

## Holiness

### [Matthew 22:34-46](#)

On Tuesday mornings, we are currently reading and reflecting on a book by Richard Foster which describes different strands or emphases in Christian thinking. This week we talked about the Holiness tradition. Now I had seen it as being about rules of behavior and associated it with anti-gay sentiment. But Foster sees it quite differently. For him holiness is about virtuous living, it is about being Christ in the world. And he says, “virtue is good habits we can rely upon to make our life work.” Good habits we can rely upon to make our life work.

But this holiness, this virtuous living, is not about rules and regulations which fail to capture the heart of holy living and holy dying. Instead he says, “Holiness is sustained attention to the heart, the source of all action. It concerns itself with the core of the personality, the well-spring of behavior, the quintessence of the soul, it focuses on the formation and transformation of this center.”

And today in the gospel reading we hear Jesus telling us what brings about that transformation – it is love. Loving God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. I think we often hear this as being about actions – that loving your neighbor means volunteering to help those living on the edge or giving money to charities or helping out a friend, but Jesus doesn’t say that in this passage. He is talking about love which is a state of the heart.

That is where holiness starts; at the core of our being. The process of becoming holy is often called sanctification, and we are sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit. So holiness is not something that we can work our way into by doing good -it comes about by a process of grace, combined with our desire to change, our desire to become holy.

Once I heard of a spiritual master who had many bonsai trees which he tended carefully, nurturing them, pruning them and looking after them. Each tree was connected to one of his students and as he gradually shaped the tree he was at the same time shaping the student.

I used to long to have such a teacher who would shape me into holiness and spiritual maturity. Over time, I have come to see that I do have such a teacher though as far as I know she is not a bonsai master. The Holy Spirit is at work in my life and yours, working just as lovingly and caringly as any gardener to transform us into the Christ-like beings we were created to be.

And the paradox is, once again, that this has *nothing* to do with us and *everything* to do with us. Jill has a favorite quote “Today is the day I come to realize that I need do nothing”. As someone who always has a long to do list, I find that a little irritating unless I’m on vacation. What do you mean I need do nothing? I have to return calls, write the newsletter, prepare a Bible Study, visit the hospital and so on. Isn’t that loving God and my neighbor? And of course that is the practical, external way that I show my love for God and my neighbor but all my busy-ness is nothing if it is not coming from a heart touched by grace, if it is not coming from the knowledge that God has already done it all.

The process of sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. We don't get to make ourselves holy. We can't. So all the work we put into trying to be good, trying to live up to what we think are God's standards is wasted. "Today is the day I come to realize that I need do nothing".

Just like the bonsai master, the Holy Spirit is shaping us and forming us. It doesn't matter what a mess we're in with our branches growing criss-crossed, this way and that, not sure which way is up and which way is down. It doesn't matter where we've been or what soil we've been growing in. It doesn't matter the poor choices we've made or the lies we've told. The Holy Spirit has seen it all before, and the Holy Spirit who personifies the love of God is ready to go to work. Yet we are not just the passive recipients of God's careful work. this has *nothing* to do with us and *everything* to do with us. We get to be active participants.

We have been given free will and so we get to choose. Do we want to become more Christ-like? Do we want to be made holy? Do we want to be formed and transformed in our hearts, the source of all action. the core of the personality, the well-spring of behavior, the quintessence of the soul?

I say yes, yes I do. I want the reign of God to be built in my heart, in the quintessence of my soul until God radiates out from every pore, until wherever I am and whatever I am doing, God is present in healing power transforming this world into the new heaven and earth, the new Jerusalem.

Foster writes, "Holiness is loving unity with God. It is an ever-expanding openness to the divine Center, It is a growing, maturing, freely given conformity to the will and ways of God. Holiness gives us our truest, fullest humanity. In holiness we become the persons we were created to be."

Our part in this work is the development of holy habits. Habits of the mind and heart which enable us to live without fear, to live without being judgmental but practicing forgiveness. Habits which enable us to give generously of our money, our time, our abilities.

Holiness is never about being superior or thinking that we are somehow better than anyone else. But neither is it thinking that we are the worst thing that ever walked this earth. Neither is true. We are beloved. We are the beloved of God. And as we grow in holiness so we grow in humility, in being able to see the place that God has made for us and accepting it willingly, even if it's not what we might have chosen, because God is the one who is working in us; God is the one who is clipping back a twig, propping up a branch, or tending to an errant root.

As we grow closer to becoming the people we were intended to be we can let go of all the habits of fear that trap us in wanting more, in being afraid that there will not be enough or thinking that we are unworthy or unloved; and so from that place of growing freedom we are able to give generously and live simply so that we have more to give, more to share.

From that place of holy freedom we can live the two great commandments in a new and different way.

Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Loving God is not feeling warm and fuzzy whenever we think about him or her – though sometimes we do. Loving God is a choice. Loving God is a response to God’s love. Even when we don’t *feel* God’s love for us we can trust that it is there. Today is the day I come to realize that I need do nothing to deserve God’s love. Today is the day that I choose to be sanctified.

Today.