
“Starts Pure. Stays Pure”

A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Pentecost 7 - Year C

I got the title for my sermon today from an ad I saw on a dairy truck last week. Maybe you’ve seen it too. The ad is printed on the back of those Mayfield Dairy trucks that drive all over town. The ad reads, “Starts Pure. Stays Pure.” That’s it. Short and simple. “Starts Pure. Stays Pure” got my attention. Any why? Well, there are four good reasons, from the trivial to the sublime.

Let’s begin with the trivial reason. First of all, that dairy truck belonged to Mayfield Dairy Farms. And Mayfield is the company that makes the vanilla ice cream that used to be my father’s favorite. Dad died four years ago. But the Mayfield logo with that yellow cow’s head centered inside a brown circle, still catches my attention. It used to remind me to buy Dad some ice cream. But last Friday, driving behind that truck, my gaze was riveted not by the logo but by the company tagline that accompanied it. That tagline caught my interest in connection with today’s scriptures. So ‘starting pure and staying pure’ is my topic today on the basis of other, more sublime reasons; reasons that culminate with our scripture readings assigned for today. But before turning to those scriptures, here’s the next reason the purity topic commended itself to me.

A couple of mornings every week I join my mother and brothers in reading some brief devotional passages. One of them always comes from the legendary British evangelist of the early 20th century, Oswald Chambers, with his book, *My Utmost for His Highest*. Last Friday’s reading from Chambers set me up for that dairy truck tagline that I saw later that same day. It’s titled, “The Way to Purity;” that’s right, “The Way to Purity” is Chambers’ reading assigned for July 26. And here is what it says, beginning with a quotation from Matthew 15:

Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart . . . For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a [person].—
Matthew 15:18-20

Commenting on that passage, Chambers wrote:

When we hear these strong statements from our Lord, we shrink back, saying, “But I never felt any of those awful things in my heart.” We resent what He reveals . . . [Yet] If I will take an honest look at myself, becoming fully aware of my so-called innocence and putting it to the test, I am very likely to have a rude awakening that what Jesus Christ said is true, and I will be appalled at the possibilities of the evil and the wrong within me . . . If I have never been an openly rude and abusive person, the only reason is my own cowardice coupled with the sense of protection I receive from living a civilized life . . .

The only thing that truly provides protection is the redemption of Jesus Christ. If I will simply hand myself over to Him, I will never have to experience the terrible possibilities that lie within my heart. Purity is something . . . [that] brings into the center of my personal life the very Spirit that was exhibited in the life of Jesus Christ, namely, the *Holy Spirit*, which is absolute unblemished purity. (Oswald Chamber, *My Utmost for His Highest* for July 26, www.utmost.org)

I wonder how many of us here today can really believe any of that: “the Holy Spirit . . . brings into the center of my personal life the very Spirit that was exhibited in the life of Jesus Christ, namely, the *Holy Spirit*, which is absolute unblemished purity.” Really, Oswald? Can we human beings really live out of a personal center that exhibits ‘absolute,

unblemished purity?' Isn't there some evidence to the contrary—evidence that what may 'start pure,' say, in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, or in the charismatic experience of Baptism in the Holy Spirit—does not in fact 'stay pure' in the everyday life of us ordinary, rank and file Christians?

It's that anxiety, doubt or worry that leads to my third reason for today's sermon topic. Personally, Christian friends, I struggle with the attitude of one of the Calvin & Hobbs characters from the comic strip. It's the cartoon with the caption that begins with the line: "God has put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things." But before I repeat the full caption, I want you to visualize a little boy who is saying these words with a frown on his face. You need to picture him looking completely harassed and ticked off, with a face that tells you he is absolutely peeved and resentful as he's making the following declaration:

God has put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things.
Right now I'm so far behind I will never die.

Yes, that says it for me too. *That's* the kind of frustrated and defeated attitude that offers my third reason for my personal purity topic today. But with this third reason we're starting to go beyond my own experiences or special interests—beyond my particular experience with a dairy truck, which was actually preceded by my special interest that morning in my family devotions.

