

Blessed are the Pure in Heart

Fifth in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

April 7, 2019

Psalm 24

¹The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;
²for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.³Who shall
ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴Those
who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is
false, and do not swear deceitfully. ⁵They will receive blessing from
the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. ⁶Such is the
company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

⁷Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. ⁸Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. ⁹Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. ¹⁰Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

I was always a big fan of National Public Radio’s “This I Believe.” The pioneering broadcast journalist, Edward R. Murrow, began these segments in the 1950’s on CBS during the Cold War. “This I Believe” featured personal reflections from both well-known public figures and ordinary people; they were less about religious dogma and more about individual, motivating core values.

Deidre Sullivan is an attorney from Brooklyn who participated in NPR’s “This I Believe” series with a piece entitled, “Always go to the funeral.” She said she learned this from her father growing up having attended the funerals of a few family friends with her parents. When she was sixteen and her fifth grade math teacher died, she did not want to go, but her father insisted saying, “Dee, you’re going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family.” She went unchaperoned, the only kid there, and stammered out, “I’m sorry about all of this” in the receiving line, but for twenty years following she would run into her teacher’s mother who always shared a knowing and thankful *Hello*.

She came to realize that going to the funeral was about respect, about compassion, about letting one’s own life change its rhythm briefly to accommodate the sorrow of another. Over the years, Sullivan became fairly philosophical about her father’s wisdom, saying: “The thing that represents only the inconvenience to me means the world to the other guy. Most days, my real battle has not been good versus evil; it’s hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.”

She goes on, “On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death, and his service was on a Wednesday – midweek. I had been numb for days, when for some reason, during the funeral I turned and looked back at all the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I’ve ever seen was a church at three o’clock on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.”¹

¹ Deidre Sullivan, “This I Believe,” NPR, 8/8/05.

What we have in the gospel story of Mary's anointing of Jesus with a costly perfume is the most human, powerful and humbling thing anyone ever does for Jesus. In a sense, Mary takes us – ahead of time – to the funeral for Jesus. Hers was an act of respect, and compassion; it was about letting her life change its rhythm to accommodate the sorrow of another.

The stench of death was already in the air. Mary's brother Lazarus is sitting at the table that evening. He had died just a week before, and had been called back to life by Jesus. The memory – of their losing their own brother, Mary and Martha's pleading for Jesus to come, Jesus delaying his arrival, the body of Lazarus already placed in the tomb, Jesus himself weeping at the drama of all that grief; and then, his ferocious roar against the powers of death, Jesus crying in a loud voice, "Lazarus come out!"

In that powerful act of bringing Lazarus back to life, Jesus had done what only God can do, which according to the gospel writer John sets into motion the events that will lead to Jesus' crucifixion. Because the number of people believing in Jesus is growing, the religious authorities come to see him as a threat while they try to navigate their own tepid religious faith under the military occupation of Rome.

So Mary's act of honoring Jesus just days after Lazarus was called out of the tomb, was inconvenient to be sure, according to the disciples; A lavish waste, Judas says. But Mary saw in Jesus – something no one else was yet able to see. Which brings us to this Beatitude in our series: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

In the Bible, the heart is not that pulsating organ inside our chests to be strengthened with exercise and a good diet, or to be treated and cared for by a cardiologist. The heart is our truest self. The heart is the part of us that feels, delights, grieves and desires. The heart has imagination, the place inside of us where we make connections, where we dream and have visions, where we exercise our freedom, where we decide, where we reason and respond. The heart is that sphere where we meet God, or avoid meeting God.

So what is a *pure heart*? The biblical word implies being clean, unpolluted, with a hint that what is pure was not always pure, but has been purified, washed out and hung up in the light to dry crystal clean. *The pure heart* would be a heart that has been emptied of what is unclean, and purged of what no longer belongs. United Methodist pastor, James Howell, has written a study guide to the Beatitudes in which he notes that: “it may be helpful to think of purity in two ways. There is a purity that looks like simplicity, focus, single-mindedness; and there is a purity that looks like goodness, cleanness, holiness – and the two are not unrelated.” In a world of distractions, Howell concludes, *purity of heart* is “to will one thing.”²

Howell likens this kind of purity to a racehorse needing blinders to block out the peripheral distractions so that our eyes are on the one goal, straight ahead. Which, in the case of the Beatitudes, is to see God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, which is what Mary alone can see. “Leave her alone,” Jesus says to Judas, “for what she is doing is important.” There will always be some poor soul – who needs human companionship and an outstretched hand; But there will not always be me, Jesus, sitting at the table as a friend among friends.

