

"Heart and Sight"

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Luke 11: 33-36 and Matthew 5: 1-16

"Blessed are the pure in heart..." Wait, what? Pure? Unblemished?

Without sin? If the only people who see God are completely pure of heart, then there won't be anyone who ever sees God. Because whether we like it or not, even the best among us are not completely pure. So was Jesus saying no one shall see God? In a word, no. That would be to ignore everything else Jesus has to say about redemption, salvation, love, mercy, grace...you name it! So what does he mean? Who is included in this Beatitude? I believe that the best reading of this Beatitude isn't about perfection, but about getting our "heart in the right place" and seeing with the clearest eyes possible, realizing that our heart and our sight are connected. Let me explain...

"Consider the saying, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' So is God. All we need to do is keep the lens clean. If your heart is cold, your vision is distorted. (Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, p138)" We all know cold-hearted people. And it's not too hard of a stretch to consider that those with cold hearts have distorted vision. But with Jesus, it's not about what

the other person does, it's about considering our own actions as individuals, but more importantly, as a community.

"Perhaps you don't like someone; you want to hurt her because she hurt you." Ever done that? We call it revenge and it has a variety of forms. Someone said something to me once that hurt me, and now I'm never going to forget it. We just don't realize that our harboring ill-will about someone hurts us at least as much -- if not more -- than the person we dislike. Jesus consistently challenges us to check our feelings, and to consider our actions, and he does call us to a different kind of living. No, not a perfect heart, or that we just take whatever is doled out by someone. But at the same time, to consider if we have in us "coldness and unforgiveness or the desire to do violence verbally, or just to avert your loving gaze so that another person will feel your rejection." Father Richard Rohr tells us that when we do that, "we will not be able to see clearly. The heart is not pure. (p138)"

In our Luke scripture, Jesus says, "The lamp of your body is your eye. When your eye is clear, your whole body, too, is filled with light; but when it is diseased your body, too, will be darkened" (Luke 11:34). "What you always see in people who love God and themselves is the ability to make eye contact." People who

don't like themselves have trouble making eye contact. We often avert eye contact from someone with whom we are angry. What do our eyes say about the condition of our heart? Are our eyes filled with love, grace, mercy, peace, wholeness, forgiveness...? Or, are they turned away, looking down, are they filled with contempt for ourselves or someone else?

Richard continues, "In my work as a jail chaplain, I've found it's the hardest thing to get the inmates to look at me eyeball to eyeball. They always put their heads down. There seems to be a terrible sense of failure and inferiority. You want to hold up their heads sometimes and say, 'Look at me. Don't you know you're a son of God, a beloved daughter?' But they close their eyelids as if to say, 'Just don't look in here.' There's too much power in the eye, too much power given and received...Truth comes through the eyes: It's very hard to lie with your eyes. (p139)"

What do your eyes say? Do they convey love, contempt, mercy, revenge,...? Is it the same for most, or all people? I see a lot of Facebook memes about dogs and cats, especially dogs and how you can see the purity of their heart in their eyes. I think it's true. I also think it could be true for humans. Our eyes are our billboards for what is in our heart. Sure, sometimes we're dealing with illness or

allergies, or something like that which makes our eyes not exactly look the way we want to. But have you ever noticed that you can see through red or enflamed eyes and still peer into the soul of someone?

Like the last Beatitude we did together, this one could be reversed as well. "Blessed are those who see God (or who see like God does), for they shall be pure in heart." We won't always get it right, but what if we were conscious of what our eyes convey? What if we paid more attention to what someone else's eyes might say? Maybe they are hurting and they don't need us to ask why they are hurting, but they need to hear from us, "I care about you. I hope things are okay." Or something like that... Sometimes in our effort to care, we go too far asking all the details. They aren't the relevant thing. What is relevant is when we someone and their eyes tell us something's up, maybe we could just find a gentle way to remind them, "You matter."

There are several stories in which the Bible tells us that Jesus looked into someone's eyes and every time he announced to them grace. There are too many people looking down these days...or looking away...or just not looking at all. This isn't about whether or not they have eyesight...no, it's about how they feel inside and they avoid others. Usually that just makes things worse.

In short, Jesus calls us to purity of heart in this scripture. Don't get all caught up in whether you are perfectly pure or not, because that's not the point. Instead, Jesus calls us to purity of heart with the promise that correct seeing will follow, but in other places he also says the opposite is true: pure seeing will give us bright hearts. Either way, sometimes we need to do a little work either on our vision, or on the condition of our hearts. When we do, everyone wins.

We live in a culture that can so often be heartless, and at the same time refuse to see the suffering of another. I'm quite sure those things are connected. We cannot fix everyone's eyesight, nor can we fix the condition of everyone's heart. But perhaps we can work on the one person we have some control over. We can work on the one community that we have some say in, be it our family, our neighborhood, or even our church. We can be mindful of how we look at people here (or don't) and what it conveys about the heart of our church. And we can continue to work to purify our church's heart so that we will also see better.

"Happy are people who have pure hearts, for they shall see God." "Happy are those who look with God's eyes at the world, but they shall have pure hearts."

Amen.