

“Purer than Puritans”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
August 29, 2021 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 17
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It is good to be back! It was also good to be away on vacation the last couple weeks, and I hope that you enjoyed the guest preachers and musicians who led us in worship on the Sundays when Joyce and I were away. While away, I was able to catch up on some reading and begin some new books as well, including this beauty (hold up David Hall's *Puritans*) that I picked up for some light summer reading. I love studying history and the history of our religious tradition, so a book about Puritans gets me excited. My guess is that I may be alone in this. For most of us, remembering the Puritans is not that exciting. Some of us would like to forget, if we could, that we are their spiritual if not bodily descendants. For we remember well the aspects of puritanism that we're not so fond or proud of today. But, like it or not, our history is what it is, not what we wish it would be.

We are children of the Puritans, those stern, rule-makers and rule-enforcers, perfectly depicted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens' famous statue *The Puritan* in Springfield, with his stern gaze and forward stride, a superhero's (and supervillain's) cape draped over his shoulders and flowing behind him, with a thick, gnarly walking stick in one hand and a giant Bible in the other, ready and eager to bludgeon you with both. The Puritans rose in England as they sought to purify society, specifically the protestant Church of England, by removing what they considered to its Roman Catholic practices. Their zeal for forming a purer church and society led some to separate completely from England and its church. Separatists, such as the Pilgrims who formed the Plymouth Colony, and many thousands of others streamed across the Atlantic to the shores of the Massachusetts Bay, seeking to form what they considered to be a pure society, full of rules for how people should live. Those who didn't follow the rules, wanted to change them, or who wanted to allow for other rules to peacefully coexist along with the Puritan rules were unwelcome at best, leading to banishment for some, as it did for Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, and death for others, as it did for over 20 people convicted of practicing witchcraft just a few miles from here in Salem.

There are indeed many very beautiful aspects of Puritan culture that we should celebrate, including their democratic ideals, love of literacy, and insistence that children (the boys at least) be provided an education. But their religious extremism was not one their culture's beautiful parts; rather, it is one of their very ugly aspects. This bad part of our history echoed many other violent, extreme religious movements that came before. Sadly, many other religious extremists still enact terrible violence around our world. Our hearts are broken this morning by the horrible loss of life caused by a suicide bombing outside of the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, carried out by a member of a group of religious extremists who cannot live in peace with anyone who does not espouse their specific, narrow vision for society.

Jesus, in his lifetime, struggled against those who had a similarly narrow and oppressive vision. Jesus did not follow all of the teachings of the Pharisees, religious leaders who taught not only the laws that we have in the Hebrew Scriptures, but another broad set of restrictions concerning all aspects of life, a set of rules that had been built up and added to over many generations, like a religious snowball that had rolled down a hill and grew and grew as it went until its giant size and weight could crush anyone in its path. The Pharisees did not think that Jesus and his followers were pure enough because they did not follow their vast collection of oppressive, unwritten laws. At the heart of his work was pushing back on those laws, calling people to turn from a cold, rule-following kind of religious life, where one's purity was measured by how well one followed the written and unwritten rules, to a faith that emphasized the growth of life in oneself and others and to follow ways of living that encouraged that growth. He cared less about ritual purity than he did about maintaining and growing purity of the heart by turning from wicked deeds and practicing instead that which builds up others. That was the core of his message, and that's one of the reasons why he was despised by the religious leaders of his day, who held on to their power not by helping the masses become more loving people, but by getting them to follow all their rules.

Jesus' younger brother James, who was in the early days of Christianity, the most prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem, and was, like Jesus, despised by the religious authorities there, wrote his letter to be distributed among the gatherings of Christians throughout Palestine and all around the Mediterranean region to

encourage them to continue to follow Jesus' teaching concerning religious law. This week's reading from the letter of James is the first of five weeks of lessons from the book that we'll be reading together. In this week's reading, we are taught about what makes a person religiously pure, and James' words concerning this are similar to the words of Jesus. James states that following ritual acts do not necessarily make a person pure, but doing the acts that God would have us do make us pure. And the purity test for James is this: Caring for orphans and widows, that is being actively concerned for the lowly and helpless, and being "unstained by the world."

I grew up in a conservative church that prioritized the unstained-by-the-world part way above the caring-for-orphans-and-widows part. And the church of my youth, being unstained by the world meant that, like the Puritans, you followed the rules of the church. Like modern Pharisees, we had a long list of unwritten rules that had to be followed or you were in danger of facing a fiery fate at the end of your earthly days. You had to avoid worldly things like dancing, for that could lead to hand-holding, and you know what that could lead to! And there was a churchy language that had to be spoken in order to have a pure mouth. Now you could say all kinds of mean, nasty things that tore down others and caused great harm, but what really mattered was using the proper church lingo and avoiding saying certain four-letter words. These were some of the important rules that had to be followed in order to be pure, but we somehow forgot the good teaching that purest kind of faith life is the one in which one's words and actions are used to build up others, especially the lowly. Perhaps you also came from a religious tradition that emphasized following the rules of the tradition more than the golden rule to love your neighbor. But Mary's children James and Jesus teach us that no matter the religious traditions we grew up in or are around us, loving others is what really matters.

If only more of our religious traditions would follow the way of love, so much of the violence and suffering in our world would cease. If people would just care for others as much as they care for themselves, the pandemic that we are in would be shortened and countless lives would be saved. Selflessly caring for others and rejecting the selfish ways of the world is what purity looks like. Let's be purer than the Puritans of old and today and be this kind of pure. And let's encourage others to be so loving and such a blessing to the world as well. Amen.