

The Virtuous Life – Holiness Tradition

Romans 12:1-2, I Peter 1:13-16

A man and his wife were traveling down a highway on their way to a wedding. Well, the wife was getting upset with her husband who was driving at a speed that was making her quite uncomfortable. Finally she said to him, “Won’t you please slow down.” To which her husband made no reply but just kept on going at the same fast speed. As you can imagine, the tension was building in the car and once again the woman asked her husband to slow down. Well, this time the man stepped down even more on the accelerator until they were traveling at a very high speed. This continued for some time and by now the two were no longer speaking to each other. That is until the wife noticed that they seemed to be traveling in circles and she couldn’t resist making another comment. She looked at her husband and said: “And furthermore, you’re not only speeding, but you’ve also got us lost. Why don’t you stop and ask for directions.” Well there’s something about the male species that resists the idea of asking for directions. He simply replied: “I know where I’m going.” They continued on for a while traveling at high speed when the wife noticed they passed an intersection they had gone through about an hour before. She pointed it out to her husband and that was the last straw. He slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. And then in exasperation he said to his wife. OK, I admit it, we are lost, but we sure made good time!”

Sometimes we can become so busy living our lives, running here and there, keeping up a frantic pace, so preoccupied with all of the activities of life, that it’s possible to lose sight of where we are going. The world which attempts to control us, manipulate our time can hinder our relationship with God. It tries to shape us and dictate how we should live. As one translation of Romans 12 warns us: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its own mold.”

We continue our series on “Growing as a Disciple of Jesus Christ” and looking at the various faith traditions that give us insight and today we are focusing on the understandings that come out of the holiness tradition. It is a tradition that I am very familiar with since both Joanna and I attended a Christian college that was founded as a holiness school. It is also very much a part of who we are as United Methodists for John Wesley often spoke of the importance of living a life of holiness. What he was saying is that the Gospel proclamation

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cannot be confined to the message of salvation or being saved, but essential to our understanding of being Christ's disciple is this need for holy living. It became very much a part of our Methodist heritage and Wesley used various terms to describe this doctrine: He called it "Christian perfection, entire sanctification, full salvation, perfect love." All describing this call of God to live a holy life and Wesley felt that this doctrine needed to be preached if real revival was to be experienced in one's life and in the church.

Hal Luccock tells the story explaining how Catholics and Episcopalians had crosses on their steeples as symbols of their faith in Christ crucified, and how Congregationalists had weather vanes up their as tokens of their democratic convictions, whereas the Methodists usually had lightning rods, perhaps in memory of their having once been struck by God and their fear that it might happen again. Well, our prayer should be that it will happen again in the United Methodist Church, in our church, and in our lives, that God by his Holy Spirit will ignite that spark within us and set his people on fire.

We are called to be a holy people in a pretty unholy world. The news everyday reminds us of that. But I think most of us shy away from the word holy because the concept of holiness has often been distorted by the church. When you hear terms like holiness and John Wesley's words of Christian perfection, we begin to think of trying to live in a manner that is unattainable or unachieveable. Like there is some moral standard that is way above us and we say we'll leave holiness for those who we consider saints, like a holy person you would see in a stained glass window. There have been times when the concept of holiness has been misunderstood. That the way you measure one's spirituality and their level of holiness is by the number of rules you follow. It was a trap the Pharisees fell into with their many rules and laws you were supposed to follow. And it has happened in Christian holiness traditions where holy living was defined by things you don't do, like you didn't drink, you didn't dance, even things like you didn't play cards and holiness was defined by your dress or the length of your air. Some of those concepts may seem foreign to us, but they point to how we can get out balance in our understanding of Christian truth.

Joanna and I had a new experience last weekend. We went on a Segway tour. We rode on a Segway along the Allegheny River on a rail

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trail. And my goal was not to return with any broken bones. Any of you have been on a Segway know that it's a machine that's all about balance. The computer on the Segway is constantly measuring how you are moving (the instructor told us at 100 times a second) to bring you to a place of equilibrium, to keep you in balance. It was a lot of fun, although most of the time we were traveling in what they called "turtle mode".

But it was all about balance...and when it comes to holiness it's important to understand holiness in the context of God's love and grace. Because holiness is not about living by some perfect moral standard. We know we all mess up, we do those things that are less than holy, but we seek to follow the Lord and live in such a way that people can see God's holy love in us. Maybe that's why the apostle Paul describes how we conduct ourselves with these words of balance: Speak the truth in love. Here's the verse from Ephesians: "but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, even Christ..."

Grow up into Christ...and part of that growing into Christ is seeking to live of holiness before God. Because that is the very character of God. Speaking to the people in the days of the prophet Ezekiel, you hear this longing of God for the revival of his people: These are the words from the book of Ezekiel: "I will show you the holiness of my great name, then the nations will know that I am the Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes." This is our calling as followers of the Lord as we heard in the book of I Peter: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." Certainly not perfect, but allowing our lives to reflect God's holy love. A life that is different, set apart from the world's standards. Sometimes we use the word sanctification to describe God's work in us toward holiness. The word sanctify means "to set apart" or "to make holy". That our lives are set apart from the world. We don't measure and evaluate our lives by the world's point of view, but by how God works in us to reflect his holy love.

I hope you get that important distinction. It is God by his Spirit at work in us. We cannot simply choose to be holy, or live holy lives. Such an endeavor in our own strength only leads us to failure and disappointment. We are dependent on the grace of God, moving in us, changing us, transforming us and making it possible to live a life different from the world. A life with a different perspective.

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In this series on Devotional Classics, we are being challenged to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. To surrender ourselves before the Lord, to let go of those things that may be hindering our relationship with God. We want to deepen our faith and grow in this spiritual journey. A man was applying for the principle's job in a school district. He seemed like the right candidate, he had all of the qualifications. On his resume were the words: 20 years experience. When the committee came to his name for consideration of the job, one of the persons evaluating his application who knew this fellow said: "I know this applicant has the credentials for the principle's job, but from what I have seen of his work, I feel that rather than having 20 years experience he has had 1 year experience 20 times." I hope that is not what is said about our own experience of living the Christian life. Where we are not growing. Where we have experience after experience but we are not maturing in our faith, or allowing God to make those needed changes in our lives. It is growing in our relationship. One of the fathers of the church from the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa, describes it as becoming God's friend. Here's how he talks about holiness: He says: "This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because we like slaves...fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like arrangement. On the contrary...we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This...is the perfection of life."

The call to holiness is living that life set apart for Jesus Christ. A life of devotion. Willam Law, another writer in the Devotional Classics, was an Anglican priest and spiritual director of the 18th century. He states that "devotion signifies a life given or devoted to God." To "consider God in everything, serve God in everything, and make every aspect of our lives holy by doing everything in the name of God and in a way that conforms to God's glory." We are invited not only experience God's salvation but we are called to live in such a way that people will see God's holy love in us. It is giving our lives in trust and surrender before the Lord and allowing God by his Spirit to shape us, and transform us. It is presenting ourselves as Paul says to the Romans as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God...not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.

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May God help us to live lives of holy love, set apart to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.