

The Walk of Christ, Pt. 2: Holy Habits and the Virtuous Life
March 27, 2011
Third Sunday in Lent
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6
1 Timothy 4-7b-8
Mark 12:41-44

Let me start with a personal word of thanks to all those who were part of last week's bilingual worship service. In particular, I want to thank Zach Thomas, whose unique blend of skills and experiences makes him so well suited to lead our experiment in sharing worship across this particular cultural line. By most accounts, the worship experience was well received. Perhaps as important as anything, more of our bilingual school friends attended the second bilingual service than the first. That is a real sign of hope and promise for our efforts to deepen relationships with these new friends.

Today, the third Sunday in Lent, we resume our walk with Christ toward the cross. This Lent we are walking with Jesus by considering in particular *how* Christ walked, how, as one both fully divine and fully human, he modeled the very best of what it means to be human.

Two weeks ago, we considered the contemplative life, the life of prayer as a discipline of Christ's that became one of the great Christian traditions. Today through Maundy Thursday of Holy week, we will continue to walk with Christ and follow the outline of Richard Foster's book on major Christian traditions. Today, we take up the question of what it means to live a life of holiness.

All by itself, that word – holiness – might stop us in our tracks. It is not a mantle any of us puts on lightly, if we dare put it on at all. You, holy? Me, holy? I don't think so, we both are likely to say.

So, we find ourselves back at a question that we entertained when we began this series of sermons: Just how Christ-like can we be, us broken and bent sinners? Is this, as I asked at the outset of this series, just a fool's errand or a venture of pure arrogance? Are we to limit our study of the life of Christ to admiration with no further presumption? Or are we really to aspire to live a Christ-like life? Hold those questions in your mind, for now, if you will.

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What, then, is the holiness tradition?

If you happen to be reading Foster's book, Streams of Living Water, in parallel with this series of sermons, you may have come away from this chapter with some of the impressions that I did.

On one hand, the life of holiness, what Foster calls the virtuous life, is as challenging as any of the Christian traditions. On the other, it can be expressed in a fairly simple statement: It is, as Foster calls it, a "life that works,"¹ a "life that functions in a dysfunctional world."²

In summary, the holiness tradition calls us to examine the virtues of Christ and to use those virtues as points on a compass for our own journeys. Remember, now, we are keeping our eyes on the human qualities of Christ, rather than the inseparable divine qualities of our Savior.

The virtuous life, then, is best recognized in the heart of a person, not by his or her good deeds or works. The heart, as Foster says, is the wellspring from which all else flows, our behaviors, our relationships, our works. And, long before Edgar Allen Poe used the phrase as a title for a short story, Christ saw "the tell tale heart" in all those he encountered, just as he still does.

When he encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, he knew her heart before she ever spoke a word: How she had been in five marriages; and how, at the time of their meeting, she was with a man who was not her husband. Jesus also saw in her heart that she thirsted for the living water of heaven. When she recognized Christ as the messiah, she told the whole town, "Come see this man who told me everything I ever did."

Jesus saw into other hearts. He saw into the heart of the rich young ruler, telling him in particular that he would have to give up his riches if he was to follow Christ. Even before the man went slinking away, back to his riches, Jesus saw that he would not give up his wealth.

And, as we heard in the scripture reading from Mark, Jesus saw into the heart of the widow at the temple that day. The story comes after Jesus has already "set his face" to Jerusalem and arrived at his final destination. He has cursed the fig tree and cleansed

¹ Streams of Living Water, p. 82

² Ibid p. 96

the temple of the money changers. He has told parables and declared the great commandment to love God and neighbor.

As he continues to debate the scribes, a widow makes her way through the line of rich people putting their large sums of money into the temple treasury. She drops in two small copper coins, the equivalent of one-sixty-fourth of a day's wages. It is all she has. She has, as Christ points out, both symbolically and quite literally, given her whole life.

The Samaritan woman's conflicted heart, practicing one thing but desperately yearning for another. The rich young ruler's bankrupt obedience to riches. The old widow's sacrificial surrender of her last penny. We see these characters on the outside. Most who knew them probably thought that the woman at the well and the rich young ruler lived imperfect but functional lives. But Christ saw into their hearts, just as he sees into ours, and he knew only the old widow lived a functional life in a dysfunctional world.

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In his chapter on the life of holiness, the virtuous life, Foster points to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a more contemporary example. Many of you may know his story. A modest, book-wormish man, he seemed destined for life as a scholar and professor in religion. But then Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich came to power, preaching a popular but hate-inspiring Arian message. They struck down all who stood in their way or did not fit their model of ideal humanity -- all, by the way, with the support of many in the church too timid to stand up to the Nazis.

