

Today is the first Sunday of the Lenten season. During Lent, we are invited into a time of reflection, repentance, and spiritual renewal. For this, over the next six weeks leading up to Easter, we will journey together reflecting on what it means to be holy in our Wesleyan tradition.

What is holiness? The answer will vary depending on who you ask. There are a variety of perspectives that sometimes confuse us. Some view holiness through the lens of legalistic righteousness, where following rules is the end goal. Others perceive it as an unattainable ideal, so far removed from our reality that it becomes irrelevant. And then there are those who consider holiness a purely personal endeavor, disconnected from the wider community and the world.

Yet, as Methodists, we see holiness in a different light. For example, John Wesley challenges these perspectives by presenting holiness not as a rigid adherence to rules, not as an unachievable goal, nor as a solitary journey, but as a transformative process driven by God's grace. For Wesley, holiness is the very essence of our Christian life—it is about living out our faith through love and service to God and each other. Our focus is not on external compliance or privatized religiosity but on the transformation of the heart.

To learn about this, we are looking at two Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. The apostle Paul wrote these letters to teach about Christian life to the new Christians who were learning how to follow Jesus' teachings. These Scriptures are significant because Wesley saw a blueprint for the Christian life in them as a life marked by grace, transformation, and love.

For instance, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul said, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." articulating a foundational truth about the Christian life: our sanctification is God's will. The call to holiness is not a human invention but a divine mandate. This teaching moves us beyond the notion of holiness as mere moral correctness or adherence to a set of rules through personal effort. Instead, Paul invites us into a deeper understanding of sanctification, one that is initiated and sustained by the grace of God in us to reflect the character of Christ in our lives. This is not about achieving perfection by avoiding what is bad or wrong but pursuing it by actively loving and serving God and others. For example, when you look at Jesus, what do you see? Love and service. That is holiness; that is God's will for us.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Paul speaks about the concept and meaning of becoming a new creation in Christ,

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God."

Here, Paul is explaining the nature of the Christian transformation: a complete renewal of our identity that influences how we engage with the world around us. As new creations, we are

transformed individuals and participants in God's work of reconciliation. Our holiness is personal and communal, calling us to embody God's reconciling love in our relationships and act as witnesses of Christ. So, the foundation of our sanctification is having our being in Jesus Christ, and a fruit of this sanctification is to become ambassadors of God's love in the world.

Our Wesleyan theology resonates with these Scriptures. Wesley's emphasis on holiness as the essence of our Christian life echoes Paul's instruction that sanctification is God's will for us. He believed in holiness as a transformative process that leads out into the world to bring Christ to all people.

In this sense, holiness is not about adhering to a list of do's and don'ts but about undergoing a deep, internal transformation that aligns us more closely with the character of Christ and God's love for the world. This means that our sanctification is the journey from who we were to who we are becoming in Christ. It is about allowing God's grace to mold us, shape us, and refine us into his image, shining light everywhere we go. And, in a practical manner, this is when we become a mirror of God and reflect his love into the world.

So, Wesleyan holiness is acting out of love as we learn how much we are loved. We don't follow or keep Jesus' teachings or God's commands to get a benefit (though that happens) but because it is our love's natural inclination to do us. This is precisely what Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Consider the story of the Grinch, for example. Much like our own journey towards holiness, the Grinch experienced a profound change not because he adhered to a set of rules or achieved some unattainable standard of perfection. Instead, his heart grew three sizes in a single day because he was touched by the unconditional love and joy of the Whoville community. As it says,

"And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say – that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day. And then – the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!"

The Grinch was "sanctified" through an act of love that seeded in him love itself. This act of love transformed him, turning him from a figure of bitterness and isolation into one of generosity and connection.

Similarly to the Grinch's transformation, our Wesleyan theology teaches us that holiness is about allowing God's grace to touch our hearts. It is not merely about avoiding what is wrong or striving for a flawless existence; it is about embracing God's love in such a way that it overflows into our actions and relationships.

John Wesley explained this in a letter he sent to Walter Churchey on February 21, 1771, "Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love; love expelling sin, and governing both the heart and life of a child of God."

This is the heart of holiness: being driven by love for God and others. Think of it this way: when our actions, words, and every decision we make are concerned about reflecting our

love for God and those whom God created in his own image as we are too. We don't pursue holiness to be better than others or to gain God's favor but because we love.

This is how Wesley argued that genuine faith leads to both inward and outward holiness. As new creations, what God has done inside our hearts and minds ought to be evident in how we live our lives as an act of love (ambassadors of reconciliation). And, as we grow in our love for God and others, the virtues of kindness, patience, and humility, among others, progressively are reflected in our moral character and interactions. This is Christian perfection: pursuing and growing in love with God and one another.

John Wesley's own spiritual journey reflects this. For years, he tried to achieve salvation and holiness through his own efforts and merits, but he failed miserably. Until he realized that salvation and sanctification were acts of grace by God. It was then that he recalled his heart burning inside with love and gratitude when he understood he was forgiven by faith and grace alone. It was then that he finally experienced the joy of forgiveness and sanctification. He believed and trusted Jesus, and the Holy Spirit instantly transformed him into a new creation—much like the Grinch. For years, he pursued this idea, but it was not until he surrendered to God in humility that he experienced it.

Just as John Wesley experienced salvation and sanctification, we, too, are sanctified by believing, surrendering, and loving God and others as we have been loved. It is then when a perfect love for God and others replaces our natural inclination towards sin, and our heart grows so big that it spills out through our actions and words—again, like the Grinch.

What does all this mean to us? How do we accomplish God's will for us to be holy in a tangible and practical manner?

Holiness is nurtured by cultivating a deep, personal relationship with God through prayer, meditation, and study of the Bible. Serving others with a compassionate heart and advocating for justice. Building meaningful relationships within our community and practicing forgiveness. Living with integrity, embracing humility, seeking spiritual growth through worship, the sacraments, and openness to the Holy Spirit. These acts of faith and love help us align our lives with Christ's likeness. They are mirrors of Jesus teachings. And all of this is God's will.

As we step into this season of Lent, let us commit to these practices, not merely as acts of personal piety but as a means to actively participate in God's work of transforming the world with his love, shining God's light into the world's darkest places. Let us also embrace this journey of holiness with open hearts. Let us allow God's transformative work to be done in us, shaping us to be more like Christ daily in how we treat the people in our lives and around us.

May our hearts be open and our spirits willing as we seek to understand and embody "The Heart of Holiness" in our lives. Let us pray that this Lenten journey will draw us closer to the heart of God, transforming us into the image of Christ for the sake of the world. Amen.