**Blessed are the pure in heart, the authentic**

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*Scripture: Matt. 5:8; John 8:1-11*

*Hymns: HWB 538, 545, StS 94*

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. - Matt. 5:8

Well, it’s happened again. A few weeks ago, I had the unenviable task of unpacking what the word “meek” might mean for us today, and now I’ve got another beatitude on my hands that doesn’t immediately lend itself to our contemporary imaginations: the pure in heart. Again, it’s not really a compliment – “wow, he or she is so pure in heart!” It sounds like something out of the Victorian era, when various kinds of purity were all the rage – I’m thinking harmful notions like racial purity and a repressive form of sexual purity. Let’s face it, there aren’t a lot of positive associations nowadays with purity. So what could this beatitude mean for us?

Alternate translations of this beatitude put it this way:

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” - *The Message*

“Blessed are those who refuse to be corrupted; for they shall not be afraid to come face to face with God.” – Janet Morley

And from Brian Walsh, who writes “corrections” to beatitudes:

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

*Blessed are those with a solid public image  
and a well-hidden agenda;  
they are never exposed and see people  
in a way that suits their purposes.*” - Brian Walsh[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, purity of heart could also mean an inner rightness, or a refusal to be corrupted, the opposite of hypocritical. The word that came to mind for me was authenticity or integrity – an honesty about one’s intentions, the living out of one’s convictions without manipulation or a hidden agenda. So, perhaps this beatitude could read: happy are those who live and relate to others authentically, for they will see God.

Now, in translating it this way, I’m maybe showing my age. You see, among millennials – those born in the 1980s and 90s to Baby Boomer parents – authenticity is extremely important. This is especially the case when it comes to church. Most articles that I’ve read about what younger people want from church mention authenticity at least once. You might expect younger people to be interested in having rock-style worship bands and a glitzy coffee shop in the foyer, but the truth is, most younger people are searching for authentic faith and authentic community. What do I mean by this?

Well, in a 2013 article called “Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” the late millennial Christian writer Rachel Held Evans talked about it this way, specifically in reference to the evangelical church. She wrote, “young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness. … the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules, and … millennials long for faith communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, younger people aren’t searching for a shinier, “cooler” version of Christianity, but one that actually practices what it preaches, one where faith is lived out and people are truly welcome as they are. Posturing and hypocrisy are particularly glaring to this generation, which is familiar with and not easily duped by advertizing, pretension, or patronizing tones. As the social media generation, we’re attuned to the fakeness of “curated” online pictures and profiles, and long for honesty about not only successes, but also struggles; you actually find both of these on social media. Held Evans continued,

What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance. … We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against. … We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers. You can’t hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We’re not leaving the church because we don’t find the cool factor there; we’re leaving the church because we don’t find Jesus there.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

So, you might say that millennials – and other ages, too! – are longing for the church to be a community of the pure in heart: blessed are the authentic, those who live with integrity, for they will see God.

Now Jesus himself certainly didn’t shy away from discussions of authenticity and hypocrisy. Our biblical passage for today is only one example of him addressing this. Others include the encounter with the Pharisee praying loudly, thanking God that he is not a sinner like other people (Luke 18) as well as various times at which Jesus confronts the religious leaders of his day, telling them off for their hypocrisy. One of these tense encounters happens in Matthew 23, where Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples not to do what the Pharisees do, “for they do not practice what they teach,” but are instead “blind guides,” “hypocrites,” and “whitewashed tombs” – tidy on the outside, full of decay on the inside! (How’s that for an insult?) The other comes right before our story, in John 7, where Jesus similarly confronts the religious leaders who continue to condemn his actions (like healing on the Sabbath) and are looking for a way to kill him. To them, Jesus says, “Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?” … If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man’s whole body on the sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (vv. 19, 23-24). And you’ll notice that this is not a meek-and-mild Jesus, by the way, but one who speaks truth to those abusing their power!