Rather than allowing the church to be used as a cover for genocide, Bonhoeffer and his colleagues stood up to the Nazis, many eventually dying for their cause, including Bonhoeffer himself, who was killed only days before Germany's surrender. As he awaited his trial and certain death, Bonhoeffer wrote these words:

The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell (people) of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment and modesty.³

To Foster's submission of Bonhoeffer as an example of the virtuous life, we might add another, that of Martin Luther King Jr. Those who spent the last six weeks watching and

³ Letters and Papers from Prison as quoted in Foster's [Streams of Living Water](#).

discussing the Eyes on the Prize documentary series have been thinking about his words and his actions.

King, of course, wrote his own letter from prison, for him a Birmingham jail. He addressed it to a group of moderate clergy who, in their own minds, were virtuous enough. They agreed with the goals of the civil rights movement, just not all of the tactics, especially the non-violent civil disobedience that called the nation's attention to the racial injustice of the times in the South.

Explaining that he himself had not planned to be the leader of such a movement, King wrote these words in his letter from a Birmingham jail:

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Yes, you may be thinking, King and Bonhoeffer were both great men who rose to do great deeds in times of great need. They should be held up as paragons of virtue and models of faith. They will be remembered through the ages for their great acts. They belong in the holiness hall of fame. But not us, we may be thinking. For you and me, that kind of holiness is simply out of reach.

However, to think that is only letting ourselves off the hook. For, though their actions were great, those actions sprang from hearts that were first shaped by holy habits. Remember, neither Bonhoeffer nor King sought the roles thrust on them and, many times, they wavered under the weight of those roles.

As Richard Foster emphasizes, holiness is known far more by what is on the inside than what shows on the outside. Think about the old widow at the temple that day. Had no one been there to see her give her last penny, her act would have been just as holy and just as sacred, all the same.

As for us, well, we are more like that woman at the well or the rich young ruler. Our hearts are far more conflicted, and we know it. The world has its grips on us, its hooks in us.

We are a nation that secretly watches those reality shows about housewives in Atlanta and Beverly Hills and, don't tell anyone, Jersey Shore. As a society, we proclaim, "All hail Snooky," at least until the next person comes along whom we make famous for no

other reason than our bored and bankrupt voyeurism. Who wants to be thought of as “holy” anyway? No one wants to be considered “holier than thou.”

And how would we know if we’re being holy and virtuous even if we wanted to try? Where do we find the check list or the instruction video? When does the infomercial air so we can see just how we are supposed to act or buy the product that makes it as easy as having six-pack abs in just six weeks?

At that point, if we are listening, we are called by God out of this dysfunctional world. We are called back to walk with Christ, to pay attention to the One and the Way. To look not at our world or our individual works but into our own hearts, the wellspring of all that we do and all that we are. As Foster writes:

Holiness is not rules and regulations. Elaborate lists of dos and don’ts miss the point of a life hidden with God in Christ. No single standard of behavior is dictated by the word *holy*. All external legalisms fail to capture the heart of holy living and holy dying.

Holiness is sustained attention to the heart, the source of all action

Holiness is not otherworldliness Holiness is world affirming Holiness is not “works righteousness.” We cannot muster up our willpower to do good deeds and thereby become righteous. Sanctifying grace, like justifying grace, is utterly and completely a work of ..., well, grace. It is unearned and unearnable.

Holiness is not perfectionism ... it is progress in purity and sanctity Holiness is not absorption into God Holiness is loving unity with God In holiness we become the persons we were created to be.⁴

Friends, hear those words. To live the virtuous life, is not to wake one day as goody two shoes or to be above it all and all others. It is the every-day business of character transformation. Foster quotes Francis de Sales, who points out:

“The soul that rises from sin to devotion may be compared to the dawning of the day, which at its approach does not expel the darkness instantaneously but only little by little.”⁵

⁴ P. 83

⁵ P. 90

The virtuous life is a journey, but a journey with and in Jesus the Christ. And in these days of Lent, we walk with Christ toward the cross in both patience and perseverance. We surrender ourselves and all that separates us from God. We yield all that is within us, keenly aware that the costly grace that is our guarantee is the gift of the one who was obedient to God in everything, even unto the cross.

His times and his world were every bit as dysfunctional as ours. But as the Christ, he shows us the way to live a functional life in a dysfunctional world. He gives us new life and models for us a life that works and stems from a heart of pure, patient and persistent virtue.

Amen