

## Fr. Geoff Coupland Sermon – 15 February, 2026

Please be seated. This is my son the beloved whom I...(unintelligible). I Wondered sometimes Who the son is who he detests? But that's not the point of my sermon this morning. That's another subject. This is the last Sunday after the epiphany and On Wednesday we begin to lend So I want to take this time this morning to set the table for lent of how we may have a holy lint together. So get comfortable. By now you know that what that means. What comes to mind when you think of purity? Clean, there's no doubt. Again, the state of being unmixed or all of a kind. But if we explore our thoughts for a while, we shall, I think, sooner or later come up with the idea of hardness. Purity is the hardness that resists adulteration or mixture or contamination. The hard clarity of a diamond, its flawless splendor may serve as a symbol. Purity implies division. It rests upon the separation of the clean from the unclean. From the foreign or strange from any mixture from what is different or other Purity wields a sword a Sword as hard as a diamond and by its cleaving the pure is divided pure What does not conform is put to the sword and destroyed so that it may not pollute. Much religion is a search for purity. for the security of clear and fixed boundaries. When I lived with the Supreme Court Justice in Ontario, we used to have a conversation just about every night. That is why it is often rightly associated with hardness with an unyielding insistence upon the established norms. Now the religious search for purity has taken various forms. In the pre-scientific days, the function of religion was to give a general account of the cosmos and in that way to provide a stable framework for the life of society. I don't know but this seems to be going in and out today. Are you picking that up? Well, it's I turned this off so I'm talking into this If it continues, I'll just go to this. In that era, the objects and events of experience were brought under a set of categories, so as to create a cosmic and social order. There is, however, never a perfect fit between our categories and reality. What escaped the classification and did not conform to the categories was dealt with as unclean. so that the ritual observance of a distinction between the clean and the unclean became a means of reinforcing the social and cosmic order. They hung left-handed people in those days. Hmm And God forbid that a left-handed person should be a priest. I'm left-handed. Today, when religion is no longer expected to provide a cosmology, ritual laws of purity may still, as with the Jews, function to mark the boundaries and preserve the identity of a particular community of people. In the sphere of beliefs, the religious search for purity becomes the insistence upon the singleness of true belief to the exclusion of any plurality or compromise. Orthodoxy is in general defined less by its positive content than by its opposition to the unorthodox. Just look around, folks. It is pure by its exclusiveness. For Christians the opposition is threefold. some Christians Against the unbelief of the pagan or heathen Against the heresy of heterodox believers and Against the refusal of Christ by the Jews The heathen have been

converted by the sword or slaughtered by it in our history. The heretics have been burned with fire, another symbol of purity. The Jews have been kept apart, but subjected to periodic destruction as infected elements. We cannot deny our history. On their side, Muslims and Jews have proclaimed a fierce monotheism which excluded any plurality from God and prohibited images regarding both the Christian Trinity and the prolific divine imagery of the Hindus as a defilement of the voluntary. Meanwhile, from the yoga of the Hindus came an aesthetic search for purity. This was an attempt to purify oneself from the body and from bodily functions. It's not just us. It's all of us. Hindu yoga was not unique. In one form or other, the aesthetic search for purity has pervaded religious traditions throughout the world. Purity has been identified with the suppression or control or elimination of the body with its bodily needs, its bodily desires and impulses, its bodily passions. John the Baptist in the here. Sexuality is renounced by virginity and celibacy. our sister churches. Eating and drinking reduced to a minimum and controlled by fasting, which is why I'm typing this sermon this morning because the fast I want is not this fast. Bodily desires dampened by mortification. Bodily passions suppressed in pursuit of the ideal of passionlessness or apathy. As far as is possible human life, it was thought must be purged of the bodily or material so as to release the spirit. Greek, but not Christian. What is spiritual is conceived as having an unchanging gem-like splendor? It is hard not soft Softness means a defiling sensuality, a lack of moral fiber, or a looseness of behavior, and unsureness and unreliability of beliefs. The saints are the pure, the unwavering, the unyielding, the hard. And I'll bet you dollars to donuts. This is much of the religion that you learned. Now seriously, I don't have any wish to condemn the search for purity It does represent our need for order and frequent show For the subordination of the Lord to the higher in the multi-dimensional nature and life of human beings all the same It should be recognized that an unbalanced stress upon purity had destructively in human consequences In the 15th and 16th century, Spain was ravaged by an obsession with racial and religious purity, which led to the hounding of Jews and Muslims and of any mixed blood and to a ruthless rooting out of heretics. Racial prejudice is still with us. And people have not ceased to reinforce it with religion. And that is not just true in America. That is true of many places in the world today. In a more hidden fashion, fear of the body, our humanness, in the name of religion, has warped the lives of many. But my purpose is not to mount an attack upon the religious search for purity. Instead, I want to present another contrasting side of religion, one much more in accord with the original spirit of Christianity than a stress upon purity. This is my beloved. Listen to him. Namely, the surrender to tenderness. I told you to get comfortable. tenderness may be described as a softness that remains open to the impact of another. The phrase the other is important here. It distinguishes the softness of true tenderness from the softness of mere flabbiness or weakness. The flabby are not genuinely sensitive to another. They do not register the distinctive impact of another person. Because all is lost in the formless confusion of the uncaring. The tender, Do care. We are sufficiently self-aware to care for ourselves in the sense of being responsive to our own

