Sunday, January 28, 1990
PEOPLE WHO SEE GOD
Matthew 5:1-12

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

The words from the Gospel of Matthew that you have just heard from the Bible are commonly known as the "Beatitudes." They are the introduction to the collection of the teachings of Jesus usually referred to as the Sermon on the Mount.

But what is a "beatitude?" A beatitude is a blessing or announcement of God's favor. A beatitude conveys God's favorable behavior toward those addressed. "Blessed" or "favored of God are those who" conveys the understanding that such favor is both present and future.

A beatitude is not an exhortation that says "we ought to be poor in spirit," or that "we should be meek," or that "we must hunger and thirst for righteousness." Strange as it seems, it is more difficult to hear and receive a blessing than to attempt to achieve one.

It is significant that the beatitudes appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount — before a single instruction is given, before there has been time for obedience or disobedience. If the blessings were only for the deserving, very likely they would be stated at the end of the sermon. But appearing at the beginning, they say that God's favor, God's grace, precedes all our endeavors. Sometimes we are so anxious to rush to the Sermon on the Mount's moral and ethical instructions that we overlook the initial word that God's blessing is the context for all our behavior and relationships.

One other point needs to be stressed before we look at one of the beatitudes in more depth. Notice especially that God's favor or blessing is granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind: the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, those hungering for justice, the pure in heart, the makers of peace, those mistreated for the cause of justice. What a reversal of values and fortunes!

Do you have a favorite among these beatitudes? I think I do, but I'm not quite sure why. My favorite is: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

No doubt you've met some individuals who are "pure in heart." I know I have. Maybe it's my favorite because pure of anything is a rare experience in our contaminated world.

Remember the Ivory Soap commercials that assured us that it was 99 and 44/100 percent pure? According to my mathematics, that leaves only 56/100 percent impure. I looked at a bar of Ivory Soap the other day to see if anything had changed, and there it was printed right on the wrapper, 99 and 44/100 percent pure. Did you ever wonder what that little bit of impurity is in Ivory Soap? Is it impossible to make it 100% pure?

We are told that much of the earth's supply of water is no longer as pure as it used to be. Now it is contaminated with chemical wastes. Our air — much of it is more polluted than in the past. More and more, we are concerned about what to do with all the garbage we human beings create so that we can limit what it will contaminate. Purity is a problem.

Purity. What was Jesus talking about when he said, "Blessed are the pure in heart?"

First of all, to be pure in heart does not mean that one is morally perfect, is without sin, or never makes a mistake. Nor does it mean one thinks only pure thoughts and obeys all the rules all the time without question.

Furthermore, being pure in heart does not mean that one is naive, the kind of person who can be easily fooled and never sees evil at work in the world. In fact, the pure in heart are more able to distinguish between good and evil than those who are not pure in heart.

Those who are pure in heart do not gloss over evil, tragedy, and suffering as if they did not exist. Rather, the pure in heart are able to see beyond such things. When Helen Keller was able to say about her blindness and deafness, “I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work, and my God,” that is being able to transcend suffering and tragedy. That is being pure in heart.

The Bible says, “And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.” In the thick darkness: what a place to find God. The pure in heart are those who have enough understanding and depth to find and see God even in thick darkness.

Secondly, people who are pure in heart are able to see the truth more clearly than most of us. They are also those who actively seek the truth. They are aware that they do not have all the truth. To be pure in heart means to always be open to new truth which is forever coming our way. Thus, those who are pure in heart are never afraid to examine their prejudices, preconceptions, biases, and assumptions. On the other hand, those among us who think we know it all have closed minds and cannot be pure in heart.

Thirdly, to be pure in heart means that one does not hang onto hate or resentment. We all feel hate and resentment at times, but holding onto such feelings, cultivating them, tending them like plants in a garden so that the feelings of hate and resentment continue to grow and prosper, is another matter.

Have you noticed that some people seem to need enemies in order to justify themselves? Unless they can see themselves as over against something or other, they do not feel secure. They define themselves by what they are against rather than what they are for.

For example, most of us, I believe, are truly joyful that the so-called Cold War seems to be winding down. Conceiving of a world without the Cold War, however, can be difficult, especially it seems for some politicians. Congressman Bob Forehead, of Mark Alan Stamaty’s comic strip “Washingtoon,” has had such trouble adjusting to this new situation that a few weeks ago his wife, Ginger, took him to see a “perestroichiatrist,” who told her, “The fading of the Cold War has left a terrible void inside your husband. He’ll need a lot of care until he finds a new enemy.”

