My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Some of you might know that I have been in the UCC all my life, and attended some six different UCC churches prior to my being called to ministry in the United Church of Christ. My brother’s journey was a different one, as he went one day to an altar call at a church and from that moment forward became unapologetically evangelical in his worldview and faith. It’s a different framework of knowing and loving God than I have, and that’s OK, there are lots of differences in life and in families.

But it led me to try and understand where he was coming from, because we were increasingly unable to communicate well. The fact that I’m divorced, for instance, for him meant that I should be disqualified from being a pastor, and that my ability to lead and teach others has been forever compromised. So I read a bunch of stuff from leading evangelicals to try and understand that.

Again and again I ran into descriptions and heartfelt writings on purity. And just like Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, there’s still lots of debate around this.

Pure, to us, means beautiful: unblemished, natural, uncontaminated. Pureness is something that we treasure and value, so much so that we’ve set up an entire bureau in the government to regulate purity, the Food and Drug Administration. Those folks have issued all kinds of guidelines spelling out exactly how much things cannot be pure and still be acceptable. Suffice to say that being married to my wife Kate, a microbiologist and FDA regulatory specialist, has opened my eyes on many things.

One food that I love is actually a drink: coffee. And while the FDA doesn’t regulate coffee, Title 21 of the Code of Federal Regulations Part 110.110 allows the FDA to establish maximum levels of natural or unavoidable defects in foods that are intended for human use but still present no health hazard. They set these up because it’s economically impractical to grow, harvest, or process raw products from naturally occurring defects that won’t harm us. The FDA uses terms such as rot, rancid, sour, gummy, shriveled, moldy, infested. Maybe some “foreign matter”.

In the case of coffee, you’ll find bugs and mold, just like you might find a spider in your bananas or fruit flies in plums. No more than 10% of beans can have insect filth and another 10% can be infested with mold for it to be acceptable for our food manufacturers to sell it to us.

That’s disgusting and alarming, but its not fatal, because millions of cups of coffee are consumed each day without incident. But we still seek things that are good, like coffee, to exist in a pure state. We want the air we breathe to be pure oxygen without smelly fumes. Water without lead. Lawns without weeds. Snow without dirt.

Jesus insists that a person’s heart and will should be the focus, whereas the Pharisees and teachers in Jesus’ day insisted that there are traditions and teachings that matter and should be respected, being handed down from generations of faithful dating back to the law of Moses. We’re even going to sing a hymn on this in a few minutes, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God’. We value pure hearts. So when we think about and talk crossing boundaries with God’s great creation, there are phrases which in any society imply that a crime against the hearts has happened, to an individual or a group of people. Such words need no further explanation as to their seriousness: Sexual assault. Genocide. Child abuse. Rape. Homicide.

All of these crimes are thought of as the most serious because they take away bodily and spiritual “purity” of the victims. But religious leaders of Jesus’ time had a pre-occupation with folks who had encountered these circumstances along with other diseases such as leprosy and smallpox, and their concern for purity ran so deep that they taught their people to exclude those who were seen as “ritually unclean”, or in our modern vernacular, impure. In Jesus’ time, somehow victims were impure. Surely that’s not the case today, is it? We don’t blame victims of crimes, no, not us, do we? How does God view victims of circumstance and violence to their being?

For my part, I can definitely say that Jesus felt differently. Our God welcomed the Samaritan woman. Our Lord touched and healed the leper. He did not judge the blind, lame, or crippled but lifted them up by showing folks they were blameless—or in other words, they were pure in their infirmity both before and after the healing. He included them, and did not cast doubt on their being. The Pharisees believed the world’s impurities might infect them if they got too close. Jesus knew that the purity of God’s love just might infect the world if he could just get close enough, and he broke through crowds a lot to do just that. To get too close is to understand God.

Now, we all have a constant flow of thoughts and feelings in our minds and hearts each day. Over time, we take on patterns acting on those, what the Apostle Paul might have said is our “fruit”, things that we say and do on the outside of ourselves. But for us to be pure—as Jesus intends and for us to emulate—we have to be aware of what is good and what is not. If we were trees, talking metaphorically again, the automatic flow of our thoughts and feelings might be the sap which nourishes what the world views in our trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit. And if the sap is sour, rancid, moldy, or infested, no matter how much we try and hide it, folks will notice that we are not right. We know a tree is unhealthy because we see many trees that are healthy by comparison, don’t we?

There’s a world of difference between the authentic road toward spiritual purity and faking it with false behavior modification. But when we say that spiritual change is needed, folks like us have no idea how to take concrete, practical steps to allow God to change the stream of their thoughts and emotions. The goal isn’t to squelch the negative emotions and thinking, what psychologist Carl Jung called the “shadow self”. We have to wrestle with our inner demons as well as our better angels, both are a part of us. But the purity of heart we are talking about brings all of this into God’s presence.

When we challenge our hearts, where both our angels and demons reside, with the love of God, we remember that love and know that we’re forgiven. Period. We don’t have to keep beating ourselves up. We can start afresh, anew, when we call out to God and seek to change. We can be angry, that’s OK, Jesus got angry too, but he knew where it was coming from. Anger is destructive to others when we go to bed on it, nurse it, and hurt other people with it, and maybe even take pleasure in that witness. That’s where the trouble starts. When we acknowledge our brokenness, or sin, as Jesus and the twelve-step people call it, that’s when the real work starts and authentic renewal begins.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Jesus didn’t like extra-curricular rules that discounted God or people. But when we leave God’s compassion in the dust, when we get all too full of ourselves rather than love and forgiveness, we can get there pretty quickly. And I know lots of folks, not just my family, who think that some clergy are not leading folks to better lives. Just look at the many church leaders who have resigned over sexual misconduct, harassment, and child abuse and endangerment. So clergy aren’t to be mistaken for paragons of purity—we have plenty of mold, too.

But Jesus takes all of that into account, loves us anyway, and says, don’t be all caught up in which of us is better than the other. It’s not about how holy we might think ***we*** are. If we can’t love, forgive, serve, and pray with compassion and mercy, then we need the resurrection more than ever. A fresh start that’s the hope of our hearts and hope of the world.

We don’t get there by avoiding the world. We get there by living in it with all the rot and mildew around us. What comes out of us each day? Good and bad, for sure, but on the whole we hope it’s more good as we age gracefully, right? Our lives are impure, but we can embrace it all. It won’t kill us. Let’s remember what redemption really means. Save us from ourselves, O Lord, and create in us a clean heart.

And for that, thanks be to God, Amen.

Some estimates

Thanks be to God, Amen.