

A Washday Word

Clean clothes, clean feet, clean heart

by Dr. Maxine Hancock

HERE AT WINDHOVER PLACE, I LOVE A day like this when the sun shines and there is a brisk breeze. I hurry to get my laundry out on the line – getting old-fashioned pleasure from watching the ravens and hawks ride the updrafts along our high ridge as I pin my sheets against the sky.

I think about Jesus' words of blessing, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8 NASB) as I lift my clothes from the basket, loving their bright colours, sorting them into a carefully modulated dance of joy – a clothes-pinned colour chart.

For some days, I have found myself thinking that this particular beatitude may have been meant for someone else. Someone truly pure in heart – like Job, maybe, who could plead his case on the basis of being blameless and entirely upright, and have God agree with him. For all kinds of reasons, I'm more skeptical about myself, echoing the voice in the Proverbs that asks, "Who can say I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" (20:9). In fact, when I read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, I agree with Hopeful, the pilgrim who, in telling the story of his conversion, describes how the more he learned of Scripture, the more he learned of his own sinfulness: "If I look narrowly into the best of what I do now, I still see sin, new sin, mixing itself with the best of what I do" (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan, Oxford World's Classics, 2003, p. 133).

Between hanging the towels and the whites, I look up that word *pure*, to see if I can under-

stand it better. Thanks to the pure water of the North Mountain aquifer that feeds our well, my whites truly glisten. As does the word I have found to be translated *pure*. What I find is that in this seemingly inaccessible beatitude, Jesus is not talking about "pure" as an innate condition – which I know I don't have; nor is He speaking of a static state of elevated spirituality which we can somehow achieve. The word used for *pure* is based on a Greek word (*katharos*), a word used for something that has been cleansed, purged, laundered. It's a washday word. It means being clean, but holds open the possibility of needing cleansing again and again. Like sheets and towels and everyday clothes.

That's the only kind of "pure" my heart knows: cleansed and needing cleansing. Jesus showed a picture of this kind of cleansing when He washed His disciples' feet. When Peter understood what Jesus was about to do, he begged for a complete bath: "Not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus rejected Peter's request gently but firmly: "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean" (John 13:9-10, NIV). Jesus' teaching here has long been understood to mean that once we have been made pure in heart through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus (Paul teaches about this in Romans 3:9-23), we do not need the initial "washing" again. But we do need daily to confess the sins we stumble and slip and slide into, and receive a new cleansing.

The promise with this beatitude is, I think,

the most wonderful promise in the Beatitudes. The pure in heart are accorded the greatest of all privileges: "they will see God."

It was sin that separated us from the face-to-face conversation with God for which we were originally created. As our hearts are cleansed, we begin to be able to see Him again: to see Him in the Scriptures, especially in the person of Jesus our Lord; to trace His grandeur in creation; to rejoice in His regenerating work in our lives and the lives of others; sometimes even – despite the fear and gloom of the daily news – to catch glimpses of His kingdom coming. And, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves talking with God again in the language of love, calling Him, as Jesus did, "Abba . . . Father."

I'm taking my sweet, wind-dried clothes in now. Their freshness makes me smile. And it is a smile on the face of God – the smile of His great pleasure in those who are pure in heart – that I see by faith. One day I will realize both what it is to be pure in heart and what it means to see God in a fuller way. The apostle John writes: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in them purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2 TNIV). There's the buzzer on my washer now. I still have the jeans and work shirts to hang out and take in, clean, fresh, bringing a smile to my face. ●

I see by faith

Dr. Maxine Hancock is professor emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Spiritual Theology, Regent College, Vancouver. Well-known to Baptist women through her books, articles and conference speaking, she now lives in Nova Scotia. She and her husband, Cam, worship at Pereaux Baptist Church.