

At the Corner of Happy, Healthy, and Holy sermon series

“Be Holy”

[1 Peter 1:13-16](#)

Today, we are starting a new sermon series called, *At the Corner of Happy, Healthy, and Holy*. As you might have noticed, I borrowed the title from Walgreens’ popular slogan, *At the Corner of Happy and Healthy*. This slogan was replaced with a new one a couple of years ago. But I still associate Walgreens with its old slogan, as a company that helps people to be happy and healthy.

Like the Walgreens store across the street from us, we, Campbell United Methodist Church also want people to find a happy and healthy life with us. And, we promote not only happiness and healthiness, but also holiness. Today and the next two Sundays, we will reflect on these virtues, as we seek to be happy, healthy, and holy throughout the year.

In today’s scripture reading, the apostle Peter says, “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” Throughout the Bible, holiness is a core central concept of God’s people, especially for Christians. But, what does it mean to be holy? If you are struggling to answer this question, do not be afraid. You are not the only one.

According to a survey conducted by the Barna Research Group a few years ago, most church-attending Americans have little or no concept of what it means to be holy. Though over 70 percent of the survey participants believed it is possible for someone to become holy, when they were asked to describe the meaning of holiness, the most common reply was “*I don’t know.*”

Actually, most of us have mixed feelings about being called a holy person because it can be both a complement or an insult. And we would hardly consider applying the label to ourselves. And since we are not sure what the word really means, we do not use it to describe others, either. We feel more comfortable with using words like loving, faithful, and devoted, instead of holy. But, as the people of God in the Old Testament were called to be holy because God is holy, we, the believers in Christ also are called to be holy for the same reason: God is holy. If we are to take Scripture seriously, we should know what it means to be holy.

The Hebrew word for “holy” is *Kodesh*, and it means “separated” or “set apart.” It can also imply “consecrated and dedicated.” The Greek word for “holy” is *Hagios*, and it means “sacred, blameless, and consecrated.” So, biblically speaking, to be holy is to be set apart, or, to be different.

Yet, honestly, we are not comfortable with this idea of appearing different from others, are we? We don’t want to stand out from the crowd. We don’t want to be perceived as being odd. So, we allow ourselves to be assimilated into the secular world around us.

However, in the ancient world, religious people were distinguished by their longing for holiness. They desired to be seen as different. They even segregated themselves from others. For instance, the Israelites

believed they were a chosen people, set apart by God for a divine purpose. So, they separated themselves from others. A faithful Jew would not even sit at the same table with a gentile, a non-Jew. That kind of strict separation was perceived to be evidence of sincere devotion to God.

The community of Hasidic Jews is a modern example of living a holy life through strict separation. Hasidim literally means “holy ones.” Living in tightly-knit communities with a dynastic leader who has both political and religious authority, they maintain their own language and follow their own rituals, customs and traditions. A Christian contemporary example of this kind of holy living is the Amish community.

Thankfully, in our Methodist tradition, being holy, being different from others does not mean withdrawing ourselves from the world around us. Living a holy life does not mean living in a community that is perfectly shielded from any and all harms of the world and simply pursuing our own personal piety.

As shown in our denominational liturgy of the baptismal covenant, our Methodist theology recognizes “the spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers of this world,” such as selfishness, greed, corruption, injustice, poverty, violence, pollution, and destruction, and it guides us to differentiate between the good and the evil that is present in our world. But, we are instructed to go into the broken world that we live in and do all the good that we can. We are called to do no harm in the process. Instead of separating ourselves from our world, we are called to radically embrace and engage it.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism made a great discovery one day while he was reading the Bible. The verse was Hebrews 12:14 which states, “without holiness, no one can see the Lord.” He understood the passage to mean that unless a person had purity of heart and life, he/she cannot enter heaven. So, fearing for his own soul, Wesley started to systematically and methodically structure his life to become holy.

As we learned last year through our sermon series, *Revival*, John Wesley’s method to be holy had two components: personal piety and social action. He met daily with a support group of Christian brothers. They read and studied the Bible together. They attended worship and celebrated the Holy Communion together. They encouraged and prayed for one another. But, their efforts to be holy did not stop there. Beyond their church and meeting place, they continued to seek to be holy out in the world. They committed their time and resources to help the poor, farmers and miners, especially with educating their children, and visited the sick and prisoners.

For Wesley, being holy meant getting outside of his comfort zone and placing himself in a small group of fellow believers where he could be accountable for his actions. For Wesley, being holy meant getting out of his comfort zone and placing himself in the world of non-believers, and creating new communities where they could also be welcomed and included.

Our Christian faith, our Methodist tradition does not provide a bunker for us to escape the harms and threats of the world. Instead, it empowers us to go into the world as agents of God’s peace and justice, as agents of God’s love and grace, and be involved in God’s work of restoration and transformation.

Many of our church family are already participating in this process of transformation of the world through their volunteer work, at schools, at hospitals, at nursing homes, in prisons, at church and many other non-profit organizations. While most of the work is local and ongoing throughout the year, some are annual efforts or occur a few times and out of state.

Friends, a call to be holy is not a call to just a personal, pietistic way of living. Being holy is not about simply reading the Bible and praying every day, going to church every Sunday, receiving Holy Communion every month, fasting or going on a retreat once in a while, though I want you to be intentional about growing deeper in your relationship with God through these spiritual practices this new year.

Instead, a call to be holy is a call to live fully in the world, a call to take a risk. To take the risk of creating a new community that welcomes and includes everyone, “people of all ages, nations, and races” beyond all kinds of divisions and separations; a Christ-centered community where all are saved and given the opportunity for new life, regardless of their identity, background, and status.

To be holy does not mean having all the right answers for faith questions, but earnestly wrestling with them, seeking to know God’s heart for the grey areas in our complicated lives and confusing world. As Mother Teresa said, “Holiness does not consist in doing extraordinary things. It consists in accepting, with a smile, what Jesus sends us. It consists in accepting and following the will of God.”

As we move forward in 2019, may we continually be nourished and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, for it is through the intercession and help of the Holy Spirit that we may be holy in all our thoughts and actions. May we accept God's invitation to be set apart by radically embracing the call to be agents of God’s peace and justice and mighty builders of God’s kingdom!

Amen.