

Be Attitudes: “Be Pure” Matthew 5:8 – June 27, 2010

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

Maybe Curly read the Bible. You remember Curly, the tough-as-nails trail boss in the movie, “City Slickers.” It is one of the most popular comedy films of the past twenty years. Its re-runs continue to be seen almost weekly on television. Mitch, the character played by Billy Crystal, is going through his mid-life crisis. He joins with two friends, also in crisis, and other city slicker novice cowboys, to help drive a herd to Colorado. Curly, the Trail Boss, played by Jack Palance, proves to be not only tough but wise. He tells Mitch that the secret to life is finding and focusing on “one thing.” “But what is that ‘one thing’?” Mitch asks. But that was for Mitch to find out.

Maybe Curly’s wisdom came because he spent his lonely nights on the range, after he had sung the cows to sleep, reading the Sermon on the Mount. Or maybe he was a fan of the nineteenth century Danish existential philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Cowboys can surprise you! Kierkegaard wrote a famous book on this beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount entitled Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing. Sounds like Soren and Curly agree with Jesus!

The word for “pure” from this sixth beatitude means clean, clear, simple, single, without alloy. Gold that has been highly refined is called “pure.” Glass that has no flaws and water that is clean are called “pure.” It has strong ritualistic and legalistic meanings in the Old Testament. But Jesus’ use of purity goes beyond having clean hands and clean food. Jesus seems to have Psalm 24 in mind when he gives this beatitude: *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. . . Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.* (vv. 3-4, 6)

Blessed are those who will one thing. Blessed are those who are single-minded, clear and simple in their approach to God. Blessed are those who are unambiguous. Blessed are the non-duplicitous. Blessed are persons of integrity. Blessed are the utterly sincere, for they shall see God!

The longing to see, to experience the Holy One is certainly one of the common denominators of most of the world’s religions. The eastern holy man rejects comfort and community to live a disciplined, monastic life with the hopes of one day seeing God. Some ancient Greek philosophers sought to free themselves from their passions so that they might view the Divine. Moses longed to see God, but was placed in the cleft of the rock and only allowed to see the hind parts of God. When Philip said, *Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied* (John 14:8) he was echoing this desire. The Pharisees focused on ritualistic cleansing with the hopes that with clean hands they would encounter the Holy One.

Recently I read the biography of Dr. Solon B. Cousins, who served as our pastor from 1921 through 1937. He began to teach Bible classes at the University of Richmond in the thirties. In 1937, he resigned as our pastor to serve as the head of U of R’s Religion Department there for twenty-two years. He kept his membership at our church until his death in 1971 – almost fifty years! He was beloved by the U of R students and faculty, and served twenty-six interim pastorates in the Richmond area.

I wish I could have known Dr. Cousins. He was a remarkable person. Though he had no seminary or other graduate school degree in theology, he was an excellent scholar and built a strong Religion Department. He read voraciously and worked slavishly. He had remarkable discipline. He was renowned for his pastoral touch, his humor and his tender love for his wife and son and others. His influence was huge. Hundreds of ministers turned to him for advice and encouragement.

Dr. Cousins’ biographer, Joseph Nettles, served on the U of R faculty with Dr. Cousins for twenty-three years and remained a close friend until Dr. Cousins’ death. Nettles knew Dr. Cousins as well as anyone outside Cousins’ family. Nettles said Dr. Cousins could best be described as a mystic. He certainly was not a theological conservative, Nettles says. And, although Dr. Cousins’ favorite theologian was Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known American theological liberal of his day, Nettles says Dr. Cousins could not be classified as a liberal. He was a mystic, a man of profound personal spirituality. He prayed, journaled, studied the scripture and worshipped with deep devotion and discipline. He had the glow about him of one who had been in the presence of the Holy One, of one who had come close to seeing God, of one who had experienced the blessing of this sixth beatitude.

This is how Dr. Cousins, the blessed, pure hearted one, is remembered by his long-time friend and biographer: “Certainly he missed perfection by ‘a long sea mile’ (an expression [Dr. Cousins often used], but there are many, including the writer of this chronicle, who consider him the most nearly perfect man they ever knew.”

Dr. Spence in his funeral eulogy probably did the best job of anyone summarizing Dr. Cousins’ full and influential life and ministry: “Solon Cousins,” Dr. Spence said, “was the most uncomplicated man I have ever known. He believed by faith that Jesus Christ was Lord. Every movement he made came from the wellspring of that belief.”

The mystic, Solon B. Cousins, pure in heart, saw and continues to see God. For blessed are the uncomplicated people who simply believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and make their every movement come from that wellspring! For the secret of life – the key to happiness – is willing that one thing!

In 1937, as he was transitioning from our pastorate to full-time teaching, Dr. Cousins preached the Annual Sermon at the Southern Baptist Convention. This was quite an honor – he was the only Virginian to do that for more than a hundred years. It was a remarkable and renowned sermon on the Christian life as a journey with Jesus. Dr. Cousins used the pure-hearted image of Jesus setting his face to journey toward Jerusalem as the central distinctive of our Savior.

Let me quote this mystic’s sermon about his Savior’s perfect model of flint-faced pure-heartedness: “The spot where Jesus took His first step away from Galilee toward Jerusalem is one of the turning points in the history of mankind. For a few miles on the journey Confucius, Buddha, [Mohammed] and the prophets and seers can walk comfortably in His company. But not now. With His face steadfastly set toward His Cross, that is the difference between Jesus and the other

teachers, between reformers and saviors, between saviors and The Savior, between a code of ethics and the religion of redemption.”

Blessed are the pure in heart – those who set their face like a mystic to journey toward the cross of Jesus – for they will see God! For they will experience The Savior and his religion of redemption! For they will find the one thing that is the secret to life!

E. Stanley Jones was a renowned Methodist missionary to India. While he was visiting the famous spiritual leader of India, Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian holy man came eight hundred miles to ask Gandhi two questions: How can I get rid of sin, and how can I see God? Having asked Gandhi, the holy man came to ask Jones the same questions.

Jones said: “Before I answer you, would you mind telling me what Gandhi told you?” “No, I don’t mind telling you,” he answered. “He told me to sit down in one place and not roam about as we holy men do, but stay in one place till I had conquered my senses and my passions and worn them out, then I might find release.” “Was there no offer of immediate relief?” Jones asked. “Oh, no,” was the reply. “He said it would take a long, long time.” And then he turned to Jones and said: “Now what do you say?”

And this radiant missionary told him what had happened to him. He said: “My yearning was exactly your yearning. I needed to know how to get rid of sin, and I needed to know God. But I did not stay in one place till I had worn out my passions; I simply turned over a bankrupt soul to Jesus Christ, and, lo, as I gave my all He gave me His all. It did not take ages, it took surrender. It did not take time, it took me.”

Curly, or Kierkegaard or Cousins could not have said it any better. But Jesus, the one and only who perfectly and pure-heartedly did the will of the Father, said it the best: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*