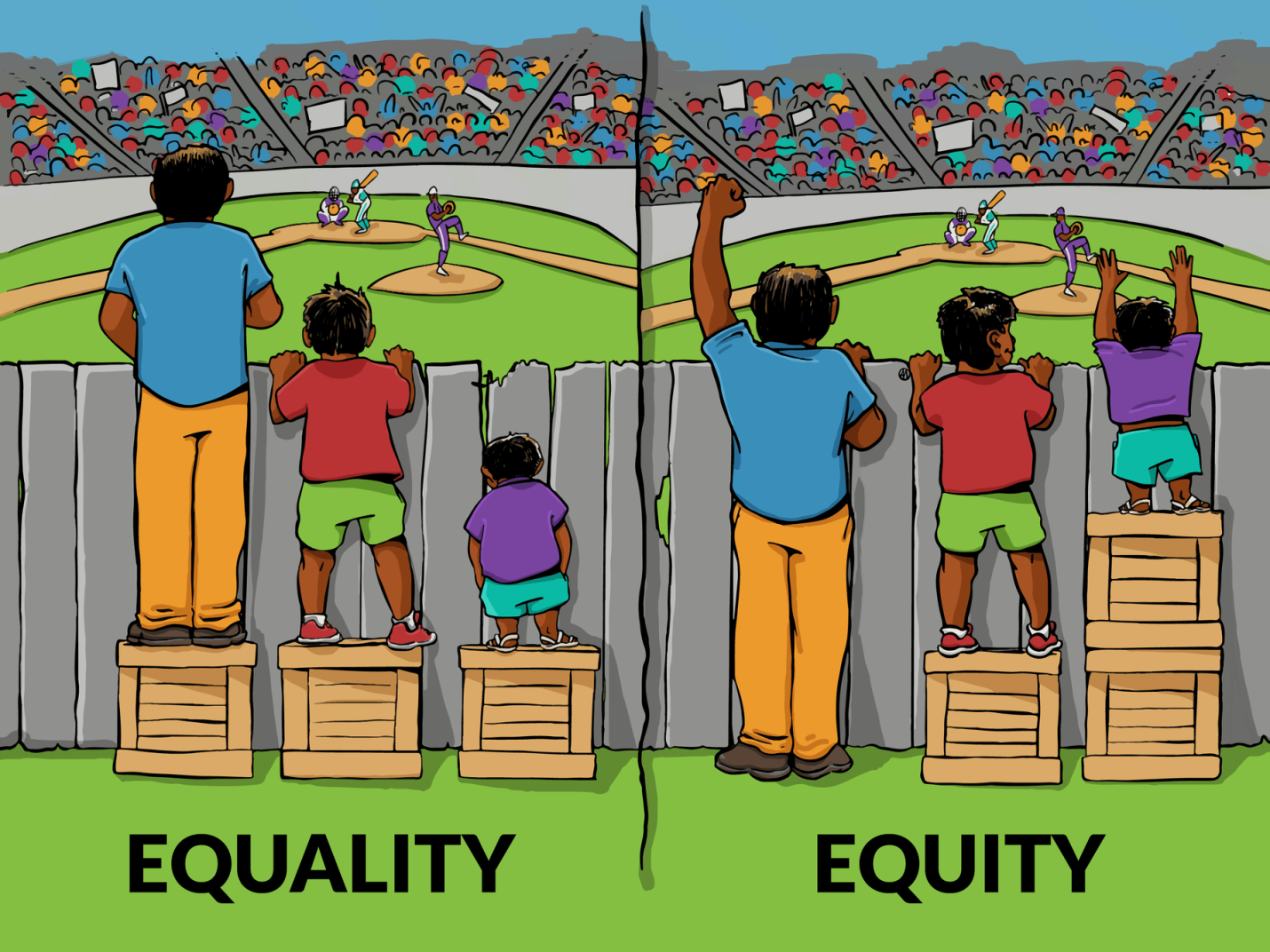
So it is just after he has said these things that we find our story, in John 8. The Pharisees and legal teachers bring a woman before Jesus, telling him that she was caught committing adultery. Then they try to trap him, to put him in an impossible situation: if he says to follow the law, the woman will be stoned to death; if he says to let her go, they can accuse him of breaking the law, adding it to the list of “unacceptable” or even “blasphemous” things Jesus has done – like heal on the Sabbath. It’s a lose-lose situation – what is he supposed to do? So Jesus pauses to write or draw in the sand, perhaps to buy himself some time to think. And then he says his famous words: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And everyone leaves until it is only Jesus and the woman left. He says to her, “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’” (vv. 10b, 11).

Biblical scholars have always had a lot of questions about this story. For one thing, it seems to have been added to the Gospel of John, since it sounds more like Luke’s voice. It seems the early church didn’t love this story – it almost didn’t make the final cut of the Gospel, perhaps because it makes Jesus look too “soft” on serious matters like adultery.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is also the question: what was it that Jesus wrote or drew in the sand? But beyond that, to our contemporary ears, the situation of the woman strikes us as terribly unjust. Here, she is the victim of the very worst of human impulses to judge and condemn via the frenzy of mob violence. I mean, death by stoning – how much more uncivilized can you get? Of course Jesus tells these teachers to look in the mirror at their own sin! We can certainly understand why Jesus used this moment to confront the religious teachers with their own hypocrisy – they claimed to be followers and even teachers of the Law, but with the very briefest of statements, Jesus cuts through this pretense, effectively asking them: where in the act of stoning this woman to death would you find the mercy, justice, and wisdom – the love of God and neighbour – that the Law of Moses demands of us? It’s simply not there. They’re not practicing what they preach here. They’re not acting from an authentic faith, but from self-righteousness. And the mob stops in its tracks, scatters, the woman’s life is spared, and we all breathe a sigh of relief.