In the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, Mary says not one word, yet her deliberate action somehow communicates more than she could say, revealing a profound depth of insight into the character of Jesus’ ministry and the sacrifice he was about to make, not far from Bethany, on a hill outside Jerusalem. She demonstrated, for them and for all of us, an extravagant... wasteful... over the top love for the one who would never otherwise have had a proper funeral. If deemed inconvenient by the others, it was nonetheless an act of respect and compassion. It arose from a heart so pure that she could literally see God. Theologian Paul Tillich preached on this text saying, what Mary represents is the ecstatic, impulsive, reckless element in our relationship with God. The disciples, on that day, represent the reasonable element in our relation to God.³

² James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p.68.

³ Don Affleck, “No Flowers by Request,” Cox Best Sermons # 7. , p. 220.

In our devotion to God, there is always the reasonable element – the proportional giving, the allotment of time set aside for worship and service, the commitment to get the children to church school, the requisite volunteer hours to feel good about our discipleship; all the rhythms of living the gospel, within reason. But – from time to time – our faith is enriched if we give into those ecstatic, impulsive, reckless elements in our life with God. The ones that might otherwise be deemed inconvenient, wasteful even.

Dropping everything to attend to a friend in grief; choosing a mission trip to help others over a fun vacation; giving more than you ever thought practical to some good cause; wasting your time to sit with someone when there is not much helpful to say but your mere presence means the world; changing your plans in order to do something good rather than doing nothing. What Mary did for Jesus was inconvenient, a waste, extravagant, over the top... anointing Jesus for burial ahead of time; but what she does for us is show us how such reckless acts of devotion arising from the heart help us to see God.

Preaching professor and New Testament scholar, Tom Long, tells a story about returning to preach at a church where, long before, he had served as a student pastor while in seminary. After the service he struck up a conversation with a woman he had not seen in a long time, whose father had a been a leading Elder in the church when Tom was a student. “How’s your dad?” he asked her. “I remember him as one of my favorite people.” “I lost my dad last summer,” she said sadly; “but he lived a long and good life.” Then she told Tom this story about her father’s dying: “In many ways he died a peaceful death. The last few moments of his life were amazing. My sister, brother and I were with him when he died. He had a stroke a few days before and lost his speech. You can imagine how hard that was for my father.” Tom nodded, “Yes, he loved to talk and loved to tell a good story.”

She went on, “About an hour before he died, he began a hard struggle, using his last bit of energy trying to speak. He seemed to have something he

wanted to communicate. It was terribly frustrating for him and painful to watch. Finally, he pointed to my brother and motioned toward the sink in his room. My sister said, “He wants some water,” and my brother went to the sink and poured a glass. He brought it to my father, but Dad refused it and made a gesture toward my brother as if to say, “No, you drink it.” My brother hesitated for a moment and then took a sip from the glass. My father then motioned with his hand as if to say, “Pass it to your sister.” My brother handed me the glass, and my father repeated the gesture that I pass it on to my sister.” It was then that it dawned on my sister who said, “He’s serving communion.”⁴

In his last hour, their Presbyterian father and church Elder was serving his children communion. Through his gestures, like Mary and without a word, their father was communicating that this was no ordinary hospital room, anymore than that dinner at Bethany was just an ordinary meal. Those spaces had become a sanctuary; a sign that this was no ordinary dying, but a sacred and faithful death. The father’s death became a Eucharistic meal, a sacrament of thanksgiving, celebrating “the death of the Lord until he comes.”

Mary’s anointing too – became an ecstatic, impulsive, extravagant, inconvenient proclamation of “the death of the Lord until he comes in glory.”

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

AMEN.

⁴ Tom Long, “Gospel Sound Track,” *Christian Century’s* lectionary commentary, Living the Word, 3/14/01.