re not, I think you know what he’s talking about. You can’t always say what you think, or you’re a dead man. All truths are not to be told.

A man and his wife are just leaving for a fancy dinner party. He says to her, “You’re wearing that?” She was mad. She threw a book at him, and it was *War and Peace*. He protested and said, “Honey, I thought our relationship was based on honesty.” She said, “Well you were wrong, our relationship is not based on **honesty**, it’s based on **flattery**, and it’s going downhill fast.”<sup>4</sup> All truths are not to be told.

And in church. I for one am kind of glad that we’re all hypocrites upon occasion. Let’s say you sit through yet another of the many sermons preached from this pulpit which go into orbit around the wrong planet. Many people endure an experience like that and then go through the receiving line after church and say not what they think, but something gentler, like “Well, **that** was...different.”

*“So duplicity  
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in sports.”*

So duplicity has an honored role in marriage, and in church, and in sports. I mean there wouldn’t be football without duplicity, right? The quarterback option, the reverse, the draw play, the fake punt, the stutter-step false move to the sideline on a perfectly chiseled pass pattern, the huddle even. Truth in advertising is one thing, but who wants truth in sports? Football wouldn’t be football without deception.

Or baseball. There wouldn’t be baseball without duplicity. The whole game is built on lies, deception, and keeping secrets. The third-base coach looks like he’s brushing lint off his shoulder, but what he’s really doing is telling the baserunner to steal second. To **steal** second. I am aghast. And the pitch-out. That’s just deception responding to deception. The change-up is nothing but a naked lie.

Batter’s up there expecting a fastball at 96 miles an hour and the ball floats leisurely up to the plate as if it’s on a street in a school zone and the batter has already swung, missed, cursed, thrown his bat, and sat down in the dugout before the ball even reaches the plate.

Charles Eliot was for many years president of Harvard University, and he never really thought sports had a place in higher education. At the end of a great year for the Harvard baseball team, Dr. Eliot shocked everyone by saying that he was thinking of dropping baseball from the university before the next season.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 59–60.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen MacMillan, Reader’s Digest, June, 1993.

When someone asked him why, Dr. Eliot said, “Well, this year I’m told the team did well because one pitcher had an exceptional curve ball.

I understand that the curve ball is thrown with deliberate intention to deceive, and surely that is not an ability we should foster at Harvard University.”<sup>5</sup> But perhaps Dr. Eliot was tyrannized by an over-scrupulous conscience.

So in marriage, in church, and in sports, duplicity and pretense have a positive role to play, but only in these innocent ways. In the rest of life, the pure in heart cannot be actors.

You know how in ancient drama, among the Greeks and the Romans, a single actor would play multiple roles in one play, and to signal to the audience which role he was playing at the moment, he would wear many masks in the course of the one play.

Some of us live our lives like that, wearing many masks. There’s one mask for the family and another for the colleagues and a third for your church friends. That’s fine when you’re acting, but not when you’re living. Our public and our private faces must be one. Our actions and our intentions must be one.

One last thing and then I’ll quit. A point of personal privilege. You took such good care of Kathy and me when our best friend Phil died in January. Some of you went to Israel or Scotland with Phil.

We’re so grateful for your kindness because on the face of it, it wasn’t really a tragedy. He was just a friend, not a brother or a father. He was 76. He died in his sleep. Never been sick a day in his life except for an Achilles tendon and a serious case of covid.

But it’s Phil I think of when I think of the unalloyed. He was Chief of Surgery at Greenwich Hospital. When he was a kid, he was a three-sport athlete at St. Lawrence University; he’s in the Hall of Honor. Never touched tobacco or alcohol once in his life. He hated alcohol for the chaos it wrought in the lives of some of his friends.

He’d stay up all night doing three emergency gall bladders at the hospital, and then hit the road for Princeton at 6:00 in the morning to watch his son play golf.

I’ve also told you about my friend George, who was a surrogate grandfather to my kids when we lived in Greenwich. George was an only child, never married, and had no kids, alone in the world except for Kathy and me, his adopted family.