On the other hand, the individuals Jesus described as being “pure of heart” do not need a lot of care until they find a new enemy. They do not need any kind of enemies at all to help them define their existence.

Parenthetically, I think we need some new metaphors instead of always talking in terms of a “war.” We not only have the Cold War, but now the “War on Drugs,” and before that, the “War on Poverty.” We’re always declaring “war” on something. Why do we need to describe so many things in terms of conflict and battle?

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” The pure in heart do not seek revenge, do not rejoice at wrong, but are kind, loving, forgiving, and gentle people.

The pure in heart do not try to mislead others. They are not devious and underhanded. Their motives are transparent, and they are open and honest and straightforward in their approach. The pure in heart are people you can trust with anything. The pure in heart are people who are already blessed and don’t know it.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Notice especially the promise— “they shall see God.” The pure in heart are people who see God.

In what ways do the pure in heart see God? They see God where many others miss God. There are examples of this throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and in our everyday life now.

The pure in heart — the shepherds — saw God in a manger on the first Christmas. Others saw nothing but a baby in a feed box. The pure in heart saw God in Jesus riding on that donkey into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. The pure in heart saw God on a cross on Good Friday. Incredible! Most people saw only a troublemaker being put to death and for good reason.

We usually think of seeing God only in the lovely things of life — in a sunset, or on a mountain top, or on a beautiful sunny warm day. We habitually talk of God in terms of love, beauty, and goodness, so much so that when we face a situation in our personal experience or in the world at large where love, beauty, and goodness seem singularly absent, we lose all sense of God. “Where is God?” we ask.

Not so for the pure in heart. Because of their purity of heart, they see God in many seemingly unlikely people, places, and events. In the Old Testament, in the depths of a depression, Moses saw God in a burning bush. Elijah experienced God while hiding in a cave at the lowest point of his life. Job, in the midst of his tragedies, proclaimed, “I have already mentioned the crucifixion of Jesus. Who casually looking on would have thought God there?”

The pure in heart can see God in a broken-down drunk, in an inmate in prison, in a drug addict, in a juvenile delinquent, in a senile person in a nursing home, in the person who has AIDS, in the leper, in the heretic, in the secular humanist, in the fundamentalist, in the extreme right-wing Republican, in the far-to-the-left-wing Democrat, and in all the many other people we like to classify as untouchable or unworthy. Miracle of miracles, the pure in heart can even see God in you and me!

Jesus treated individuals the way he did because he saw God in them. He saw God in the woman about to be stoned to death as a result of being caught in adultery. He saw God in those who were about to throw the stones. He saw God in Zacchaeus. He saw God in the lonely widow. Once you begin to see God in other people, you begin to act differently toward them, and they also begin to act differently.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” They see God at work in the movements for justice and peace.

The pure in heart are in many ways like little children. That’s why Jesus told his followers that unless we become like little children, we cannot see the kingdom of God. The wonder of little

children is that they have so few preconceptions and prejudices until they pick them up from us. Until then, they can see much that is around them that we miss. Children see God almost everywhere.

But there's hope for all of us. No matter what our age, we can be pure in heart and see God. For some of us, it will mean that we have to slow down at times. I'm always amazed at the things I see when I walk through a neighborhood which I have missed the many times I have driven through the same area. So many of us race through life, not really seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling, or hearing.

Slow down, and you will begin to see God in some unlikely places and persons. Try this: the next time you see a person that repels you, remind yourself that God is in that human being as much as God is in you. The more you begin to see God in people, the more you will find yourself becoming pure in heart.

Haven't you known people who called forth the best in you? That person saw something in you that you had forgotten about or didn't realize was there. That's what every good teacher does. The pure in heart see things we do not see. Jesus did this with many of the people with whom he came in contact.

He called forth the best that was in them, that which was hidden and covered up.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." This vision of God, which the pure in heart have, goes far beyond anything we can imagine. It means being able to watch the evening news night after night on television without being overwhelmed. It means being able to read the daily newspaper without being overcome with despair.

The reason the pure in heart can carry on is because, in this whole crazy and often mixed-up world, they get a glimpse of God working here and there, and it keeps them going.

A young social worker once asked an old priest, "What's your idea of a blasphemous remark?" The old man nodded, accepting the question, and then sat down and thought about his answer for a long time. Finally, he looked at the young social worker and answered the question like this: "How about, 'too good to be true?' That's a blasphemous remark, because what is there that can be too good to be true? Are truth and goodness opposites?"

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