distinctive qualities and needs. But as tender, we care for others. We are prepared to receive from others. to appreciate others' qualities and to feel their needs as demands. Tenderness is not the plasticity of the immature, but the differentiated sensitivity of the fully developed person. All the same the stress is on process not on achievement true responsiveness to the actual conditions of human beings evokes compassion and you remember my sermons on compassion and calls for forgiveness. Folks, as you all know, human life is messy. It never fits a perfect pattern. tender carrying copes with the stubborn messiness of life. As I like to say it, I said here many times, we all have a story. tender, caring copes with the stubborn messiness of life, not by constant purging, not by ever harsher discipline, but by harvesting growth in its tiniest formations. If purity implies division, Tenderness implies communion. It is tender affection that unites parents and children, husband and wife. It is tender affection that gives rise to a compassionate social concern and to the acceptance of plurality in unity. That is of community. Purity fears indeed abominates the hybrid or what is mixed, because it does not conform to our categories and classes. The hybrid becomes the unclean. the corrupt, the inferior, I hope you're getting this. Purity knows only the closed unity of the single, the unmixed. tenderness is open to change. and is able to integrate the contribution of others. It is not afraid of the hybrid, the mixed, provided the contribution of each is respected. So the communion produces synthesis, not confusion. Tenderness refuses to make our tidy divisions absolute. Tenderness seeks a creative communion of opposites. A communion of opposites, not their separation. Now, I hope you're still with me. If not, have a good snooze. Our bodies. Do with all this In my definition, body, means relationship. Baudeliness is the characteristic of our spirit when it is inserted into nature and into the unity of the human species. What I mean by this is the body is our personal self. When taken in relation to the world and to other people, we do not have bodies. We are our bodies. The body is not an appendage. The body is the whole person. but seen in relationship. It is the center of a network linking the person us to the material world, linking us to the human world, and linking us to other persons. It relates us to all other living beings. and to inanimate nature, and it provides the framework for our lives. It relates us our body. relates us to all human beings. Because human life, both physically and culturally, is essentially one, embracing past and future generations, as well as our own. To fear our bodies our humaneness is to fear relationships The failure to appreciate bottliness with the tender responsiveness it brings has made our modern life so harsh. and made us human beings coldly destructive of our own species. of other living beings. and of nature itself. We live in a hard world of disembodied rationality and of mechanical rhythms. And I'm almost done. Which is why I'm preaching this sermon as prep for Lent. We really need to search ourselves and connect again with our humanity. with our botiliness, with our neighbors, with nature. We all want to avoid getting hurt. many seek invulnerability by grasping after positions of power or by restricting their involvement. Both domination and withdrawal result in a rigid unresponsiveness. We die. To be truly human is to be vulnerable. the cost of tender sensitivity,

not only to ourselves but to others. is suffering. but without suffering. There is no joy. Now it would be special pleading simply to say that Christianity was Not a purity That's not true. Christian history is full of ambiguities. There have been times and places when the drive for purity caused a monstrous insensitivity to others and suppression of the variety of human thought and experience any of us who studied history know this All the same it is true to say That taken as a whole The Christian tradition puts a high evaluation on the tender responsiveness of love and a low Evaluation on the search for purity But the most decisive of any of this is the Christian exaltation of tenderness as a divine attribute found in our Lord and Savior. Because Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, made human for us, The sufferings of Jesus were the sufferings of God. It was God in Christ who suffered with us and for us. He came down to share our vulnerability. to do so corresponded to the very nature of the Godhead. We worship a responsive, suffering God, not an impassable absolute. Christianity Our faith, our religion is the religion of the God-man. Christianity does not fear the hybrid or the plural. True Christianity. Not some of this, nevermind. It was modified, it has modified the pure monotheism that proclaims the singleness of the Godhead against any plurality in relationships within. For us believers, in the trinity, plurality and relationships are not just signs of finitude, they belong to ultimate reality. And the plurality within the Godhead manifests itself in a divine, self-giving way to human beings. The Divine Thought. within the Godhead becomes the Word made flesh. You are my son. my beloved, in whom I am well pleased. That is, the divine thought is given body within human history. The divine love or Holy Spirit becomes a gift sent by the risen Jesus. That is, the divine love is made present in our Christian communities as an unending source of self-giving love. That is who we have been called to be. to believe in the Trinity is to conceive the inner life of the Godhead with its plurality and unity as the counterpart and model of the way of life in Christian community The Trinity is messy So is life and God knows this. It calls for a life of relationships and of self-giving love. That way of life we find exemplified in the earthly life of Jesus. He refused to make the pursuit of purity a paramount concern. He was prepared to leave aside the ceremonial laws of purity and the law of the Sabbath when compassion or the fostering of human relationships demanded it. He mixed with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners. He went so far as to eat with them, ignoring social distinctions and the socially engendered fear of contamination. Positively, he made himself vulnerable by continuing with his teaching and his way of acting despite the opposition it aroused. He was put to death because his attitude was subversive of the established order. And he could perform only by closing his heart to the call and deeds and needs of others. He preferred a flexible responsiveness. to keeping intact the categories and norms of the social and religious order. Now, you and I both know, all know, a fear of tenderness pervades our present society. It stunts personal and social development. Only the suppression of tenderness can explain the frozen insensitivity and absence of human responsiveness so frequently manifested by those with decision-making power in our society. The blighting fear of tenderness can and is being

reinforced by religion. to think otherwise is to be foolish. Its expression is to be found in religious dogmatism and moral absolutism. Religion can become a one-sided striving after purity. which cannot abide the intractable messiness of life. and its teaming on classifiable variety. but true purity is not achieved by restriction. To the pure, all things are pure. and inner purity has its source in love. Oh Now I share that with you and I was long I promise you During lint. I will not be nearly as long But I did want to share this with you today as a way of setting the table for the kind of lint that I hope that we have I'm not interested in you being pure as the driven snow. What I hope we can all find together is our own humanity. to learn to give together in relationship and community, to be supportive and upholding of each other, and to explore the ways that we can do that together as we go into our future.