Of course, another glaring question remains in all of this – where is the man? If this woman “was caught in the very act of committing adultery,” as the teachers claim, where is he? According to pastor Bert Montgomery, “That’s of no one’s concern. Perhaps he has a good name, a good reputation; perhaps he is someone important. It really does not matter. The crime of adultery is easily leveled against women, but rarely against the men involved. *Boys will be boys*, you know.”[[5]](#footnote-5) But, wait a minute, that sounds awfully familiar! Have we as a culture really moved beyond the logic that the teachers espouse here? How often are women only still blamed for adultery or even in situations when they are abused? I’m sure we can think of examples of this from today. And given those parallels, it’s remarkable where Jesus ends up: namely, he ends up standing with the condemned woman. In Montgomery’s words, “Jesus stands in front of a group of fellow men, and he stands WITH HER. Jesus dares to publicly question their authority and challenge their own righteousness. Jesus opens a door so the woman can exit with her dignity intact. Jesus publicly affirms her worth as a person and as a child of God. … Jesus pulls this group of united men off their imaginary thrones and places the woman up on level ground with them. It is nothing less than a radical shift from highly concentrated power toward equality.”[[6]](#footnote-6) So in this situation, Jesus does not remain neutral – he stands with this woman against the condemning mob threatening lethal violence. He stands with the one who is marginalized and in danger of being scapegoated. After all, as the previous chapter of John suggested, they’re looking for ways to kill him, too. But rather than use this chance to agree with the religious teachers, to prove to them that he’s not a troublemaker, that he’s like them, Jesus chooses to stand with the accused woman. Blessed are the authentic, those who live with integrity, for they will see God.

So what are the ways that we can live this beatitude today? How can we be authentic and live with integrity? I have already hinted at Jesus’ example of siding with the marginalized, even though it was risky. That really is a key aspect of authenticity or integrity, though – the part about not remaining neutral. Cindy Wang Brandt, who writes about parenting and faith, tells a story about this from her university days. As an Asian-American, she sees her early faith journey as inauthentic in that it asked her to set her racial identity aside to follow what she calls “a white Jesus.” Her understanding of faith at the time therefore “erased a large part of my own cultural and racial identity.” So when a friend complains to her about some of the difficulties he’s experiencing as one of the few Asian Americans on campus, she “chided him for his anger and negativity, pointing out how our white fellow Christians were nice and loving toward everyone. He looked at me sadly and said, ‘Cindy, that’s just not enough,’ and walked away.” Reflecting back, she says, “I was clueless and didn’t get it. … The palatable-sounding, universal love and equality on our campus had blinded me to the many microaggressions I myself experienced, and caused me to bury the suffering of people of colour who have endured it for a lifetime.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, it’s not enough to treat everyone the same, as if the history of inequality can simply be ignored, as if we’re all starting with a blank slate. We have to work to dismantle the biases and systems that we’ve inherited, to make sure that the many, subtle ways in which people of colour and other groups are marginalized – those micro-aggressions she mentioned – are also addressed.

Another way of talking about it is in the difference between equality and equity, and you may have seen this image before:



In the first, everyone is treated the same – there is equality in everyone being given the exact same crate to stand on. But you’ll see that that’s not good enough to meet people’s real needs. The tallest person could already see without it; the smallest can’t see even with it. When we work toward equity, on the other hand, everyone’s needs are met because it’s not a one-size-fits-all strategy. It’s recognizing that we’re not all starting from the same place.

Closer to home, I’m reminded of our own church statement concerning marginalization, which appears in our bulletin every week. In it, we commit to welcoming all people without discrimination and marginalization. As much as I value this statement (it’s one of the reasons I came to work at this church), I wonder, sometimes, whether we interpret in the way Wang Brandt cautions against. Is it a vague sense of loving everyone, or is it something we intentionally work at and live out? Do we practice what we preach in our welcoming statement? Is it an authentic reflection of our faith community? I can certainly think of examples of living this out, among which is our participation in the Pride parade earlier this summer (and you may have seen in covered in the *Canadian Mennonite* as well).[[8]](#footnote-8) Rather than simply claiming that we honor a diversity of sexual orientations, our walking in the Pride parade with other Mennonites was a way of putting this into practice, a way of celebrating the many steps forward for LGBTQ2S rights in recent decades. There is still discrimination, and there is still violence, but there is also strength and resilience in this group of people that has so much to teach all of us about living authentically no matter the cost, since so many have faced rejection by their family or faith community because of their sexuality or gender. For many, the Pride parade is a healing and life-giving experience of being who they are without fear. Blessed are the authentic, for they will see God.

This is what this beatitude has to say to us today: that we are to strive for authenticity, for integrity, for practicing what we preach without hypocrisy. If we commit to this journey of faith, then our understanding of God will overflow the confines of what we knew before. We will, as Jesus promises, see God face to face in everyone we meet. AMEN

1. Brian Walsh, <http://empireremixed.com/2017/07/19/beyond-smugness-beatitudes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>. See also this article: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/may/lifeway-protestant-abuse-survey-young-christians-leave-chur.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women’s Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 137, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Bert Montgomery, “When Jesus Broke Up the ‘Boys-Will-Be-Boys’ Club,” <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/cbf/2018/10/when-jesus-broke-up-the-boys-will-be-boys-club/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cindy Wang Brandt, *Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy, and Kindness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://canadianmennonite.org/sask-pride-2019> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)