



North Shore  
Congregational  
Church

FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Heart in Action”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*James 2: 14-26; Matthew 21: 28-32*

*August 10, 2025*

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who was among the most prominent American voices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Church. The son of two nomadic artists, Merton was born in France, but moved to the US at the age of one, in 1916. After losing his mother to cancer at the age of six and his father to a brain tumor just ten years later, Merton eventually got a degree from Columbia University, entered into the Catholic Church, and committed himself to the conservative Trappist tradition of St. Benedict in Kentucky in 1941. In the 27 years he spent in that monastery, he wrote over 60 books, along with hundreds of poems and articles on spirituality, civil rights, nuclear proliferation, and more. One of those books, *Thoughts in Solitude*, that he copyrighted in 1956 at the age of 41, included what has become known as ‘The Merton Prayer.’ It goes like this...

*My Lord God,*

*I have no idea where I am going.*

*I do not see the road ahead of me.*

*I cannot know for certain where it will end.*

*nor do I really know myself,*

*and the fact that I think I am following your will*

*does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you*

*does in fact please you.*

*And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

*I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,*

*though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore, will I trust you always though*

*I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.*

*I will not fear, for you are ever with me,*

*and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

-Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

*“The fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.”* I’ve always loved that quote – that sensibility of the perfect imperfection of the Christian journey in and towards God. It’s a notion far too often lost in our faithful constructs of today, and one that I think is imperative to our grasp of who and what we are in God, and who and what God calls us to be and do. More to the point of the day, however, it’s reflective of what I hear in those words from Jesus in our Beatitude of the week.

We are into week six of our series on the Beatitudes seen through the lens of the parables, and that puts us in Matthew 5, verse 8 – *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”* Now, the reward side of that blessing – the outcome of the purity of heart – is a matter of discernment. I think one might read this statement and infer some soteriological sensibility to it – as though it is referring in some way to the heavenly reward in which one will ‘see’ God. If there’s anything we’ve seen across these Beatitudes, however, it’s that these statements aren’t about just about the hereafter, they are about the here and now. ‘Seeing God,’ in this context, isn’t a promise of salvation, it’s a promise of discernment... of understanding... of ‘knowing’ the presence of God right here and right now. The pure in heart, Jesus is saying, will see God more clearly in their lives today.

The question I want to spend our time on today, then, is what is meant by ‘pure in heart,’ and that’s where we come to our parable of the day.

When you read through the Gospels, you quickly discover that Jesus had different modes for different times. He had more than his share of the ‘teddy-bear’ moments of welcoming, embracing and loving those whom society had neglected. He had his many messianic moments in which his divine personhood was revealed in the form of wonders and miracles. He had his prophetic and rabbinic moments of teaching and forming the understanding of the people. He also, however, had his share of rabble-rousing – of pushing back, calling out, and standing against the injustices and misconceptions of faithfulness that he saw around him. This is one of moments!

In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew, the first eleven verses share the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we remember and celebrate on Palm Sunday. That moment of joy and majesty for Jesus, however, quickly turns in Matthew’s gospel in the twelfth verse as Jesus enters the temple and starts throwing tables around as he slams the money changers and dealers who were making a profit from the faithful efforts of others. Verse eighteen takes us to the very next morning when Jesus, clearly still worked up, curses a fig tree that didn’t have any fruit and causes it to die – using that image as a chance to offer a fairly ominous lesson to those around. And then, back in the temple that day in verse 23, we find Jesus confronted by the chief priests and the elders who question his authority to do what he has been doing. That’s where we pick up our parable in Matthew 21:28.

*“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to*

*them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him. (Matthew 21: 28-32)*

That’s not a parable we look towards all that often. In fact, I’d venture to guess that it may seem new to more than a few in this room. That said, Jesus sets up a scene not at all unfamiliar to anyone who has had children – a parent asking a child to do something and a child not exactly responding with an enthusiastic affirmative. I think it’s particularly interesting, however, to note that this dichotomy that Jesus sets up between these two sons is one in which neither is really responding in the way that anyone would not as ideal. It’s not as though we have the one person doing the right thing and the other doing the wrong – neither of these sons is meeting the mark. On the one hand we have the son who rejected his father outright, but who eventually came around and leaned into that which had been asked of him, and on the other hand we have the son who told his dad exactly what he wanted to hear, but never actually followed through. Neither of these were perfect. Neither of these were what that father was hoping for when he engaged in those conversations. But still, Jesus lifts up the one who rebuffed the father at first but who eventually came around. Why? I’d argue that it’s because that one is the one who was pure of heart.

Remember the context here. Matthew’s gospel lays out this parable in the wake of two days of contentious interactions between Jesus and the Jewish establishment of the time. In Jesus’ eyes, he has spent the last two days perpetually embattled with that second son. He has spent two days confronting – and confronted by – those individuals who, in his mind, were ‘saying’ all the right things but not living to the deeper expectation of God. The Pharisees, The Sadducees, the elders... these were people who were adhering to the letter of the law, following the rules, and meeting the dictates, but were now rejecting that deeper call that God was proclaiming into their lives. Meanwhile, the first sons – the tax collectors, prostitutes and others among them – had spent much of their lives rejecting faith (reject God) but were now embracing the faith they’d come to understand in their lives. Said in the context of our Beatitude, Jesus saw some whose outward and portrayed purity was met with an inward dearth of heart and others whose outward dearth of righteousness was met with an inward purity of heart – and those are the ones he lifts up as the exemplars in faith.

There’s a slightly different, and yet connected, sensibility that emerges from our reading from James. James tells a parable of his own, in some ways, as he sets up this image of an individual meeting another’s need and sending them off with nothing but well-wishes – making the point that the well-wishes are not enough if not also accompanied by a character and act that lean into that well-meaning intent. I don’t want to spend a lot of time on this passage today – and some of you may recall past endeavors into this passage in which we’ve explored how some read into this passage the notion that it is our ‘works’ that get us into heaven. I’ve said before, and will say again, that that’s the point James is making here. The point that James is making is that of the inseparable nature of our faith and our works. James’ point is actually quite simple – if we truly have faith, that faith will be exemplified in who we are and what we do. Said another way, I truly believe that James’ fundamental point is that there is no such thing as a ‘lip-service’ faith, and that’s where I believe all of this comes together.

James makes the fundamental argument that you can't claim to have faith and then not live it out in real and meaningful ways. In the same way, Jesus makes clear in his parable that there is one who is giving 'lip service' to his father and the other who, albeit imperfect, eventually allows the purity of his heart to determine who is going to be and what he is going to do – and it is the imperfect son, eventually turning towards his own purity of heart, that Jesus celebrates in that parable.

What I've always loved about that quote from Thomas Merton – and why it came to mind in the midst of these celebration this week – is that it is reflective of that foundational truth that none of us are going to get it right.

*I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

We will all be off at times. Whether it is with the intentional defiance of that first son telling his father that he won't go into the fields or the more subtle laziness of that friend wishing another well while failing to tend to their needs – we will all have our moments (and more than just a few) in which we won't meet the mark. Jesus knew that. Thomas Merton knew that. If we are honest about it, we know that.

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.*

And yet, if our heart's desire is to pursue that faith that Jesus has inspired within us... If our heart's desire is to follow the lead of God in our lives... If our heart's desire is to head out into that field or serve that neighbor's need even if we missed the boat at first... that desire – imperfect as the life around it may be – is the pure heart that Jesus calls out in our Beatitude. And that purity of heart – no matter how frail or flawed it may be at times – is the one that carries us ever closer to God.