

“Purity of Heart: to will one thing.”  
3 Advent A

Ask me on any given day whether I get distracted from the task at hand and I will laugh, and say, “Who isn’t distracted?” To will one thing and stay with it until it is finished is to remove all distractions and stay focused on what you have set your heart to do.

In his address, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing, Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard wrote this little book to help other Christians attain purity of heart in making one’s Christian confession. He said that to reach purity of heart one had to have the ability to do one thing. He believed that the one thing was to will The Good and that Good was to know the Eternal God. University of the South professor, Gerald L. Smith, compares purity of heart to the hunt. He writes passionately about the cause and effect relationship of the people and the land. He says, “When the hunter has purity of heart, he can enter the forest in an even steady mind and the animal that comes to him comes always as a gift. The ultimate test of the hunter is not whether he brings home an animal; in his heart of hearts, the test is whether he can see the animal’s eye, look into its soul, and not bring it home. It is sometimes startling how much more full the woods become, how much more in touch with everything from the leaves to the sounds, we become when we close our minds to the distractions and seek purity of heart.”

<http://smith2.sewanee.edu/texts/Hunting/PurityHeart.html>.

Lately, the search of purity of heart has taken me on the road. And if there were ever a test to keep my mind free of distraction it is as I drive down the Freeway listening to my booktapes. A driving instructor on NBC’s Today Show said something profound about my driving skills that apply to life as well. When asked what fatal mistakes people make when they drive in ice and snow he said, “Drivers must learn two things: they cannot turn and brake at the same time.” Doing both will lead you to lose control.

Distractions...disappointments...can lead one away from purity of heart and question what is real. John the Baptist’s life work in the gospel is hanging in the balance. He is in jail wondering about his message about “the one who is to come.” These very thoughts are weighing on his mind. John’s message about “the one who is to come” had been quite clear in its expectations regarding what this coming one was to do. Those expectations were steeped in images

of divine judgment and wrath written in the beginning of Matthew's gospel (3:7-12). Yet, apparently like his own disciples (cf. 9:14-17), John is troubled that what Jesus is doing does not fit with that expectation. Jesus' ministry focused on the celebration of God's reign in the world rather than on a dramatic purge in preparation for its arrival. Maybe Jesus wasn't the "one who is to come" after all, John might have thought from prison.

Is there a "one who is to come" today for you? Are we waiting and expecting that someone may help us to stay focused? People spend a lot of time in prayer, in conversation, in counseling, hoping that someone or something might change and make everything right. When one has done everything humanly possible to stay focused on one's self, on a relationship, on a job, and then it could be time to rest and wait for God to come. Meanwhile, the challenge is to stay the course unless the road gets slippery and we try to steer and brake at the same time!

John was in a place where he could do no more to prepare for "the one who is to come." He had to let go. But he also had doubts as to Jesus being "the one" for whom he had worked so hard even to the point of death. Something was missing for John.

Jesus supplies his emissaries with the missing link. Matthew's gospel subtly suggests a second reason why one might doubt that Jesus is the Messiah through the specific language of Jesus' response to John's question. Whereas "what the Messiah was doing" had been reported to John, Jesus now explicitly directs John's disciples to report to him "what [they] hear and see" (v. 4). Even the word order stresses the absence that gives rise to the potential confusion about whether Jesus is indeed the Messiah. The reports must include what Jesus is teaching ("hear") and not simply what he is doing ("see").

Doing gets results partially. It gives an example of what to do but not necessarily how to do. People want to know and understand what they are being asked to do and follow. I recall from my military days that orders we were given often did not make sense. From officers to enlisted questions were asked about a plan of action and whether it was the best way to accomplish a mission. Orders are not meant to be questioned even if one's life is on the line. Yet, orders need to be understood if they are to be carried out properly. John's disciples had to know if their time had come to change course. They needed to "hear" as well as to "see." Upon delivering the message

sent from Jesus the light bulb went on for John. The missing link was Jesus teaching. John and his disciples wanted to know what they were seeing.

How many of us understand the mission of our church? What direction it is going? What does it mean “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ?”

If we “hear” Christ’s message to John as one of ‘restoring’ then I think we get some clarity on our own mission. Jesus declaring his authenticity as Messiah places the emphasis on acts of deliverance *for* the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf and even the dead rather than upon acts of judgment *against* the unrighteous. Jesus also stresses within these actions the role of preaching as well: “the poor have good news brought to them.” Where John emphasized preparation for judgment stressing the Isaiah oracle, Jesus makes a shift to stressing comfort. If our mission is to restore and bring comfort then we have a mandate from our Lord and Savior. If Jesus coming is the arrival of God’s reign then the church continues to build that kingdom by what Jesus did and taught.

The authenticity of Jesus as Messiah was based not only on his ministry of comfort and deliverance. It was based on his teaching that God’s kingdom had arrived and would bring together the greatest and the least of this world. Those entering his godly realm would be greater than those fortunate to be chosen in the human realm. Jesus kingdom would be extended to all who love justice and righteousness. John’s ministry was proof of the genuineness of Jesus claim to be the Christ. John’s ministry signaled an end to the human realm of prophets who came before John. They did their part to proclaim God’s justice in the realm of the kings they served. Now had come the one who would not just be a prophet, or just a priest or just a king but one who was all those persons. Jesus, prophet, priest and king, would bring comfort and deliverance beyond all expectations.

Perhaps JESUS has not been what you and I have expected. For us perhaps he has not always been what we hoped. If so, then is it time for us to return to his teaching and be obedient to his call to be his disciples. We who are least of his kingdom are called to bring deliverance and bring good news. In that mission to restore all people, we will find the long expected Jesus, who is prophet, priest and king. He is the Christ, the good news sent into the world to live among us, bring comfort and deliverance.

Purity of heart is to will one thing, as Kierkegaard wrote. May we not be distracted from the Good he wants for his people. May we be single minded toward the great things he will do for he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. May he show us that He is the one who is to come. Amen!