

One Thing
Sermon Text: Matthew 5:1-12
Psalm 73: 1-3, 21 – 28; Luke 10: 38-42

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

I heart my cardiologist. You know what I am talking about; you've seen the bumper stickers – I, a picture of a heart, and then the thing, person, object you – heart/love. Well, I heart my cardiologist. The reason I heart him is that after putting me through \$75 million worth of test, he declared my heart – healthy. So, I heart my cardiologist.

Jesus didn't have a cardiologist. In fact, the whole concept of the "heart" in ancient Palestine was totally different from what we think of today. We post heart messages on bumper stickers, but most of us think of the heart as this pumping organ in the left center of our chest cavity. We take care of that one. We diet and exercise and avoid the foods that we like and eat the ones we should; or at least we ought to.

For ancient Palestinians the heart was not so much a biological pump but their truest self. It is the part that yields the most authentic feelings – grief, delight, anger, love, hope, desire. It is the fertile ground of the imagination; the place where they conceive and imagine ideas that improve their lives and the place of love. It was the incubator of their dreams and the point of connection with people and ideas; the place where they met God.

If Jesus imagined the heart to be more than the pump that pushes blood back and forth through the body; what did Jesus mean by "pure in heart?" The Greek word implies both innocence, purity, and the implication of purification or something that was once pure; something that became impure, and has been made pure again. Imagine clean white shirt that has been dirtied and washed and is now pristine again. So a pure heart is one that has been emptied of what is unclean and is once again pure. It has nothing in it that doesn't belong there.

Blessed are the pure in heart. I think it is helpful to look at this from different angles. Purity to me looks like simplicity, a single mindedness that is focused on one thing at a time. I watched the Olympics this past week. Lindsey Vonn was poised at the top of that ski run and her eyes had a laser like focus. I imagine that she had blocked everything except the ski run. Shaun White during an interview said that he gets in the zone and does not hear anything but the swish of his board on

the snow, no crowds, no cheers, just him, the board, and the snow; simplicity in the face of complexity – focus, single minded intent.

The other way is to see purity in the usual context – cleanliness, holiness, goodness, godliness. I contend that these two concepts, single mindedness and purity are discouraged by the culture in which we live. Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing. He argued that the human condition pulls in multiple directions. We try to do everything at once but we are made to do only one thing at a time.

An interviewer asked Albert Einstein what he thought about we he tied his shoes? Einstein replied, "The lace." He focused on one thing at a time. And sometimes he focused on things I still don't understand. Let's watch this clip from the movie *City Slickers*. It's an exchange between the city slicker Mitch and the cowboy, Curly. I think you'll figure out which one is which.

What is the one thing that matters ultimately? That "one thing" is God. If purity of the heart is to will one thing then our focus should be on the "one thing" in this case the One that matters – God. Focus is importance in this instance, we should be like a race horse with blinders on, blocking out all that distracts and keeping our eyes fixed on the finish line.

In the gospel lesson from Luke today, Jesus enters the home of his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. This visit is a perfect portrayal of a pure heart and one that while well intended is not; it's too busy. Martha is coming unglued at the fact that Mary is not helping out in the kitchen. Jesus seeming doesn't understand. Martha is busy making preparations while Mary sitting at Jesus' feet hanging on every word he is saying. Martha looks at Mary; she looks at what has to be done to get supper on the table, and she becomes unglued. Jesus exposes Martha's distractions, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; there is need of only one thing." The pure in heart keep their focus. They don't let others pull them away from life's vital things for the merely important.

Our lives are diffuse – hoping from task to task; going from this to that to the other; all important, all needing doing, attempting to do them all at once – becoming increasingly stretched and stressed. But occasionally circumstances jerk us into focus – the doctor calls, it's malignant; the police knock at the door, there's been an accident; some one runs a red light, you hear the crumpled metal and shattering

glass. Suddenly the entries in your day planner pale. In an instance what you had considered as vital becomes trivial.

If purity of heart is doing one thing, then it can't be just any old thing. We may have reached the pentacle of our career, penthouse suite, private jets, all the trappings of success. We may have climbed all the mountains that we dreamed of climbing and always reaching the summit. But if we have substituted our desires for God then we have run away from God. The pure in heart want God and no substitute, regardless of how pleasing it is, no substitute for the One will do.

I know what you are thinking. I am blasting success. I am not. God intends for us to be successful. God wants us to succeed. He doesn't need people who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. What God wants is our focus and attention to be on God. Yet, everything around us seems to scream distractions. But, everything around us seems to mock God. When we look at the successful in the world, many if not most simply have no room for God at best or scorn God at worst. Jesus addresses this in the *Sermon on the Mount* – the Lord causes the rain to fall on the field of the just and the unjust. Go figure!

