

How Can True-Hearted Living Purify Us?

Beloved friends, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how can true-hearted living purify us? With deep gratitude, we have gathered to worship God on this late summer morning in our long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. We are together via livestream and here with this land which has been in relationship with people for millennia before us. As we move into this time of wondering, let's first pause to pray.

God of all, we pause for this hour to be reminded of your steady presence. We long to be comforted and challenged by your love. Open and embolden our hearts and minds, that we might – with true hearts – more closely attune our living to your way of Love. Amen.

Friends, this was one of THOSE weeks as a preacher – a time when I encountered the question that the scriptures had kindled in me a few weeks ago and thought, *“Run! Run away, Clare! Who wants to think about purification? Think up something less heavy to explore with the congregation on this Labor Day weekend.”* That was the voice of fear. The voice of Love invited me to stay, saying, *“We’ve got this. Maybe we’ll be surprised by how something heavy can shift when we approach it with care.”* And so I stayed. And now the Psalmist, Jesus, the author of the letter of James, and I invite you into a conversation about how true-hearted living can purify us.

Let's wonder for a moment about purity. Let's draw out some associations we have with the word “pure.” I invite you to close your eyes for an extended moment if you're comfortable doing so. When I say the following, see what comes to mind as you fill in the blank at the end of the sentence.

“I am grateful for pure ____.” Or: “Life is good, in part because of pure ____.” I welcome you to open your eyes again if you wish. Would anyone care to share aloud what it is that you appreciate encountering in pure condition? [*water, air, love*]

Now, per what came to mind for you, what does “pure’ mean? Would anyone care to share aloud what pure means to you? [*unspoiled*]

As I considered how to approach that to which the Holy Spirit seemed to be leading me, I looked up the definition of the word “purify.” It essentially means “to cleanse by filtering out harmful elements.” At first brush, that definition feels kind of harsh and sterile. But it didn’t take me long to recognize the Spirit at work in the concept of purification. When I started free associating with the word “pure,” I soon thought of PureMoist – a contact lens disinfectant solution. Please show me with a nod of your head if you’ve ever worn contact lenses or been close enough to a contact lens wearer to know the discomfort of these squinty-eyed words: “Ugh. There’s something bothering my contact!” Such relief comes with removing the lens from the eye, giving it a squirt of solution to cleanse it of the unwanted speck (be it dirt, fuzz, or eyelash), and then reinserting it to enjoy uncompromised, unspoiled vision. God’s Love purifies our hearts by cleansing them of what blurs or mucks them up.

Let’s dive into our three scripture readings for today, inviting them to inspire us (one at a time and each in their own way) to the sort of true-hearted living that can purify us (that is, cleanse us and present our whole, bare selves for participation in community. We begin with the lyrics of the Psalmist in Psalm 15. We are familiar with the story of Moses receiving from God the ten commandments – ten guiding rules for living out the greatest commandment to love God, self, and other.

Let's experiment with reading this Psalm as though the writer has been inspired by their own fresh insight into four key ways to align our living with the faith that we dwell within the presence of a loving God. We heard, *"Who has the right to enter your tent, God, or to live on your holy mountain?"* In other words, how can we stay anchored in your way of Love, God?

The Psalmist's first way of dwelling within God's purifying presence is this: *"Those who conduct themselves with integrity and work for justice, who speak the truth from their heart..."* This verse inspired my homing in on the notion of 'true-hearted living.' At the end of each day, how might you answer this question: **Did I live with integrity today – doing justice and speaking truth?**

The Psalmist's second way of dwelling within God's purifying presence is this: *"[those who] do not use their tongues for slander, who do not wrong their neighbors and cast no discredit on their friends..."* At the end of each day, how might you answer this question: **Did I exercise wisdom with my speech, lifting others up more often than putting them down (whether directly or in their absence)?**

The Psalmist's third way of dwelling within God's purifying presence is this: *"[those] who look with contempt on the corrupt but honor those who revere God, who always keep their promises even when it hurts..."* At the end of each day, how might you answer this question: **Did I more often chase after fleeting power and control or more often find contentment in being trustworthy?**

