

“Whatever is pure...”

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on the Sixth Sunday of Epiphany
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 12, 2017

Texts: Psalm 19:7-10

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” We begin our ponderings together once again this morning with these words from the Apostle Paul. They contain Paul’s description of what it means to be a Christian, to live a Christian life, in the midst of an inherently unchristian world. We’ve used these words often as a benediction, a thought to carry in our hearts as we leave worship. We’ve done so on many occasions especially over the last year which is why it makes sense to take this opportunity between the light filled joy of Christmastide and the somber self-reflection of Lent to consider exactly what Paul was attempting to clarify for us with these beautiful, simple words.

The first week of this series, now two weeks ago, we focused on “whatever is honorable.” Last week had I not been ill, we would have considered “whatever is just” in more detail and we yet may at some point in the future. This week our journey through Paul’s wisdom continues with a closer examination of “whatever is pure.”

In all candor, when I was first putting this series together, I almost leap-frogged right over this one. “Pure” can be, has been and still is a very dicey word in religious circles of all sorts. When we think of “pure” in the same breath as “God” or just about anything connected with our faith, it gives us a sort of queasy feeling inside, like we already know we won’t measure up to whatever “pure” is supposed to mean in this context. Not so, however, when we think about the other contexts in which we hear this word quite routinely. For example, we want the grape juice we drink for communion to be pure, untainted by anything that shouldn’t be there. When we want to have soft sheets we look for a high thread count of pure Egyptian cotton, whatever that means. When we’re shopping for organic foods, it’s vitally important that we can trust that the foods we buy are pure – clean, unpolluted and pristine, grown without chemicals. So many things we shop for, from personal care products like shampoo and skin lotions to pet foods of all sorts, purity of ingredients is our highest priority. So, clearly, in these situations and many more besides, being pure is a good thing, a desirable thing, a thing worth the extra cost it inevitably requires.

So, here’s my question. If pure is such a good thing when we are buying something for ourselves or the people and pets we love, why do we find it so incredibly disconcerting when we think about purity within a religious context? Why does purity and religion

feel so uncomfortable when we consider mixing them together? Is it just our imagination that this feels awkward or is there something to this? All of these were my questions as I decided to plunge ahead with examining this whole notion of Paul's about "whatever is pure" being something important for us to understand as we throw ourselves into this whole endeavor of being a Christian. Clearly Paul thinks this is important in its own right. Why is knowing what's pure important? How does understanding whatever is pure make a difference in how I live as a Christian? What does "pure" mean in this context anyway?

Well, let's begin with why I think talking about whatever is pure in the context of our faith makes us so uncomfortable. And it does make us uncomfortable. If you doubt this, all you need to do is pick up a concordance for the King James Bible (a listing of key words correlated to the texts in which they appear) and see how many listings there are for "pure." Then do the same with a modern translation like the Contemporary English or even the New Revised Standard. Much smaller list in the more modern translations. We don't like the word "pure" or "purity" so we just translate it into something else more palatable, like spotless or stainless or even chaste. Or we sidestep it altogether by concentrating on what is impure and therefore sin laden. This is what the Purity Codes of the Old Testament focus on in the book of Leviticus. These are a hodgepodge listing of all sorts of things

that can make you impure even though you are a faithful, practicing Jew. Eating shellfish or pork. Mixing dairy and meat. Even mixing of different kinds of fabric, like silk and linen, can break those ancient purity codes. And then you would have to go to the Temple to make an expensive sacrifice before the priest who would then declare you clean once more. Until the next infraction like letting your beard grow too long or weaning your baby too soon or too late. Then the whole purification process has to start all over again. And so on. And so on.

There are purity codes in the New Testament too, though not quite as visible. One time is when the disciples chide Jesus for speaking to a strange woman and asking her for a drink when they met at the town well in Samaria. A Jewish male did not talk to a woman he didn't know, especially if she was unescorted by a male relative. And he most certainly did not talk with an unescorted female who was Samaritan. But, Jesus didn't care about that. He spoke to the woman because he knew she needed to hear what he had to say. So too did the woman with the issue of blood who was healed because she dared reach out to touch the hem of his garment as he hurried past on his way to heal a dying child. Once again the disciples were horrified as Jesus submitted to this impure intervention by an unclean woman. Once again Jesus didn't care and healed the woman on the spot telling her, "your faith has made you well." So, it doesn't seem to me that Jesus put

much stock in the purity codes. He believed that people mattered more than rules. He believed that God's love was more important than regulations established to control how folks could interact with God. This was the new teaching Jesus brought explaining the Kingdom of God as something in the here and now and accessible to all. Jesus taught quite clearly that God cared about only two things: how well you loved God and how well you demonstrated your love of God by how you loved others. Jesus did not have a purity code as a boundary around his ministry. He did not check to see if those he healed and helped were "worthy" of his help. He just did it and left the judging up to God.