Many do get ahead in the world and they are not meek, or merciful, or poor in spirit. They don't hunger and thirst for righteousness and certainly they are not pure. Yet, they are riding high and seem happy. When I ruminate, actually sometimes I fume, on this I turn to one of my favorite Psalms, the one read today and these words are a soothing balm, "Truly God is good to the upright; to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, all day long I have been stricken" (Ps. 73). The psalmist has done the right thing and his reward - he is stricken. How can this be? Isn't God supposed to bless us?

"Through the prism of tears the psalmist sees the fiction that the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished."¹ He is tempted to give up on God. So what does he do? He goes to church, he enters the temple, the place where God is and in the radiance of that place he gets a sense of hope. The presence of God is a balm to the suffering servant. No miracle occurs – the flesh is still festering and his heart is still broken. He is still poor – but hope; hope in the long view of history, or the belief that the goodness of God prevails; that the pure in heart will see God.

¹ Howell, 71

For the psalmist, God is no longer an abstraction – or a dotting old grandfather in the sky who doles out goodies to grandchildren. But God is good and the psalmist notes that his love never fails. Frederick Buechner begins his book, The Life of Jesus with these words, “He had a face ...”² and “the contours of that face are the compassion and wisdom and tenderness of Jesus.”³

God is good. But the greatest gift that God gives is not a thing – it is God’s own self. He had a face. I have some of my father’s things. My father died over 40 years ago – I have his high school ring, his wrist watch and some pictures. I treasure those things. They are gold and they do have some economic value, but of course the value to me is that they are reminders of him. They are not for sale. But I would gladly give them away for another hour with him in person, with the man himself – listening to his stories, watching him work the crossword puzzle, laughing, joking with his friends while demolishing them at a game of bridge; just one more hour to look into his face.

To be in God’s presence is good. To be pure in heart God is good. But purity of heart is not to be confused with doing good or avoiding evil. In fact, no impurity is more defiling than self-righteousness. Bonhoeffer suggested that “the pure in heart are those whose hearts are undefiled by their own evil – and by their own virtues too.”⁴ John Calvin would agree. So what pours out of a pure heart? Love.

The pure in heart – love with an unconditional love. It is the love that flows from the heart expecting nothing in return. I have a friend whose child has Down’s syndrome – Adam is not brilliant, but his heart is pure. When he sees someone he knows – he walks up to them, hugs them, never utters a word, then walks away. In his presence, the level of grace and love in the room rises exponentially. Purity of heart is lived with childlike simplicity.

There is a legend about the disciple John; the one whom Jesus loved. In Da Vinci’s fresco of the Lord’s Supper, he got it all wrong! The disciples would not have sat at the table in chairs. They would have reclined around the table on cushions or mats. In the fresco, John, is seated at Jesus’ right. Legend has it that John reclined to the left of Jesus so that his head rested on Jesus’ chest where he could literally hear the heart beat of the Lord – John heard the purest of all hearts.

² Buechner, The Life of Jesus, Weathervane Books, 1974, 9.

³ Howell, 71

⁴ The Cost of Discipleship, 125

Towards the end of John's life, when he was a very old man, his disciples would bring him out on a stretcher to preach. To them his sermons became embarrassingly repetitious. The congregation would gather and the old man would simply say – love, love, love. Wanting to prod him to say more, to be more profound, his younger disciples asked him why he only spoke of love. John replied, because that is all there is.

What is the reward of the pure in heart? What is the reward to those who give unconditional love? They shall see God.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, near the end of his life was asked if he could sum up his theology. Barth had written prodigiously. His systematic theology the Dogmatics alone is over 10,000 pages. His Epistle to the Romans is considered one of the most influential books ever written for the church. Could he sum up all of this in a few words – Barth said, "Yes." Pens at hand, ready to record the theological wisdom gained from years of preaching and study and teaching and pastoral care, the eager students stood ready and Barth said, "The sum of all theology is this; Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

One of my favorite books is The Little Prince. It's a little book; not many pages. I read it for the first time in the fourth grade. I have since re-read it countless times. Each time it gives up gems that I had not noticed before. Among the many wonderful lines in the book, I think my favorite one is this, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

The pure in heart love Jesus. Their desire is to be with him. So how; how can we be near Jesus? Go where Jesus would go. Visit the sick, Jesus will be there. Hold Bible studies for the prisoners, Jesus will be there. Sit with the lonely and forgotten, in nursing homes, Jesus is there. When you have done it to the least, those who cannot repay your gift, you have done it to Jesus – Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Amen.

Stand and sing with me ... Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong, Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, for the Bible tells me so. Amen.