



Revival: Living the Methodist Way
“THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS”

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Scriptures: Acts 3:1-10, Psalm 96:9 (KJV)

One morning a man was sitting at a stoplight. The woman in front of him was talking on her cell phone while rummaging through her purse, and when the light changed to green, she didn't obey its command. A green light is a commandment, right? It's not a suggestion. When the light turned to red again and she still hadn't moved, the man began (with the windows up) screaming swear words at the woman and beating on his steering wheel. His expressions of anger were interrupted by a policeman, gun drawn, tapping on his window. Against his protestations of “You can't arrest me for screaming in my car!” the policeman ordered the man into the back seat of his cruiser and took him to the police station.

After two hours in a holding cell, the arresting officer advised him that he was free to go. The man said indignantly, “I knew you couldn't arrest me for what I was yelling in my own car. You haven't heard the last of this.” The officer replied, “I didn't arrest you for shouting in your car. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw you screaming, shouting profanity and beating your steering wheel. I said to myself, ‘What a jerk!’ But I knew there was nothing I could do to you for throwing a fit in your own car.

“Then I noticed the cross hanging from your rearview mirror, the bright fish symbol on your license tag, the JESUS IS COMING SOON bumper sticker on one side and GOD IS MY CO-PILOT on the other side. I figured the person who owned the car must be a very holy person, so I decided you must have stolen it!”

Holiness. It's not a common word in our vocabulary today, and when we do hear the word “holiness,” it often triggers negative images of people who claim to be “holier than thou.” We think of people who seem to be very pious, but whose intentions and even actions demonstrate the opposite. Holiness, however, was a central concept in the life and ministry of John Wesley. Holiness is nothing more than loving God and others with all that we have and all that we are. Wesley talked about holiness of heart and life. When holiness of heart is marked by purity and devotion to Christ, the result is holiness in all areas of life.

When I was in ninth grade, my home congregation built a new church because our old facility was way too small. My father was on the building committee, and we ended up with a very contemporary but simple brick sanctuary. To this day, the only furnishings in the sanctuary other than the pews are a baptismal font, a free-standing pipe organ, a bare communion table and a stark wooden cross located exactly in the middle of the sanctuary, right among the pews.

What fascinated me the most about the sanctuary, however, was the windows. On the east side near the back there was a red stained glass window symbolizing Pentecost. The baptismal font was right in front of the window, and that's where people were always baptized and joined the church on Pentecost Sunday. During worship on Sunday mornings, the sun would always stream through that red window, making beautiful and intricate patterns on the stone floor. And then to the west, there were huge clear windows from floor to ceiling. Whenever we worshipped, we could look outside and see trees, flowers and sky. We knew if it was sunny or raining or snowing. We knew if it was spring, summer, fall or winter.

Whereas the stained glass window was a beautiful symbol of God's presence within that holy place, the clear windows were a reminder that our call as Christians is to take our faith with us out into the world. When you and I come to worship, we experience holiness of heart through this sacred space. Yet, we must never remain in the church, for our ultimate call is to demonstrate holiness of life by living out our faith in the world.

Now this sanctuary is a little different because we can sit here and almost be oblivious to the rest of the world. We can't see outside. I kind of like that. I can really focus on God here and leave behind the cares of the world, even if only for this hour. The stained glass windows lead me into the beauty of holiness. But occasionally, in the middle of my private reverie with God, the sirens go off, the fire engines and ambulances roar by, I pray for whatever situation may be unfolding in the area, and I am reminded once again that, even here in this sanctuary, we are also part of the world.

One of my favorite Bible verses is Psalm 96:9 in the King James Version, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." This is a holy and beautiful space. I feel so close to God when I am here. The beauty of our worship together is not only a gateway to holiness of heart, though; it's a gateway into the holiness of all life. In the same way, the beauty of this 237-year-old doorknob from the very first Methodist house of worship in London, the mother church of Methodism, reminds me that the beauty of this sanctuary is not only a gateway to God, it's a gateway back into the world.

In our scripture for today, the disciples Peter and John, now leaders in the early Christian church, are on their way to the temple for afternoon prayers and are about to enter through the Beautiful Gate. We have no definite historical knowledge of a temple gate called Beautiful. All we know is that in the sunshine, the polished bronze, gold and silver would have shone with spectacular beauty.

It was at this Beautiful Gate that a man lame from birth was laid every day by friends so he could beg for money. Remember that in the time of Jesus, people associated physical and mental disabilities with sin. You were sick because you sinned. That made you unclean and unable to enter the temple proper. The lame man could lie at the gate but couldn't go through it.

On this particular day, he saw Peter and John and begged for money. They stopped and looked the man right in the eye. What did they see? A pitiful beggar seated helplessly next to the magnificent silver and gold of the Beautiful Gate. Peter said, "Look at me." The lame man did as

he was told, anticipating a windfall. Maybe he'd get so much money he could call it a day and go home.