And the Psalmist's fourth way of dwelling within God's purifying presence is stated like this: *"[those] who don't demand interest on loans and cannot be bribed to exploit the innocent."*

At the end of each day, how might you answer this question: **Did I take unkind advantage or disregard anyone today or did I stay alert to doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly?**

The Psalmist ends this poem about dwelling in God's purifying presence through ways of integrity, wisdom, contentment, and kindness with these words of encouragement: *"If people do these things, nothing can ever shake them."* If we do not feel at peace with our responses to those end-of-each-day questions, faith reminds us that we can try again tomorrow. Reviewing our own behavior at the end of a day is one avenue toward purification – cleansing and presenting our whole, bare selves for participation in community.

Let's turn now to Jesus' thoughts on purity. When the Pharisees (the guardians of Jewish ritual tradition) and other religious scholars confronted Jesus on his disciples' publicly displayed lack of discipline in regard to purity codes, we hear this: *"Jesus answered, 'How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites when he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless; the doctrines they teach are only human precepts.'"* Then, confronting them on their choice to focus on the minutia of his disciples' purity habits, Jesus said, *"You disregard God's commandments and cling to human traditions."* Jesus is calling his elders to task then and calls us to task today. **Jesus seems to wonder this: On a given day, do we find more pride and joy in follow human rules (however honorable the rules may be) or do we find more pride and joy in loving God, ourselves and others?**

We continue to listen in as Jesus revs up and delivers his thesis on purity:

“Jesus summoned the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand. Nothing that enters us from the outside makes us impure; it is what comes out of us that makes us impure. If you have ears to hear, then listen... For it is from within – from our hearts – that evil intentions emerge: promiscuity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, obscenity, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evils come from within and make us impure.’” **Jesus seems to wonder this: On a given day, do we more often aim to shelter ourselves from the influences of those who see the world differently than we do... or do we more often take the other in (exactly as they share themselves with us) and then trust God to process the experiences with us inside our heart?** If we lean toward the latter (holding ourselves open to the other), people might tend to experience us emitting purified love as opposed to defensiveness or harmful fear (the fruit of a blurred or mucked up heart).

Finally, let’s hear again this morning’s excerpt from the letter of James to early followers of Jesus and to us. I often find myself leaning humanist in my approach to our Christian faith. Yet, I love the sense of God as divine mystery emerging from James’ opening words. We heard, *“Every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above, descending from the Creator of the heavenly luminaries, who cannot change and is never in shadow. God willingly gave birth to us with a word spoken in truth, so that we may be, as it were, the first fruits of God’s creatures.”* James affirms that our deepest birthright is our origin in the fathomless, mysterious Love we call God. There is something quite pure about mystery. Because we can’t fully understand the nature of God, we dwell closest to God when we hold a posture of wonder and awe.

James continued: *“Remember this, my dear sisters and brothers: **be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger.***

*So do away with all your filth and the last vestiges of wickedness in you. **Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you,** because it has power to save you.”* Friends, purification of our hearts takes time – slowness.

James continued: *“But act on this word – because if all you do is listen to it, you’re deceiving yourselves. Those who listen to God’s word but don’t put it into practice are like those who look in mirrors at their own faces; they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like. But those who **look steadily** at the perfect law of freedom and make it their habit – not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice – will be blessed in all that they do.”* Friends, here they are saying that purification of our hearts takes not only time slowed down but also deep focus (looking steadily).

And finally, James closes with these words: *“If those who don’t control their tongues imagine that they are devout, they’re deceiving themselves and their worship is pointless. Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of our Abba God, is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by this world.”*

Friends, a purified heart empowers intentional loving action developed over time, slowly and with focus. May we trust that the Love of God can purify us such that all of our labor might be ever more true-hearted. God’s Love is counting on us. Amen.

September 1, 2024
St. Croix United Church @ People’s Park
Psalm 15; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23; James 1:17-27