The purity codes didn't go away, though. In fact, they came back with a vengeance in some of the Epistles as they attempted to impose boundaries and rules where Jesus had only love of God. Women needing to keep their heads covered and not being allowed to speak in church are examples of such boundaries which developed in the latter half of the first century. But they didn't reflect Jesus and Jesus' teachings. They did make clear how the evolving Christian faith was co-opted and reshaped by the local cultures and practices in which Christian communities took root. This is not surprising. Such is the nature of human relationships and co-existence. Somebody always wants to be the boss which means somebody has to decide what the rules are going to be and who is going to enforce them. All too often those rules settled

back into familiar and comfortable ruts such as what constitutes the “right” role for women and those at the margins of society for whatever reason. It’s often said that the victors in these culture wars write the history reflecting what they want it to be and in some cases even believe it was. That is certainly true when it comes to early Christian history which is why ongoing modern scholarship is so very important. For example, we now know that there were many early Christian groups that embraced women as leaders seeing no need to curtail their power and influence. We know that the disciples and indeed the early churches survived because of wealthy women who became their benefactors. We know that women were always and still are central to the forward momentum of the Christian faith in all its forms and settings, purity codes notwithstanding.

But what of Paul’s thinking about this curious phrase, “whatever is pure.” What did he mean? Was he thinking of these purity codes as core principles needed as barbed wire fences around the fledgling churches? Was he really that worried about keeping out the impure, whatever that might be? Or was he trying to get at something else through these incredible words offered to the ancient church in Philippi? I think we can gain some vital insight into Paul’s thinking here if we look at another text, one Paul surely would have known, in which this whole idea of whatever is pure is visible. In Psalm 19, verse 9 the Psalmist

writes, “the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.” The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. To understand this sentence, we must understand what “the fear of the Lord” means.

Technically, it means not an awareness or anticipation of danger, but rather a profound reverence and awe toward God. A profound reverence and awe toward God. So, it would not be too much of a stretch to translate this verse as “The awesomeness of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.” In other words, God is so totally awesome, to put it into modern vernacular, that the sense of God’s awesomeness is pure, untainted by anything else. And not only that, that sense of God’s overwhelming awesomeness that is untainted by anything, *anything*, lasts forever. Nothing, NOTHING, can take that sense of God’s awesomeness away from you, once you realize what it is and how it impacts your life.

This is what I think Paul was thinking about when he encouraged those ancient folks in Philippi to search for what is pure. Be vigilant in watching for how awesome our God is, he says. Watch for God’s awesomeness because it is there! It is always there, and always has been. And always will be. We may lose sight of it from time to time but not because God’s untainted and unrestricted awesomeness goes away. No, if we lost sight of it, that’s because we stopped looking for it. We let ourselves get distracted by other things that just don’t matter in the grand scheme. We get bogged down in our own thoughts and feelings,

worries and concerns. We listen to the world too much and to God not enough. Then, little by little, we lose sight of God's pure awesomeness, letting it be replaced by insignificant stuff that doesn't matter. We let fear take over our lives and forget that God expects us to live our faith – our commitment to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as we love ourselves. We forget to be the people God needs us to be, the people God created us to be, the people Jesus invites us to be, the people the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to be. This is what Paul is urging us to do and to be. "Whatever is pure" he says. Think about these things. Think about the pure awesomeness of God and the difference it makes in your life and let yourself be transformed by it. Then go out and transform the world. One day at a time, one step at a time, one minute at a time, one person at a time. "Whatever is pure" is all around you every day, if only you will take the time and make the effort to notice. Our purely awesome God thinks you are purely awesome too! So, what are you going to do now, purely awesome that you are? As you think about this thing, as our friend Paul encourages you to do, I hope you will hold on to the truth that what you do does make a real difference in the lives of real people every day. Paul wants you to remember that awesome you is the key to making that difference for God every day. Who knew? Now you do. Amen.

