

“Blessed are the pure in heart”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 11/18/18

I am taking today’s sermon title from Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 5, also known as the “beatitudes,” especially when he says “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

The reason I’ve selected this scripture is because it gets down to the core of our church community’s essence. I didn’t realize this till my good friend Don Golden, the director of Red Letter Christians, a national movement of mostly evangelical Christians who are taking a stand against legalism and refocusing on Christ as the head of the Church—whose words in scripture matter—but it was when Don looked so seriously at me and quoted this scripture, with a follow-up comment, “well I don’t need to tell you this Dan, you come from a contemplative community.” The inference Don was making was significant: Contemplative worshippers, which we are, value the inward spiritual awakening that comes from contemplative prayer and meditation. We are, in effect, always striving to see God’s face, and understand that in order to realize this fully we must empty ourselves of all distractions, in other words making our hearts pure—or better yet, uninhibited.

How many of you love to do dishes? Well I will admit to you that it is something I absolutely loathe. When I was growing up, my sister and I had a chore list, and it was designed to make sure we had a fair balance of household duties: Take out the trash, clean up the living room and kitchen, pick up after a family meal, and do the dishes. The problem was that we both hated to do the dishes. To avoid doing dishes, and with hopes that maybe mom would come along and do them for us, we devised a clever plan. We would “soak the dishes” first; however, this “soaking” would often be overnight, and given that there was no time before school the next morning, we could slip out before anyone would notice, leaving my mom to do them in the end. We tried this trick and we were both successful at it for several weeks before my mom caught on. Years later, I would share this trick with my wife, and she laughed about it. However, having shared it, I was unable to use it. As soon as I left the dishes “soaking”, she knew what I was really intending: For her to do the dishes. Then, just recently I walked in the kitchen and saw them “soaking”, and she even said: I’m soaking the dishes. I knew what she wanted. I had been beat at my own game.

Why so much talk about dishes? I like to think that Jesus had a firm grasp of my disdain for washing dishes when he talked about it in Matthew 23, and calls the religious teachers, “hypocrites” and then tells them “you clean the outside of the cup and dish but the inside remains filthy... Clean the inside first, then the outside will be clean.” Jesus says that the teachers were fixated on the outer surface of the cup, just the appearance, and not the inside of the cup. In fact, we see Jesus using a similar illustration when he was obviously frustrated with another group of religious leaders at their first time meeting with his disciples and who had snobbishly criticized them for not properly washing before eating. In Matthew 15, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah back to them, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” Jesus was exhausted at the inauthenticity of the religious institution itself. Their hearts were not pure, or uninhibited. Their hearts were chained to the superficial process they had created to show religiosity.

As most of you know, I had the unique opportunity of going on a Civil Rights tour through the South with a group of mostly local African-American pastors from Lynchburg about a month ago. It was a transformative trip on so many levels. As we spent nearly two days in Montgomery, Alabama,

confronting the epitome of hatred, staring at depictions of the vilest, most hateful, bigoted parts of our racist history, as we confronted, together, the most violent acts of torture and lynchings, many of you know I was a broken man. I was nearly paralyzed by the horror of our darkest moments in history, with which we continue to combat. In the midst of this, I began to hear one of the pastors mutter under his breath words from the prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is wicked. Who can know it?” over and over. He, certainly, was referring to the good Christian people of the South who perpetrated some of the most heinous crimes against his people, and all as a perverse, “Christian” cause. That night, at Montgomery’s now dilapidated First Presbyterian Church, where the famous pro-slavery orator William Yancey regularly preached slavery was God’s will and why we must preserve it at all costs, I was reminded of Jesus’ own observation in Luke 6:45 “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” In our brokenness, haunted by reality in that wretched sanctuary, a bastion of white supremacy, we white pastors took the feet of our black pastors and washed them. I felt so broken and undone, remembering how Jesus wore nothing but a simple loin cloth as he washed his disciples’ feet—to emulate a slave—and after seeing how the slaves were treated as non-humans, whose bodies were objectified and mutilated, I stripped down as far as I could go without offending anyone (for the record, like Jesus, I left something on), taking the feet of Pastor Carl Hutcherson, former mayor and the first black teacher at E.C. Glass High School in 1972. Holding his feet, I cried. I said, “I am sorry for the atrocities my white people have committed against your people. I repent of this evil. And I am sorry for all that you personally have had to go through as a person of color in our country, our city. I am sorry for not speaking out sooner, not advocating sooner, and not helping usher in true equality in our community. Forgive me.” Carl’s eyes were full of tears, as if the first time hearing such repentance from the majority culture of this country. I learned in this moment, what Don Golden had really meant, about how our contemplative community having a special inroad to the “purity of the heart.” How we strive to see God. In that moment, my heart was uninhibited. Human rules and norms no longer mattered. We must be real. We must be humble.

Purity of the heart requires true humility. If we remove our ego from our heart, we might have a fighting chance of truly seeing God. This is our ultimate challenge. Author and guru Deepak Chopra says, “the point isn’t to change your actions but to change your consciousness. To do that you must walk a path from A to B, where A is a life based on the incessant demands of the ego and B is selfless awareness.” He also recognizes that in our moments of meditation, the state of selfless awareness manifests itself best—in that moment we become truly aware. Humility is at its peak when we are selflessly aware. Think about that for a moment: Selfless awareness. That moment when your heart is unfettered by distractions of life, when you are free to simply exist. In that moment of rest, God speaks, and we can see God—or better yet, know God.

Also, in that moment God’s love consumes us. The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 5 of his letter, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Of this concept, our former pastor David Edwards, said, “Unfortunately, Christianity has continued to tell people that they are not good or spiritual or moral enough. We also have made Christian faith a matter of the head, of having the right ideas. Thinking is very important, but intellectualized religion has starved people, or made them fight with, and sometimes kill, each other over ideas and doctrines. Paul doesn’t say that God’s love has been poured into our heads, but our hearts. Heart, soul, spirit, mind. These biblical words all mean the same thing—the core of our being. The spiritual life, the life of faith,

has to do with awakening to God's love poured into our innermost self, and then responding with our whole being." This idea fits nicely with Chopra's idea of changing our consciousness instead of focusing on our actions. Or better yet, Jesus's idea of cleaning inside the cup, rather than just the outside. We have to have an inward focus first.

So, this gets back to me and my sister soaking the dishes first. And even my wife who has recently adopted this method. Maybe it is an ingenious idea to soak in the waters of God's presence for a while. In our silence to commune restfully with our Creator. The grime becomes loosened in the warm water, and dislodges itself. And then we, in that moment, become like what the proverb says, "keep the heart with all vigilance (i.e. awareness), for from it flow the springs of life." Be selflessly aware and share that awareness with others, in love, selflessly—be the change you want to see in this world. It starts with us.

Peace.