



ALL SAINTS CHURCH  
Pasadena, California

## Purity and Compassion

A Sermon Preached by The Very Rev. Scott Richardson  
August 30, 2009

*Gracious God, let these words be more than words, and give us the spirit of Jesus. Amen.*

I want to do something this morning that progressive preachers rarely do these days, and that is put in a good word for purity.

Before I do that, let me quickly reintroduce myself. My name is Scott Richardson, and I served here from '98 to '03 – pastoral care, stewardship, parish life, Associate Rector. I currently serve in San Diego as dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral – more on that in a minute.

And, before I move on, for those who remember us from the days of yore, Mary sends her love. She is very sorry she couldn't be with us today; she is doing the mass *en Español*. She can't wait to see you again. Mary and many others in San Diego are praying for those affected by the fires in the hills above us here. Those fires in some way overshadow everything we are doing today. We are mindful of those most directly affected by them today, and hold them in our prayers.

Now, back to purity.

There's a reason progressive homilists skip over this concern. It has to do with the excesses of puritanical thinking, past and present. Let's be honest; it can get a little crazy. Most of us also recognize our own struggle with purity – we too are pilgrims on the long journey toward interior integrity. So we don't go on and on about it; given a choice, liberal preachers prefer to reflect on compassion and social action. We believe that, as we do so, we're being faithful to the deepest strain of the Jesus tradition.

That last bit is true, I think; that *is* the deepest strain, but the Bible and raw human experience don't really provide that choice. The press for personal morality is persistent in scripture and in our own hearts. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and author, put it this way in his journal in 1968, just months before his death:

"There is a need of effort, deepening change and transformation. Not that I must undertake a special project of self-transformation... In that regard, it would be better to forget it. Just go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside.

But I do have a past to break with.

An accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk. A great need of clarification, of mindfulness, or rather, of no-mind. A return to genuine practice, right effort. Need to push on to the great doubt. Need for the spirit. Hang on to the great light."<sup>1</sup>

So that's Merton. The Bible backs up his revealing and wonderfully honest insight. Listen again to the concluding line of today's epistle: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and

widows in their distress (compassion), and to keep oneself unstained by the world (purity). Jesus, in the gospel, dispenses with ritual purity but endorses God's demand for moral purity. He cites a litany of sins, the corporate failure of humanity: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and folly. Add all that to Merton's list, and it's enough to make you cringe.

But rather than cringe and turn away, good liberals might instead examine all this from the other side, from its positive aspect, and reconsider a spiritual practice that is indeed pure and that leads back to the world and to deeds of compassion. Rather than focusing on fornication, adultery or licentiousness, for instance, we might turn all that upside down and ask about God's intention for every human being in regard to the full expression of affection. We might think about sacramental sexuality, the outward and visible sign of love, bodies joined together, perfectly reflecting the inward and spiritual grace of fidelity, mutuality and enduring respect. Or, instead of talking about theft, avarice and envy, flip that and think instead about trust, generosity, and distributive justice. Or, rather than being tempted by deceit and slander, place yourself under the gentle discipline of holy listening and holy speech. Or, instead of falling into the pit of pride, step around that by humbly remembering your place at the center of the human family – you are one of billions, no more or less special than any other, but certainly cherished.

So there they are: just a few of the positive virtues of purity that scripture commends today. And all that, taken together, is just the beginning. As we work towards spiritual integrity in our personal lives, we also move out into the world to – in the language of James – be doers of the word and not merely hearers, to care for orphans and widows in their distress.

Now, with that bit about humility still ringing in our ears, let me brag for a few minutes. You get to do that when you come back once a year to preach. Here's my boast: I am proud and blessed to be the leader of a congregation that very specifically and very intentionally cares for widows and orphans. Exactly fifty years ago, the rector of Saint Paul's in San Diego noticed that some widows in the congregation weren't doing well. They were isolated, lonely; a few were malnourished and others depressed. The vestry decided to be doers of the word. They built a simple home where those who chose to could live in community, together, for mutual support. Saint Paul's Senior Homes is now a twenty-million-dollar a year non-profit that offers multiple levels of care to seniors at extraordinarily reasonable rates. Last year we opened a new ministry to our most indigent seniors who wish to stay in their homes. Everything they need (from transportation to medication to physical therapy to case management) is provided for them. Praise God.

More recently this same vision was applied to the lives of children in great distress – orphans, some of them. Imagine this scene: La Mesa Prison in Tijuana in the mid-90's – 450 children live in prison with their incarcerated parents. They see everything – violence, abuse, sex, drug use, despair. Some good souls take note of this and decide to be doers of the word. They rent a small house across the street, hire the remarkable Sylvia Laborin to direct their program, and send Sylvia into the prison to ask jailed parents to consider an alternative for their children. In that first year, eight children move out of the prison and into the house. Forty-five children now live at Dorcas House. They receive full-time care (housing, clothing, food, education, medical attention, and lots of love) from a dozen house-mothers and from people just like you and me.