No, besides me, there are a lot of other people who resonate with that particular Calvin & Hobbs cartoon; so many that the numbers account for why it has 'gone viral' out there on the internet.' Indeed, as one of your pastors I am well aware how some of us sitting here in church today feel overwhelmed about some of those "certain things that God has put us on this earth to accomplish." But that leads me to a much better way to talk about my final reason for today's topic of 'starting pure and staying pure'—a reason that promises to take us beyond feeling overwhelmed, and certainly beyond any marketing or cartoons or devotional readings.

The final reason for today's focus on 'starting pure and staying pure' is that we are in fact, as a faith community and as a 'beloved community,' taking on some of the tough issues of our time. Just consider our book discussions this month: Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, and James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Then recall our plans next week to follow-up those discussions with a pilgrimage to Montgomery, Alabama; to visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, focused on our nation's history of lynching, and the Legacy Museum, subtitled From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration—both created and maintained by Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative. Finally, connect the dots between that Montgomery pilgrimage and next year's Jerusalem Pilgrimage to the strife-torn Holy City in the Holy Land; the land where Old Testament prophets, along with Jesus and those first apostles, addressed related issues of justice and reconciliation in their day.

Here is where today's scripture readings 'get into the act.' In the words of today's tough worded reading from Hosea, we are acknowledging and addressing some of the most heinous, primal and ancestral ways in which our predecessors on this, our land, have 'committed great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' Using Hosea's strong language, we are attempting to renounce a history where people went 'whoring after other gods who were not true gods,' in order that, "in the place where it was said to *them*, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said [you are], 'Children of the living God'" (Hosea 1:2, 10). Yes, church family, that's the noble, virtuous, and purifying reason we are engaging in the faith-based efforts I've just described; why we are engaged in so many other efforts in our church—more than I can enumerate here.

More precisely, paraphrasing the words of today's Colossians reading, we are acknowledging and addressing some of the ways in which our predecessors in the faith allowed themselves to be 'taken captive through racist philosophies, and antisemitic, xenophobic and anti-immigrant deceits, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ' (Colossians 2:8)

Yes, in the vivid language of Colossians, with our recent efforts we seek to go beyond the errors of our forebears and return to a more genuine Christian identity; as the reading puts it: to be 'circumcised with a spiritual circumcision,' to be 'buried with Christ in baptism,' that we might be 'also raised with him through faith in the power of God.' We yearn and aspire to be no longer 'dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of our flesh,' rather, 'to be made alive together with Christ, who forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us . . . and setting it aside, nailing it to the cross, thus disarming the rulers and authorities and making a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross.'

Indeed, we want to inherit that blessed state described at the end of the Colossians reading, where, after following its dictates: ‘therefore do not let anyone condemn you’ . . . [and] do not let anyone disqualify you” (Colossians 2:11-18).

Church family, if we still feel inadequate when we confront those ‘certain number of things God has put us on this earth to accomplish,’ let us have recourse to our gospel reading and its reliable ‘good news.’ For in today’s gospel reading Jesus teaches us to pray today, as he taught his disciples to pray back then, “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” And here I commend to you the process theologian Marjorie Suchocki’s definition of forgiveness. Notice especially that her terms are tough enough for the kind of issues that we’re looking at in our Cathedral congregation nowadays. She writes:

[Forgiveness is willing the] well-being of both victim and victimizer, with the fullest possible knowledge of the nature of the victimization. [Repeat . . .]

In her elaboration of this definition, Suchocki insists that this kind of forgiveness can be achieved without expressing feelings of love for perpetrators, or without necessarily embracing them into our lives or living spaces. If grace abounds, we may indeed choose to do so. But apart from warm feelings or empathy, we can deliberately will that perpetrators may experience a “transformation toward the good . . . even over [our] against feelings of revulsion and antipathy.” Yes, she maintains, we can “release” them in a way that effects a “direct intervention that has the power to break the cycle of violence” (Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*; NY: Continuum, 1994, p. 145).

In these ways, church family, ‘Christ can become good news again’ (cf. John Cobb’s book of that title). Moreover, we can reclaim ourselves as noble and honorable and praiseworthy disciples of Christ. That good news is heralded also by our Psalm appointed for today, where we find that beloved promise in verse 10:

Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other. (Psalm 85:10)

Finally, as Jesus maintains in our gospel reading, our Christian honor and integrity, purity and authenticity, is not a matter that we must beg and implore God to achieve for us. Rather, in the final declarations in today’s gospel, Jesus says:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened (Luke 11:9-10).

Thanks be to God!