

Vision Beautiful: Learning to Look

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Amie Giguere

February 2, 2020

Matthew 5:8 Blessed ***are those who are pure in heart, for they shall see God.***

Two years ago I was able to travel to Israel and Palestine for a class - *Religious Education in the Holy Land*. As part of that trip, we visited the Galilee region, including the Church of the Beatitudes. This beautiful, simple church, built in 1938 overlooks the Sea of Galilee. While there is not archeological evidence to confirm the location, tradition has it that the church is built upon the hill where Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount. A couple of my classmates and I stood on the terrace of that church looking out at the Sea of Galilee, which I imagined would be bigger. And it is not really a sea. Rather, it is a fresh water lake just 13 miles long and 8 miles wide, and is similar in size to Sebago Lake in Maine. So as a couple of us stood there, our guide instructed us to hold out one arm and hand so that our fingertips extended toward one end of the lake and then to hold out the other arm and hand so that our fingertips extended toward the other end of the lake... as we stood there with both arms extended – he made the following statement, “Two thirds of Jesus’ ministry took place between your outstretched hands.” Wow! With that statement, I became utterly touched by the privilege I had to be there! It sparked my imagination then and continues to now as I think about today’s Scripture. What was Jesus’ message to his listeners next to the Sea of Galilee over two thousand years ago? What is Jesus’ message to us now?

The words shared during today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew are the opening words of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. They are words which are well-known to many as “The Beatitudes.” As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I realized that I was attempting to preach a sermon on a sermon. Not just that, but a sermon preached by Jesus. How could I possibly do that? Further, I discovered that there is so much conflicting scholarship about the Beatitudes. A complicated picture emerged for me, and I realized that I might need 12 sermons to preach these 12 verses instead of 12 minutes. So, I decided a better idea would be to take just one of the Beatitudes. This one is enough, so here goes!

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. What did purity mean to Jesus’ followers? In this Beatitude, the Greek word that is used for pure is *katharos*. In the Greek Old Testament, the use of the word *katharos* is very common, and occurs more than 150 times. In the ancient world there were two conceptions of purity. One conception regarded purity as a matter of ritual observances, as the continued obedience to a set of conventional regulations and taboos, as entirely a ceremonial matter. The other conception regarded purity as a matter of life and conduct and a state of mind and heart. First, let us look at the purity of ritual observance. The very fact that *katharos* is so often used in this sense in the Greek Old Testament is the proof of how common and deep-seated and

widespread this idea of purity was. For example, the Old Testament book of Leviticus outlines that there were certain animals which were clean and certain which were unclean. The Old Testament book of Numbers instructs that to touch a dead body rendered a man unclean for seven days. Before an orthodox Jew sat to eat, he washed his hands in a certain way. The handwashing seems to be less for reasons of hygiene. Rather to *not wash* in this certain way was to be unclean or impure.

Another aspect of purity comes out in the regulations governing eligibility for the priesthood. To be a priest a man must have been a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron. Moral quality, spiritual insight, goodness or virtue did not enter into the matter. If a man was a descendant of Aaron, he could become a priest. Even though such a man might be arrogant, unscrupulous, and cruel, as long as he was a descendant of Aaron –nothing could stop him from becoming a priest. And, if a man was not a descendant of Aaron, all the saintliness and all the goodness in the world could not make him a priest. However, the Law laid down 142 physical blemishes which disqualified a priest from serving at the sacrifices in the Temple. Further, on the once-a-year Day of Atonement the High Priest (who is the only one allowed to enter the most Holy part of the temple) had to wash his whole body in clean water five times, and his hands and feet ten times. These conventional rituals and ceremonies had to be observed meticulously to make one pure and to render him well-pleasing to God.

From this point of view, purity had been completely **externalized**; it was a matter of observing certain rituals and ceremonies; and the heart did not enter into it at all. So long as a man went through the conventional observances, he was pure. That was what we might call the official and orthodox conception of purity in the time of Jesus; and Jesus completely contradicted it and dissociated himself from it with two words – Blessed are the pure ***In heart.***

For Jesus, as for all people in his time, the "heart" was not just a pulsating organ inside one's chest to be strengthened by exercise and a good diet or cured by the cardiologist's tool kit. In fact, for thousands of years, the heart as metaphor has represented the hub of human identity and been linked with our capacity for emotion, the core not only of our physical but of our spiritual life. Our heart is our truest self. The heart is the sphere where we meet God, or avoid meeting God.

