

Blessed are the Pure of Heart



"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8)

I have preached many sermons on the theme of Jesus challenging the purity codes of his own religion. That is, he challenged dietary laws, the rituals of hand-washing, the rules around touching others who were unclean, who you could eat with, etc. These were all externalized expressions of a deeper longing for purity. And Jesus said that they missed the point, which was a pure heart, an internal purity. When this exclusive focus on externals had the effect of masking the impure condition of the heart, Jesus called it out.

But I think that to the extent liberal Christians dismissed the category of purity/impurity as it relates to the spiritual journey we excluded a critical phenomenological religious sensibility: the loss of a pure heart is one of the most profound losses we can experience. This is because impurity, as it relates to the heart, cuts us off from our natural capacity to "see" God, as the beatitudes put it. Conversely, when our hearts are cleansed, this spiritual vision comes back on line.

I recently experienced, in my body, mind, and soul, the deep grief of my heart being stained by trauma in my life. Another way of saying this is that I lost my innocence. Not innocence as naivete, but rather innocence as the experience of being

able to deeply trust that the universe is good, nourishing, and trustworthy. This left a stain on my soul. I could no longer relax and be carried by life. I developed a certain vigilance. I needed to be wary, always one eye out for danger. I was in danger of being taken from, fed on when I should have been nourished. Disgust enters the picture, a deep sense that something is very, very wrong. And with this, a profound, if unconscious sadness. This sadness would be buried because as a child it was too overwhelming to integrate. But the vigilance, the grief, and the sadness would operate from the unconscious in subtle and not so subtle ways. You might call this an existential fall from grace.

But it is not inevitable. In truth, it should not happen to any of us. But it happens to the vast majority of us. And what is taken from us, along with the loss of innocence is our capacity to see God.

The work of the spiritual journey is primarily regaining this lost purity. This requires much grief – grief as spiritual practice. It demands a facing of the disgust, and an expulsion of the poison that has lodged itself at a cellular level. It is literally nauseating to face this. The recovering of our lost purity demands that we bring to light all the darkness, all the darkness, all the trauma, all the deep disappointment that we were not loved unconditionally, that in truth we were taken from. This being taken from issues in the felt sense that life is too much for us to bear, we carry too much responsibility, because we did when we didn't know what to do with it.

This is shadow work, and it is virtually absent in the mainline, liberal Christianity as a practice. This is why there is typically so much conflict and so much wasted energy on interpersonal issues. The community becomes a cauldron of shadows unconsciously acting out pain, disappointment, failures of love. When trauma is not integrated consciously, we end up with drama, dramas that are re-enacted again and

again. Nothing new actually happens. The furniture of our lives may change, but it is the same drama.

When I think of the misery that ISIS is enacting upon the world in the name of religious purity I get very sad. These young men are being ideologically brainwashed to believe that everybody else who does not believe as they believe are impure. As such, these unwashed deserve to die as divine punishment for impurity. But this is the kind of purity that Jesus warned against. Their violence is their own unconscious grief at having lost their impurity. But they cannot own it, or rather, they choose not to own it because it is too painful. It becomes their shadow, and it is projected onto the rest of the world. We – the others – become the great unwashed, deserving of death. This is religious purity that is disconnected from love, precisely because to feel deep love is impossible without feeling the loss of innocence, all the ways that love has failed them in the past, and then consciously reintegrating this suffering into our lives.

The pure of heart see God, because, cleansed of the violence and the poison that was enacted against them, they feel love—for themselves and for others. This directly felt experience of love is the feeling of being one with all, including God. And when the pure of heart look out at the world, it is God looking through their eyes, and they feel it. This is not theology. This is the actual experience of recovered innocence, of a heart that is wide-open, surrendered in trust to life and to Spirit, in deep reverence for all that is arising moment by moment. It is the direct experience of beauty, because God is beauty itself. It is the experience of weeping in the presence of such beauty, and of a deep longing to somehow help all those who are suffering to know how loved they are, and that is okay, it's okay just to be your true self, before the trauma stole their vision.

I feel like the church should stop everything else and simply focus on helping people to find their pure heart. We devote

massive resources to almost everything, but this one thing could be a game changer. It could give the church back its fundamental footing, the ground from which all else arises, and that is the capacity to see God.