When George was 85, he was very ill with cancer and faced serious surgery. Kathy and I were headed to Honduras for a mission trip, so we couldn’t care for him. We had to talk to him about rehabilitation facilities.

George protested. “I’m not going to one of those infernal places! People die there.” Back and forth we went for about ten minutes, and then Phil jumped in with a solution. He said, “George, how about you spend a week at 96 Perkins Road?” George said, “I’m not going to any place called 96 Perkins Road!” George didn’t realize that 96 Perkins Road was Phil’s home. George spent seven days recovering in the home of the Chief of Surgery at Greenwich Hospital.

Phil’s wife Linda tells us that one night Phil got up at 3:00 in the morning to change a bloody catheter. Surgeons don’t change catheters.

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<sup>5</sup>Clifton Fadiman, ed. *The Little-Brown Book of Anecdotes*, (Boston: Little-Brown, 1985), p. 189.

Near the end of the week when George was feeling better, Phil said, “George, tomorrow morning we’re going to go for a ride in the countryside in my 1965 Mustang. We’ll take the top down.”

The next morning when Phil got up, there was George sitting in the living room, wearing a tie and a three-piece suit, because he was going for a ride with the Chief of Surgery at Greenwich Hospital.

It was a magnificent day. They felt the wind in their faces. They had a blast.

They stopped at a hot dog stand for chili dogs. “What is this?” asked George. He’d never had one. You gotta have a chili dog before you die.

My friend Phil: Jesus would have called him pure in heart. Jesus would have called him The Unalloyed. Jesus would say that Phil would see God. Face to Face.

## —The Great Prayer— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Shamrock God, three in one, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

Let us look to the clovers. Let the vibrant shade of green remind us of your presence in each day of growth, renewal, and change, three leaves, one stem, be a reminder of your triune love expressed in the gospel of Jesus.

From the beginning, you have been with us.

In the simplicity of life, you nourish us, you enliven us, you compose us. You hear our cry, you know our worries and wonderings, you hear our longings, you soften our hearts. We are entangled in one another, person to person, and creation to Creator. We hear your word proclaimed not just in this Sanctuary, but in the Sanctuary of sky, evening sunset and approaching storm giving equal testimony to your glory.

Therefore with all creation, we sing your praise.

Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory,  
Hosanna in the highest.

May your incarnate word continue to speak blessing into the fragmented places.

For those at the breaking point, on the brink of collapse, running on empty, may there be more of your divine presence.

For those who mourn, for those who have sacrificed something dear, for those who surrendered what was most treasured, may your strong embrace make way.

For those who are content, for those who seek no more and no less, for those who are satisfied and at ease, may all that matters rise up to meet you, may such contentment remain.

For those who bear a truth too uncomfortable for others to hear, may you accompany them, may such prophetic spirits join with the

voices of old who knew of your treasured path of justice, kindness, mercy, and humility.

For those who are sick, who are back and forth from medical facility to medical facility, for those who are healing, waiting, tending, mending, for those who have heavy burdens to carry, for those who worry about their children, in ways too deep for words, for those who mourn a loss just beyond impossible, for those who need strength to face this day, for those we love, for whom we pray whether or not we know what to ask.

For global leaders, those who can undo the roads to violence that rise up day after day, for peacemakers, for those who have yet to live into their calling to be peacemakers, for those whose hearts are hardened and who have the power to choose another way, for places where war has become ingrained, habitual, intractable.

Be our guide, O God.  
Insist upon your way.  
Make it so.

And as much as it is possible, let your way be lived out here at your table.

Gracious God,  
Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us  
And upon these gifts of bread and cup  
That they may be for us the body and blood of Christ  
And that we may be his body for the world.  
By your spirit unite us with Christ and one another  
Until we feast with him and with all your saints  
In your eternal realm of justice and peace  
Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,  
In the unity of the Holy Spirit  
All glory and honor are yours  
Almighty God  
Now and forever. Amen.

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