



Blessed Are the Pure in Heart

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 5:2-8
Matthew 14:22-33

March 21, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In college I participated in a Bible study with some guys. I'm sure just saying that resurrects your own memories of all those late nights in college studying scripture, doesn't it? We were reading the Beatitudes. We got to, "Blessed are the pure in heart." I remember looking around this particular group of guys and thinking: we don't have a chance. We were just trying to, I don't know, find a way to get by; but purity was not an option.

Well, I'm different than I was in college, thanks be to God, but purity is still not an option. But this is one of those places that a seminary education can prove valuable. For when I returned to this wisdom of Jesus while in seminary, I learned something that I had not known before. The language includes some nuance I hadn't previously appreciated. When we say something is pure, we think of it as being without flaw, or perfect. That's not me. It's not anyone. No one gets the important things right all the time.

Understood this way, if the pure are the ones who see God, we can assume that no one will ever see God because no one is ever pure. Why would Jesus describe a blessing that no one, I mean no one, will ever experience? Well, he wouldn't.

This Beatitude is not a call to be flawless. Something else is at play here. If I understand it, the pure in heart are not those who are without flaw, but rather those whose life is shaped by their faith. There is an integrity to their life—a focus.

I think Matthew gives us some narrative examples of some of the Beatitudes, and if I read it correctly, he has given us a picture of what the pure in heart look like. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and head across the sea. But before they reach the other side, Jesus walks out to them on the water. Now, first of all, if you are skeptical that this really happened, you should be. If the early church has handed us a

story that communicates that Jesus had the power to walk across the Missouri River without getting his ankles wet, well okay, that's impressive. But that really has no impact on our lives. Because you and I, even on our best days, will never do that. And what difference would it make if we did? What difference would it make if he did? Something else is at play here.

This is not a story about Jesus' power over nature; it is a story of his capacity to convert human nature. When the disciples see him walking the way he does—something they obviously had not seen anyone else do before—they were afraid. Can't blame them for that. But Peter, in perhaps his best moment, says, "Lord if that is you, tell me to come out there where you are. Tell me to walk where you walk."

If I understand it, this story reveals that Jesus walks through the world like no one else and it's a little frightening. This story also reveals his invitation to all of us to walk like he walks, to walk where he walks... even if the whole world says you can't walk that way and survive.

It had to sound crazy to those guys in the boat when Peter said, "I'd rather walk out there with you, than stay here in the safety of this boat." The disciples probably thought: I'm glad I'm here to see this. That boy is going to sink like a stone.

But Peter doesn't sink. He got out of the boat and he walked toward Jesus. He's not perfect at it, but he's better than me.

But then the story says he notices the wind and the waves. It is then—when he is distracted from his focus on Jesus—that he begins to sink.

This is where the Beatitude comes to life. Peter walks on the water for a while; he walks like Jesus walks. That's what the pure in heart look like. Peter is moving through the world as Jesus moves through the world. But then his mind becomes divided. His heart

becomes fragmented. He notices not just the power of Jesus, but also the power of the wind and the waves, and Peter begins to wonder: Which one shapes his life? Which power will win? To say it a different way: Which power is true and can be trusted?

This seems so real to me. I like to think that my Christian faith is my guiding light. My north star. My foundation that shapes every choice. I like to think that I am Christian in every moment. But a more honest assessment is that there is a collection of voices, a variety of powers, an academy of philosophies that influence my world view—and many of them are the bluster of wind and wave that stand in tension with the Christian life. And I live with a fragmented heart, a divided mind. I see both Jesus and the wind and waves of the world. Am I making any sense to you?

Several years ago, I met a woman who, with courage, shared with me that she suffered abuse from her husband. She went to her father, whom she told me was a pastor. Her father told her to go home and make amends because a wife is to be submissive to her husband. “It’s in the book,” he said.

Well, just saying it’s in the book is not enough; the book has to be interpreted as a word of love and life and ‘go submit’ is neither.

He had confused the voices; the voice of patriarchy was not the voice of God. The voice of violence was not the voice of God.

So, where do you think that confusion might be blustering in our lives? How does your faith shape your parenting, if you are a parent? How does your faith shape your work, if you work? How does your faith shape your investing, if you are an investor? How does your faith shape your use of time?

I could go on, but suffice it to say, we have reasons for the way we do the things we do; we have convictions of what is important. But how much does God shape those convictions and how much are they shaped by the wind and the waves of individualism or nationalism or capitalism or any other ‘ism’? How much are our choices shaped by the gospel and how

much are they shaped by fear or injury or selfishness?

If I understand this text, Jesus has shown us how to walk in this world. But it’s hard to trust all the time. And it can be a bit frightening because, after all, to love like he loves means there’s always a cross in the picture and none of us can face that without sweating a bit of blood.

A couple weeks ago, I shared with you a moment from the life of John Lewis. This week I remembered the only time I met Mr. Lewis. It was here in Kansas City and he was speaking for an event for the Truman Library.

That evening he shared that a man brought his father to Lewis’ congressional office in DC. Lewis said, as the man entered his office, his eyes were wet and his voice was shaky. The older man told John Lewis that he had been one of the officers on the Pettis Bridge that day in 1965 who had beaten the marchers. “I thought I was doing right,” he said, “But I was blinded by hatred and I was wrong. I am so sorry. I was wrong.”

Lewis said, “I forgive you.” And then Lewis said to us gathered around the banquet-hall tables, “I continue to believe that it is possible for us to get it right.”

I want faith like that. I need faith like that. I am living toward faith like that. Pure in heart. Not really an option because we all know the voices and the powers that form the wind and waves of our lives; those powers distract us from God. We are a people of belief and unbelief.

But we are also a people who do our best to get out of the boat. To say, “Jesus, I want to walk like you walk. I want to live like you live. Tell me to come to you.” And some days we learn to walk on water. I continue to believe we can get it right.

Most importantly, Jesus believed we could get it right. It’s the only reason he had to look at a frightened disciple and say, “Come on, you can do it. Just take that first step and keep your eyes on me. Come on my beloved disciple... Come on. Just take the step in front of you today and I’ll be right there... but come on.”