

Sermon, March 29, 2009
5th Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Geoffrey T. Piper
St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church
Marion, MA

Sermon - Create in me a clean heart, O God

Alternatives often eclipse this prayer.

Create for me a beautiful, diversified portfolio of equities, bonds, T-bills and precious metals, O God...

Create for me big romance, O God...

Create among us scintillating parties in lavish settings, O God...

Create in me perpetual youth and beauty...

Create in me rock hard abs and buns of steel...

When I think of my own spiritual path, I think of the substitutes I used for this prayer as a young man.

If there was a basic, deep yearning of my soul, it was after something like knowledge, approval, and academic prestige. I knew that I would never be the smartest one in the room, but I hoped that if I was diligent enough, I might at least become well-informed, articulate, and perhaps even witty. If I could just learn enough, read enough, and understand enough, then I would be able to hold my own ground with the smartest ones in the room.

This quest was wrapped up with my young identity and sense of self-worth. I would know that I was successful if I was admitted to the selective colleges that were unquestioningly worshiped in our family tradition. I would achieve my place in my family heritage. Once there, amidst the distinguished professors and gifted students, the high purpose, notable achievements and rich joys of life would naturally unfold. We would together be clever, interesting, well-versed in the classics, creative, insightful, and critical of the mainstream, whatever the context of the discussion was.

As the journey unfolded, it became increasingly and troublingly clear to me that there was not a clear, direct path to this philosophical and cultural utopia. It was more like the children's game of Chutes and Ladders. The latest idea or enthusiasm from following some new intellectual mentor would undermine what had been the certain foundation stones of my original journey. I began to question whether it made any sense to claim to know anything at all with confidence.

Somewhere along the line I came across Alexander Pope's lines from his *Essay on Criticism*. I learned that I wasn't the first student to find himself confused and discouraged in the naïve pursuit of intellectual enlightenment.

A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:
(What the heck is the Pierian Spring? I had to look it up. Pieria is a district of Macedonia believed to be the home of the Muses, the deities of the arts and sciences.)

There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Fir'd at first Sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless Youth we tempt the Heights of Arts,
While from the bounded Level of our Mind,
Short Views we take, nor see the lengths behind,
But more advanc'd, behold with strange Surprise
New, distant Scenes of endless Science rise!
So pleas'd at first, the towering Alps we try,
Mount o'er the Vales, and seem to tread the Sky;
Th' Eternal Snows appear already past,
And the first Clouds and Mountains seem the last:
But those attain'd, we tremble to survey
The growing Labours of the lengthen'd Way,
Th' increasing Prospect tires our wandering Eyes,
Hills peep o'er Hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

About the time that I began to see the alps piled on alps, I began to also suspect that there were deeper truths to discover about living well. Even if I were able to absorb the encyclopedic data in every library; even if I were able to make clever and witty rejoinders to please or "one-up" my companions; even if I could point to advanced degrees from prestigious schools, my life could be a tangled, joyless, unproductive garden. As Robert Coles, a professor of social psychiatry at Harvard, has said, "it is possible to get all A's in school, and still to flunk life."

In my journey, there were several indicators that I would need to change course if I would live well and enjoy the trip. There was an increasing alienation from joy; there was an aching sense that Henry David Thoreau got it right when he wrote, "*Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.*" (The idea here is that our song--what is supposed to be our deepest personal expression of joy--is left unsung.) There was a sense that loving

relationships were simply games of chance, stumbling along from one to another in the hope of hitting the jackpot of compatibility.

Perhaps some of you have found yourselves along a path like this... Sound at all familiar?

It helped me that I came across other writers and thinkers, far smarter than I was, who helped to point the way. Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician and philosopher wrote about a faithless, gnawing emptiness within us: "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself." [Pascal, *Pensees* #425]

William James, in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, laid out for me the possibility that a person might be both rational and faithful.

Out of my twilight of the soul, this sense of gathering darkness, my earliest childhood recollections of faith in God began to stir in another part of my psyche. I remember reading the words of Jesus and feeling as though a cold bucket of water had splashed me in the face: "My father will send you a comforter, the Spirit of Truth." I was ripe enough to consider that truth was not just a heap of information, but a way of seeing with God's perspective. Wisdom was possible, with God's help, in learning what matters most in order to live well. Gradually, I traded my default prayer from "Make me an impressive and clever guy through all the stuff I know," to the ancient cry of the soul, "Create in me a clean heart, O God."

A clean heart.... I suspect that we all have regrets from unconsidered enthusiasms. I like the thought that enthusiasm is what happens between having a good idea and realizing what is wrong with the idea. A clean heart entails the grateful sense that we can be forgiven from past enthusiasms that didn't work out.

A clean heart... I love the imagery that Jesus gives us. The Holy Spirit will be within us a spring of living water, welling up to eternal life: Cleansing us, refreshing us, satisfying our deepest thirst for meaning, purpose, and connection with God.

A clean heart... a source in the deepest part of us that is simple, innocent, fresh, and trustworthy.

A clean heart... a peaceful place within us... a place for God to dwell.

God loves to answer this prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me.

Pray it with me?

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right Spirit within me.

Amen.

"A certain flock of geese lived together in a barnyard with high walls around it. Because the corn was good and the barnyard was secure, these geese would never take a risk. One day a philosopher goose came among them. He was a very good philosopher and every week they listened quietly and attentively to his learned discourses. 'My fellow travellers on the way of life,' he would say, 'can you seriously imagine that this barnyard, with great high walls around it, is all there is to existence?

I tell you, there is another and a greater world outside, a world of which we are only dimly aware. Our forefathers knew of this outside world. For did they not stretch their wings and fly across the trackless wastes of desert and ocean, of green valley and wooded hill? But alas, here we remain in this barnyard, our wings folded and tucked into our sides, as we are content to puddle in the mud, never lifting our eyes to the heavens which should be our home.

The geese thought this was very fine lecturing. 'How poetical,' they thought. 'How profoundly existential. What a flawless summary of the mystery of existence.' Often the philosopher spoke of the advantages of flight, calling on the geese to be what they were. After all, they had wings, he pointed out. What were wings for, but to fly with? Often he reflected on the beauty and the wonder of life outside the barnyard, and the freedom of the skies.

And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved by the philosopher's message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks, months to a thoroughgoing analysis and critical evaluation of his doctrines. They produced learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure!"

*An English translation as quoted by Athol Gill, *The Fringes Of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working For Justice*. (Lancer, Homebush West, NSW) pp. 30f.

"A PARABLE OF A LIGHTHOUSE

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was a once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding areas, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the new members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea.

So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they re-decorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club.

Less of the members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired life boat crews to do this work.

The mission of life-saving was still given lip-service but most were too busy or lacked the necessary commitment to take part in the life-saving activities personally.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people.

They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin, and some spoke a strange language, and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal life pattern of the club.

But some members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the life of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. They evolved into a club and yet another life-saving station was founded.

If you visit the seacoast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, only now most of the people drown."