

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 4, March 10, 2013, dedicated to Polly DeVennish and all who show mercy and live with pure hearts, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Blessed Are the Merciful and the Pure in Heart”**

**Matthew 5:7-8; Luke 15:1-2, 12b-32**

**(Part V of VIII in the Sermon Series  
“Blessed Are You!”)**

Having surrendered our poor spirits unto God, having mourned mightily, having humbled ourselves in meekness completely before our God, having hungered and thirsted after justice, we come to blessedness of mercy and purity of heart. “Blessed are the Merciful for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7) and “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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**“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”** (Matthew 5:7) “Mercy” is the fifth blessing Jesus offers on the hillside. This Beatitude is unique. It is reflexive. If you are merciful, the blessing of mercy returns to you. Like a boomerang of blessing, Mercy granted returns as mercy.

Mercy has evaporated from the landscape of our society leaving us dry, crusty, and hard. We have become more permissive as a society but less merciful. It starts at home but it extends far

beyond. When one of our family members come to us in need of mercy (not judgment) have we blessed them mercifully? When we encounter someone in our daily walk with Christ, are we merciful or judgmental?

We know what mercy looks like when we see it because it has become so rare. The other day, I pulled into a parking space at Bob Evans that someone else had lined up for. I wasn't paying attention. Before I could back out and allow her to pull in, she moved on and parked two spots down. When I got out of my car to go into the restaurant and apologize, she was smiling and said, "No problem. You are just fine." I had encountered mercy. I knew it because I have experienced and (and I confess) responded with the opposite in similar situations. It felt great. After holding the door for my new friend, she smiled and blessed me again!

Yesterday, I was honored to a part of the Equality Ohio Summit here in town. Equality Ohio is working to bring justice and equality to LGBTI men, women, and children in the state. Besides being deeply touched by the new executive director, Elyzabeth Holcomb, mentioning the importance of faith, faith leaders and faith communities at least 15 times in her opening 45 minute presentation, one man offered this thought during the plenary. He said, *"I am so grateful that we, as LGBTI persons in a major minority, have a majority of support in our times from mostly straight friends and allies. It humbles me to think of others who stand with us when they have nothing to really gain from their kindness and just behaviors."* Wow! Have you expressed gratitude to God for the people who have stood with you when they had nothing to gain from doing it? Here is where gratitude and mercy embrace!

***Mercy is like the mystery of forgiveness.*** By definition, mercy and forgiveness are unearned, undeserved, and not owned. If you don't experience all three, then it is not the experience of mercy. If you think people have to be merciful or try to earn mercy then you have lost the mystery of mercy and forgiveness. Merciful people act out of their own integrity by being open to the needs of those around them. Mercy given is mercy received – clear and simple. Another way of saying it is - Mercy and forgiveness are the

gospel of Jesus Christ in a nutshell. (Found in Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World*, St. Anthony Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1996, p. 136).

**Our God is a God of mercy and forgiveness.** Thus, this Beatitude means exactly what it says. Those who are merciful, obtain the blessing of mercy in their lives as well.

You don't know mercy until you have really needed it. Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and mystic, once said, "Mercy within mercy, within mercy . . ." Mercy is experienced as if it is collapsing into deeper nets of being enclosed by grace, after grace, after grace. I like Franciscan priest Fr. Richard Rohr's writing on mercy. He says:

*I once saw God's mercy as patient, benevolent tolerance, a kind of grudging forgiveness. But now mercy has become for me God's very self-understanding, a loving allowing, a willing breaking of the rules by the One who made the rules - a wink and a smile, a firm and joyful taking of our hand while we clutch at our sins and gaze at God in desire and disbelief. (Ibid.)*

We pray that the Rule Maker will look with kindness on us when we have been the rule breakers. Granting mercy is always ultimate entry into powerlessness. I say this because once we have been truly merciful, there is no retreat to judgment. Forgiveness can never be a half-way covenant.

If you want to see how the Rule Maker and his son Jesus, look at us, go no further than today's gospel. In Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger son wastes his father's inheritance far from home in the brothels of another place. Living among swine, he finally "comes to realize" (comes to himself) and decides to return, repent and ask for forgiveness from his father. His father sees him far away and runs to embrace him – forgiving even before the son can confess. Dad throws a party. The older, dutiful brother is enraged as he witnesses the grace of his father and his outpouring of love (also dad is now spending big brother's inheritance). But father says to older son, "You are always with me. I love you. But, your brother was lost and is found; was dead and has come back to new life."

From our Heavenly Father we encounter grace upon grace. Mercy upon mercy. Forgiveness upon forgiveness. God's love is both/and not either/or. The embrace of the younger son does not mean the rejection of the older one. We find it hard not to be offended by God's amazing grace toward another. But, we hunger for it when it comes our way – undeserved. As Reinhold Niebuhr has said, *"I pray that my God deals more mercifully than justly with me . . . even though I pray the opposite for my enemy."* In Christ Jesus, we are called to be merciful.

**Look at yourself.** "Look at times you have withheld forgiveness. When you have done, it has served as your final attempt to hold a claim over the one you won't forgive. It's the way we finally hold on to power, to seek the moral high ground over another person. I will hold onto unforgiveness and you will know it just by my coldness, by my not looking over there, by my refusal to smile, or whatever. Oh, we do it so subtly to maintain our sense of superiority. Non-forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control, and diminish another. It is not of God. It is not God's way. God, in Jesus Christ, refuses to use such power." (Ibid., p. 137)

If Jesus is the revelation of what is going on inside of the eternal God (as we believe he is), then we are forced to conclude from this beatitude that God is humble and merciful. The God who can wipe us out, exhibits holy powerlessness by being merciful. Be merciful as God is merciful. Whatever you are hanging onto against whomever you are lording it over, let it go. Surrender your will to God - as one who is meek and humble. Then, in the bountiful mercy of God, move on.

***Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.***  
(Matthew 5:7)

When you have obtained mercy, you are ready to ascend to the sixth beatitude – *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*

This sixth beatitude is a high step indeed. It is a tough one. The air gets thinner as we ascend to the final beatitudes. The word

for “pure” in the Greek is *"Katharoi,"* which is the same as “catharsis” which means "to clean out, to wash out, to cleanse completely." I like Soren Kierkegaard’s definition of purity in his little book *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. We often get distracted trying to go many directions and do many things. Kierkegaard says, *"We were made for just one thing – to love God."* Like a racehorse with blinders on – he says run the race for one thing – to reach God.

Similarly, the “heart” in the Bible is not the cardiovascular pulsating organ which we spend lots of time trying to keep healthy (or not). The heart is your truest self. The heart is the “imagination,” the place inside where we conceive, where we connect, where we dream. The heart is the place where we exercise our freedom, the mechanism that chooses what to do in the evening, who you will marry or date, whether to lie or speak the truth, how to respond in a crisis. The heart is no less than the sphere where we meet God – or avoid meeting God. (drawn from James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p. 68)

So, let’s restate this beatitude as *"Blessed is the person whose motives are entirely cleaned out, washed through and through, because that person will run the race toward God and see the face of God in the end."* Let’s back it up.

Purity and impurity are vastly different qualities in our human condition. Those with impure motives and hearts are easy for you and me to identify. We recognize their overt behaviors, and too often we resemble them all too much. Sometimes those with impurities cast light on the shadows lurking in our own hearts. We look upon them and we certainly see our truths upheld or exposed in the impurities of others. In adulterous relationships, lustful, violent or abusive behaviors, we see those whose hearts are living proof of the mixed and harmful motives of impure hearts. Impurity is much easier to spot and to condemn than purity is to celebrate and embrace!

**So, I ask you, do you know someone who is pure in heart?** Are there those in your life who approach other people with unmixed motives? Rather than going through life asking, "What's in

this for me?" are you one who enters tasks and projects with unblemished motivations? I mean no offense when asking these questions. I ask them of myself. But it seems that as we move through life encountering hardships and hurts, fewer and fewer of us emerge with pure hearts. The new and purely beautiful nature, with which God gifted us at birth, seems to break down little by little throughout life as we are faced with one challenge and another. Eyes that saw only good become jaded and cynical - so much so that they become blind to purity and goodness.

This is where God enters the equation. Having taken steps on the kingdom stairway, we, who are impure of heart, must trust God to heal our blindness and cleanse us so we will see God once again! The pure in heart reflect the face of God to others. They see God because their eyes and their lives are in focus. They are focused on God alone. They are on fire for God.

There are lots of people who talk about God. "God talkers" have plenty of words and they often deliver their lines with passion. But the pure in heart are often those who feel deep love for God! They often do quietly and without fanfare. Their relationship with God is alive and well! They wake up in the morning praising God. They go through the day trying to figure out what God would have them do. They seek no glory. They bring no focus to themselves. We see them because they shine for God. They are never looking for excuses. They show up, they serve, they help others, and they answer the call because they are paying attention. Their motives are unmixed and so they see God! Blessed are you when your motives are unmixed, for you will see God!

I am blessed (we are blessed) by people who fit this description right here at First Church! I see their faces every day and every week and I am blessed! To be pure in heart may be like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day. You see glimpses of sunshine. You see rays of hope. Those who are pure in heart shine in small ways but influence people in great ways.

I end with a story.

Two years ago, I was in the Middle East for sabbatical. In Jerusalem, I spent six hours one day praying in the church of the Holy Sepulcher – the place where Christendom has said Jesus was crucified, removed from the cross and then buried. It is complex and holy place. While there (trying to stay focused on the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ), I met a group of joyful nuns, the Sisters of Charity. This is the order Mother Teresa established. They care not only for the poor on the streets of Calcutta, India, but across the globe, including Jerusalem and the USA. I sat with them and introduced myself.

I started up a conversation with a beautiful young sister who happened to be from Calcutta. I asked if she had known Mother Teresa. Her eyes lit up and she began to talk. *“Mother found me as an orphan on the streets of Calcutta. I was being used as a child prostitute. I was 7 years old. She lifted me up and carried me to the motherhouse. She took me in and she healed me.”* Now my eyes were filled with tears.

*“What was she like?”* I asked. She continued like a beam of sunshine bursting into the darkened Holy Sepulcher, **“She was pure in heart.** *Her face shined like the face of God. I saw one day, when I rose early to do my chores. She was about 80 years old at the time . . . I was about 8 . . . I was supposed to be cleaning the toilets that morning. But there she was, down on her knees scrubbing the toilets at 7:00 am.”*

I knelt beside her and said, *“Mother, you shouldn’t be doing this. It is my job.”* She took my face in her hand (the clean one), and said, *“ ‘My beautiful child, you have suffered enough. The least I can do is clean the toilets for you.’ Her face shined like the sun. I felt like I was looking into the face of God. . . . She had such a pure heart.”*

As I looked in this young sister’s eyes, as she recalled her story from 20 years before, I saw the face of God shining in her and through her to me. The purity of Mother Teresa’s heart was in this sister. The love of God was blasting out of her to me. In that moment, I felt as if I was looking into the face of God.

***“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see the face of God.” Amen.***

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