As people who share your vows and values, we felt compelled to respond when this ministry was brought to our attention. We took primary responsibility for Dorcas House three years ago. We're putting our money, our prayers, and our labor behind the conviction that a better end is not only possible for these kids but required by the God we worship this morning, demanded by the God we love and serve. And you, dear friends, are carrying this load with us. You've been very generous through your Alternative Christmas Market and by other means; we deeply appreciate that. Here's the next step: we'd love to have you come down on a Saturday, cross the border with us, get in a cab, go to the house and directly offer your love to these precious ones for two or three or four hours before you come back. A team goes down once a month. Hannah Miller is here; I'm going to ask

Hannah to stand right now. Hannah is a member of our board and Director of Communications for the Diocese of San Diego. She can tell you all about this. It is a transformative journey. You can do it in one day, and it matters a great deal to the children who live in the house.

Everything I've said so far may seem obvious to you. This is run-of-the-mill stuff, right? Care for orphans and widows in their distress; keep one's self unstained by the world. That is "cookie-cutter Christianity." But guess what? These are not universally shared values, even among Christian people. If you travel down to San Diego anytime in the near future you'll see a plethora of NOTW bumper stickers. NOTW: Not Of This World. The drivers of these (often mammoth) cars displaying these bumper stickers are making a faith statement. They do not understand themselves to be citizens of this realm. Heaven is their home. That's fine with me; everyone is entitled to their opinion and their theology. The problem for their neighbors is this: for the most extreme type that I'm now talking about – not for the average folks – no concern for this world pertains whatsoever. Care for the earth? Forget about it – we won't be here much longer anyway. Work to repair harmful social conditions? Don't bother – if you're successful you may be delaying the return of the Lord, the return that's expected when the human community reaches its moral nadir.

Now that kind of thinking might strike you as odd, but get this – there are far more Americans who believe that than there are Episcopalians in this country, and by a significant factor. Some of them held high positions in our federal government in the very recent past. This cohort discounts the utility of social action because they believe that Jesus will return at any moment. More than this, they hold that this world lies beyond improvement. This world is doomed and social passivity is called for under these circumstances. Some people even believe that social transformation is for losers, for those left behind. An early founder of this movement put it this way: "Satan, I do not doubt, wants to reform this world a little, to help on the deception that men do not need to be born again."

Dear friends, I'm all for being born again – been there, done that, delighted by it – but there it is in stark detail. Any attempt to improve the human lot is seen as a move in the direction of self-sufficiency and, more importantly, as a step away from God. That is absurd. That is scandal. That is blasphemy. It is all of that because it perfectly cuts against the message, the method and the ministry of Jesus as these are revealed in the canonical gospels. Those who are truly NOTW – Not Of This World – follow their Lord in two fundamental ways; they never support violent domination of others, either individually or collectively; and, wherever they are on the economic spectrum, they reveal profound concern for the well-being of the poor. Those are the two primary characteristics of that alternative realm, the "Reign of God," that Jesus lived and died for.

And now a moment of delightful irony: in spite of his great wealth and even greater worldliness, Teddy Kennedy got closer to achieving that biblical ideal than most modern-day pietists. We can spend \$10 billion a month on war, he would wonder, but we can't afford universal health care? That is not political chatter; that is gospel. Here now, paraphrased, is his Lord and ours – the reading from Matthew shared at his funeral yesterday:

When I was starving in sub-Saharan Africa, did you give me food? When I was parched, crossing the Sonoran desert hoping to get a job at the car wash, did you give me drink? How about a coat when I was shivering on the streets of LA in mid-January? When I was laid low and too poor to buy insurance, did I get the care I needed? When I was locked up, did anyone come to visit me?

Salvation is something of a moving target in scripture, but that may well be the final standard – who, on this side of the veil, can say for sure? If that is the standard, what then do we do? Here's my suggestion: strive for authentic purity – the sacramental expression of affection, trust and generosity, holy listening and holy speech, thoughtful humility, gentleness, justice, and wisdom. Then, in the process of establishing that sacred and solid base, rescue the world. Note that I am not saying *after* you establish that sacred and solid base, but *in the process* of establishing that inner integrity, *on the way*, move out to rescue the world. Make a real difference in

the lives of real human beings. Show up for Jesus: care for widows, be kind and fair in all your dealings, visit, share, pursue your great causes – economic justice and global peace and full inclusion and earth care and the end of racism. Be a good friend, tutor someone, extend mercy – and come down one day to Tijuana and love a frightened and lonely child.

The list, of course, is endless. Here's the good news: there is not a congregation on this planet that addresses that long list as faithfully as yours. You really do get it. And when you do any of these things, your precious neighbors are immediately prospered and immensely blessed. They know they're safe, at least for the moment. Those who need it get support to heal. Systems of injustice come tumbling down – the walls of Jericho. And here's the best part: Christ returns – not in judgment, not in condemnation, not in wrath, not in a way that ignores the world's pain, but through pure love that redeems *this* world, one person at a time.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: the End of the Story* (New York: HarperOne, 1999) p. 113