



THE DYNAMIC OF HOLINESS

Deirdre Brower Latz

People often look for definitions for holiness, but after decades of ministry, I feel fairly certain that at least part of the truth is that it cannot be defined by raw text. Instead, holiness can be understood only as it is lived out. Holiness is storied and embodied personally and corporately in real-life, here-and-now ways.

What does that mean? I think it means we're asking ourselves the wrong questions sometimes. "What is holiness?" might be better phrased as "What does holiness look like, smell like, feel like, and sound like?"

Holiness looks and sounds like a community of believers who welcome into their midst a drunk man who shouts out

during the sermons. It means some of the congregation sitting with this drunk man, someone fetching a cool drink for him, some helping him outside for a breather. The whole congregation wills him toward a different future. Holiness sounds like this congregation learning the name and life story of the alcoholic and—in naming and knowing—living out life together toward his release from his captivity to the alcoholism that has marred his life, the birth of a different hope that tomorrow can be different.

Holiness looks like the people of that congregation trying to understand something alien to them and working together for the man's freedom from oppression. These people collectively agree that alcohol will never be on the premises, agreeing that in hospitality the temptation to drink will never be placed in front of their brother. That is an enacting of holiness—a real illustration of something that binds us together before God.

How else might holiness be performed? The answer lies in the men and women of the congregation who find themselves in a world of competition, striving for achievement and success, desiring fancier cars, bigger houses—easily walking away from relationships, memberships, and beliefs, and determining, because of Christ in them, to practice faithfulness, to stick with it, to pray, to live simply, to put down roots, to be truly faithful to God and their spouses and their church. They view their money as a tool rather than a god. The life choices of generosity and hospitality are bravely taken, the career ladder embraced only so far—or, having achieved success, making the generous choice to live within a different framework so that the surplus salary will be spent on digging wells, funding scholarships, or buying goats.

Holiness is the drug-addicted mother who comes to church to get a handout and gradually begins to see that because of the grace and acceptance, perhaps there's a different way to live. Seven years later she discovers that she is still moving forward on a journey of faith that includes running the benevolence program she once depended on and giving advice to others on moving away from drugs.

Holiness is like the college professor who chooses to commit his life to an inner-city congregation and be known only by his name. He paints the walls and makes pancakes for church breakfasts. He embraces everyone who comes through the doors; he says that this congregation helps him find what holiness genuinely means.

Holiness is like the oncology nurse who pours her life into her patients. They ask for her by name, knowing that to her they will be a person, not a number, and that they will be cared for as if they were her own parents.

Holiness is partly found in these connection points of people in which they are encountering God in a real way and then allowing that moment of initial encounter to prompt a lifetime of transformation. Transformation and holiness are intimately interwoven in the person as an individual—persons who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Master as they become more and more Christlike. But they *also* are interwoven as people work alongside each other to discover what such holiness means. That is where the congregation of the church, the community of believers, becomes a holy nation, a holy people. (See 1 Peter 2.)

It is interesting that holiness understood in this way is essentially something that grows; it's organic and dynamic, it's always changing, always being new. In some soils it looks like

this, and in others it looks like that. Holiness, I believe, is deeply related to the soil of the Church and culture it's being grown in. But wherever we are, holiness is always related to groups of people personally and corporately working to live out what the kingdom of God looks like in the present.

Of course, there are some things that will always be true: holiness will be life-bringing, life-giving, and affirming. It will always be related to the most loving acts of a community. Holiness will be redemptive and renewing. It will be discipling and discerning. It will bring freedom and not oppression.

Clearly I am mirroring something of Romans here. The freedom of holiness is not freedom to sin, to bring death, or to hurt, wound, expel, exclude, crush, abuse, or desecrate. The freedom of holiness is about love in all its fullness.

If someone were to go out for coffee with me and ask me what holiness is, my instinct would be descriptive. I might ask questions back: *What do you think it is? How do you think you become closer to God? How does life reflect God's best? What kind of holiness does Jesus make you think of?* Then I would tell stories to describe holiness, because it is not only organic and growing but also somewhat of a mystery: how it happens, how one is made holy, how one is sanctified. It is essentially a gift—a gift and a grace from God.

I believe that holiness described like this is probably full of laughter, joy, life, hope, freedom, playfulness, subversion, and justice more than anything else. And holiness like this would be contagious and compelling to others. It would call people in and brim over with creativity and peacefulness. Holiness understood in these ways would call out to people who are in pain and offer hope, realism, help, possibilities, and comfort.

Holiness would include the capacity for grief, rage, frustration, anger, fear, stumbling, doubt, and failure but would always enable places of wrestling to be points of encountering God and being renamed. (Think of Jacob in Genesis 18.) The face-to-face encounter with God truly changes the human, and the community is then touched as well. Holiness then includes things like justice, reconciliation, renewal, truth, and hope.

From these descriptions I've offered, what of goodness and life doesn't holiness include? Exactly. Holiness as a practice of life is all-encompassing; no part of life is left untouched.

So holiness is real, possible, here, now, a gift, grace, about life, about hope, about God. Now what about sanctification? Where does that fit into this picture of holiness? In my storied, embedded, and embodied understanding of holiness, how does sanctification happen? I believe that similar to holiness, sanctification is process and moment; it is conversion and conversion again. It is gift and grace; it is given, not earned; it is bountiful and en-fleshed.

Sanctification is a practiced gift. It is reflected in our wholehearted response to God's generous and indescribable grace in helping us become who we are—God's people—a holy nation, a chosen people, a light to the nations. I think that in a life that seeks God's face over and again, sanctification can be understood only in the light of the Sanctifier. And God's mercy, spirit, love, life—poured into the follower of Jesus—begins the work of sanctifying.

Such grace means that the sanctified express their love in wholly loving God, themselves, and others. This love is real, now, present, all-consuming, active, tough, gritty, justice-leaning, determined, persevering, hope-filled, and all-enfolding.

This love resists sin and temptation in whatever form they come. As people love in this sanctified way, they become transformed agents of God's transformation. We are sanctified for the sake of the whole world. Such sanctification is humble and oozes gratitude to God, who makes us wholly His so that we can be whole again as individuals, communities, and a world. The possibility of such all-encompassing wholeness, restoration, and renewal of people and communities is one of the high points of Wesleyan thinking, I think, that all people may be wholly sanctified—being made free from sin, able to resist temptation and reject hate, that people may be made truly whole to love God, self, and others. It is something that we dare suggest is possible—not because of any merit or ability and not because we are able, but because God is. And by grace we respond to God's grace—He is the beginning and the end. For God sanctifies His people. This is good news!

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Discussion Questions

1. What are some main themes that jumped out to you from this chapter?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Deirdre's suggestion that holiness cannot be defined by raw text? Why do you feel that way?
3. What are the strengths of describing holiness and sanctification in stories rather than definitions? What are the weaknesses?
4. What does it mean that grace is dynamic rather than static?
5. What is God's role in Deirdre's description of holiness?
6. How does sanctification change the way people live, according to this chapter?