It would seem that for Jesus purity was an inward thing, a thing of the heart and of the mind and of the attitude of the soul. If we examine the meaning of *katharos* when it is used apart from ceremonial purity, we see that nearly all the other meanings of the word have one common element; they all describe something which has no tainting, with nothing added or mixed in – such as unmixed milk or wine or unalloyed silver. That is, they have no element

added into them to affect their purity. Perhaps this kind of purity looks like simplicity, focus or single-mindedness. Soren Kierkegaard wrote a well-known book entitled *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. If purity of heart is “to will one thing” then focus becomes very important. Perhaps the pure, like a racehorse, need “blinders” to block out their peripheral vision, so they keep their eyes on the one goal, straight ahead, the finish line.

What, then, are we to focus on?

My husband and I decided a few years ago when we needed a new vehicle that we wanted to purchase a Jeep. We both had grown up wanting one, and once our children were older, we decided the time was right. Once we became Jeep owners, suddenly we began to look for and notice many Jeeps on the road. In fact, we noticed that it is a “thing” for Jeep owners to acknowledge one another with a brief wave when driving by one another on the street. So, we intentionally look for Jeeps so that we do not miss the opportunity to wave to others and do not miss them waving to us. I could pass many other vehicles on the road and not pay attention to the make or model, but when I am driving our Jeep as I am this morning, my focus is on other Jeep Wranglers. I see what I am looking for.

I read a book not long ago entitled *On Looking: A Walker's Guide to the Art of Observation* by Alexandria Horowitz. The book is structured around a series of twelve walks the author takes, mostly in her Manhattan neighborhood, with experts in a diverse range of subjects, including an urban sociologist, an artist, a geologist, a physician and a sound designer. What they each see, how they see it and why most of us do not see the same things reveal the startling power of human attention and the cognitive aspects of what it means to be an expert observer. The book is brilliant in that it illustrates how different people can walk the same city blocks and see completely different things. Knowledge makes a difference to seeing. For example, the author took a walk with a field naturalist who specializes in tracking invertebrates and insects. This particular expert spent the time on their walk on the most ordinary of city blocks, pointing out innumerable indicators that insects had left of their presence – from egg cases, to webs, to leaf mines – which is evidence that a lace bug had sucked the green juice out and made the leaf turn yellow. Some wise words shared by this expert with the author were these: half of tracking is knowing where to look, and the other half is looking.

I think these words are really quite theological and could apply to today's Beatitude: Blessed are those who are pure in heart, for they shall see God.

As we have said, we see what we look for... the pure in heart “will one thing”, that is they have a focus. The human predicament is that we let ourselves get frittered away in multiple

directions, trying to be and do everything when we were made for just one thing, for the one thing that finally matters: God. Purification of the heart is the endless struggle of seeking a more God-centered life. It is the minute-to-minute discipline of trying to be so aware of God's presence that the heart has no space for our own worries, ambitions, or attention to appearances.

So, do we really SEE God? We learn from Scripture that it is impossible to literally see God with the physical eye. When Moses wanted to see God's glory, God answered, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." [Exodus 33:20] John 1:18 tells us that "no one has ever seen God." Author William Barclay claims that to see God means two things: The first is to enter into fullness of knowledge of God. I think this fits with the advice of the insect tracker: knowing where to look. It means to focus our attention on the things of God. The second thing Barclay says is this: to see God is to enter into the intimate fellowship of love. I think this is the other half of the insect tracker's advice about tracking... which is actually looking. Looking for God's love... in oneself and in others.

We have to learn to look. It is often not easy to do, we have to train ourselves... like Bruce and I look for other Jeeps on the road, like the insect tracker turns over leaves to find indicators of the presence of insects. These things may not jump out at the casual observer. Instead, we can learn to look for what we may miss otherwise... that which is right in front of us. We can focus on a sense of perpetual wonder of God's presence and God's love that is all around us if we learn to look for it! That is good news! We can claim God's promise that in having a pure heart that we will see God! I wonder where we will see God today? Let's learn to look! After all, we see what we look for. May it be so. Amen.

©Rev. Amielia Stuart Giguere 02.02.2020

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

Bibliography

Barclay, William. *The Beatitudes and The Lord's Prayer for Everyman*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Editors. *Feasting on the Gospels*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

Forest, Jim. *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Horowitz, Alexandria. *On Looking: A Walker's Guide to the Art of Observation*. New York : Scribner, 2013.

Howell, James C. *The Beatitudes for Today*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Larsen, John Scott Bible Studies with Dale and Sandy. *The Beatitudes: Developing Spiritual Character*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998.