I wonder what was going through Peter and John's minds. Did they hesitate? Were they wondering what Jesus would have done? Did they feel a surge of Holy Spirit power? What would you do if that lame man was lying at the entrance to First Church every Sunday? Peter said to the lame man, "I have no silver or gold, like you see right in front of you, but what I do have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." "What Peter offered was more valuable than any of the precious metals that made up the Beautiful Gate, for temporary modest financial gain and charitable handouts were not what this early Christian community was primarily about."¹

What did Peter do next? He touched the man, and as he lifted him up, divine healing energy flowed to his feet and ankles. The formerly lame man jumped up and began to walk. Then the most important sentence in the story: "He entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God." Peter and John and the beggar walked through the Beautiful Gate together, the first time that he had ever entered the temple. When the love of God breaks through, it always leads us through the Beautiful Gate into the kingdom of God.

But there's something more. This path through the Beautiful Gate toward holiness goes straight through human misery; not around but straight through human misery. You see, the lame man was seated at the gate. Peter and John could not avoid him. So it is with you and me. As a congregation, we are not physically located in a community where we are continually surrounded by street people, poverty and misery. Yet we understand clearly our obligation to care for the very least of God's children, so we travel back and forth constantly to those places in the Detroit Metro area where God calls us to serve.

At the same time, this community of faith does not merely offer words of sympathy or even money to suffering people. We are also called, and indeed, empowered to deal with the root causes of oppression, to help people move from poverty to self-sufficiency, and to bring emotional, spiritual, relational and physical healing to all. The power to heal in the name of Jesus Christ and invite others to walk through the Beautiful Gate is far more precious than any gold or silver. This healing power comes as a gift. It's a gift given in response to our holiness of heart and life.

The spiritual quest for holiness was at the core of John Wesley's theology. In his sermon, *The Witness of the Spirit*, Wesley writes, "We must be holy in heart and life before we can be conscious that we are so. But we must love God before we can be holy at all, this being the root of all holiness."²

Wesley was insistent on two types of holiness. At different times, he called it inward and outward holiness, holiness of heart and life, works of piety and works of mercy, faith and good works, personal holiness and social holiness. For Wesley, salvation is fundamentally social in nature. Salvation is not just individual. When you and I respond to God's grace through faith, our spiritual growth is nurtured in community and leads to offering help to those in need. We can't have one without the other.

We can't show road rage and have a "Jesus Is My Co-pilot" bumper sticker on our car. We can't read our Bible every day and treat our co-workers poorly. We can't pray an hour a day and verbally abuse other people. Holiness is nothing more than loving God and others with all our heart.

John Wesley had a remarkable ability to link piety and justice. His converts were gathered into groups called societies, bands and classes. The goal of the meetings, which consisted of study, prayer and encouragement, was to translate the gospel story into everyday life. A transformed life within leads to a transformed life without. The whole person is converted. The stated purpose of Wesley's societies was to promote "real holiness of heart and life."

For Wesley's followers, holiness of heart included things like praying several times a day, partaking of the Lord's Supper regularly, examining themselves every night, reading spiritual books and shunning all foreseen occasions of evil. Likewise, holiness of life included things like financially supporting charitable causes, giving food and money to the needy, visiting the sick and imprisoned and teaching the children of the unfortunate.

That holiness of heart and life – it was beautiful – and it resulted in a spirit-led renewal movement that began in England and now encompasses 12.4 million people around the world who call themselves United Methodists and millions more who are part of other Wesleyan denominations. Today, our insistence upon holiness of heart and life still leads us and others into the kingdom through the beautiful gate.

Examples of this kind of holiness abound. Several weeks ago a member of our church was headed to her regular grocery store one day, when all of a sudden she felt a nudging to go to another store, one she hardly ever uses. She bought her groceries, and as she headed out to the parking lot, she saw an elderly man who was pulling a small cart full of groceries with one hand. It wasn't a store shopping cart. And he had a bag in the other hand.

She felt led to speak to this man and offer to push the cart to his car and load the groceries. But he said to her, "I don't have a car. I'm walking to my house with these groceries." And she said, "Oh my, you can't walk that far with all these groceries. Let me take you to your house in my car." Do you see? She walked right through the Beautiful Gate by driving that elderly man home with his groceries. She never goes to that grocery store.

I could cite dozens of examples every week of how you, too, walk through the Beautiful Gate of the Christian faith by demonstrating holiness of heart and life. Going down to the river to pray, visiting people in the hospital, sending cards, nurturing your own faith by attending our Duke intern Robert's Bible study class on Monday night, going to Henderson Settlement in Kentucky this month, preparing to travel to Costa Rica in July with our senior high youth, or gearing up to be one of our one hundred volunteers for Vacation Bible School which starts tomorrow morning with three hundred children.

When you tend to your own spiritual life and then share your faith with others by your words and actions, you are living out the words that Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, who is supposed to have said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."³

Be kind, be holy, invite others to walk with you through the Beautiful Gate, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle of one kind or another.

When you and I worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, we, too, can open new gates to love and compassion around the world. Our eyes are opened, our spirits are nourished and we, too, like Peter and John, are empowered to walk with others through the beautiful gate into the holiness of God. What we have to offer is not simply silver or gold but kindness and love. What we have to offer is not a way around but a way through human misery, right into the midst of the great battles we fight every day. What we have to offer is our hand, the invitation to walk together with others through the beautiful gate into the goodness of the kingdom of God.

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1. *Acts: Interpretation*, Atlanta, John Knox press, 1988, p. 44.
 2. *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*, Reuben P. Job, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 104.
 3. "A Gate Called Beautiful," Deborah Smith Douglas, *Weavings*, May-June 2003, p. 12.