

Church Words: Holy Sunday, 10/25/17

1 Have you ever noticed how many strange words are used in church or in talking about church? My least favorite church word is “narthex.” To me it sounds like a part of an insect’s anatomy, as in “Observe the color variations on the narthex of this specimen.” Or maybe narthex just sounds a little too much like anthrax for me, that deadly bacterial infection. Narthex actually means a lobby outside of the sanctuary. Well if a narthex is the same thing as a lobby, can we all agree that we’re simply going to call it a lobby? I recall a staff member at a previous church loudly objecting to modernizing our language from narthex to lobby, saying that people needed to learn to historic elements of our faith. Let me reassure you, failing to explore the architectural and historical roots of the church narthex is unlikely to interfere with your ability to draw closer to Jesus!

What are some of the other church words that need to be updated? How about “episcopal.” When we talk about the “episcopal residence,” it’s the same thing as saying, “the bishop’s house.” So why not say that? Or how about, “ecclesiastical,” which simply means, relating to the church. Here’s a good one: “aspergillum,” which is the name of the device Catholic priests use to sprinkle holy water on people. Or how about the “zucchetto?” According to the National Catholic register, zucchetto “comes from the Italian for ‘little gourd’ or ‘pumpkin.’ It refers to the close-fitting, ecclesiastical skull cap worn by the Pope (white), Cardinals (red), and bishops (purple).”¹ Clearly there are some church words that are unnecessarily obscure and need updating.

On the other hand, there are some church words that are steeped in the traditions of the Bible and the Church, words that can bring us deeply into the presence of God in a way that words like aspergillum will never. Words that allow us to think about and talk about faith in nontrivial ways. Many of them appear to be simple words, until we intentionally explore them and challenge our understanding of their meaning. In the short series we’re beginning today, we’ll explore just three of these words: holy, sacrament, and grace. There are so many others we could explore: salvation, mercy, hope, faith, love, atonement. What are some church words you’ve never really understood or would like to learn more about?

¹ <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/kschiffer/from-aspergillum-to-zucchetto-a-glossary-of-13-obscure-catholic-words>

You can leave me a note on your response cards this morning and I'll considering including your words in a future reprise of this series.

2 We're kicking off the series with a four-letter word: no, not one of those four-letter words, the good kind. It's a short word, so it probably won't earn you very many points in scrabble. It's a familiar word, so most of us have some ideas of what it means. It's a word that should be a part of every worship service and a part of every day of our lives. Holy, or holiness.

Let's start with what holiness doesn't mean. Last week Jana and I drove to Chicago to see a musical, Hamilton. How many of you have driven to Chicago before? Every time I drive there, I forget about the inevitable toll booths. It occurs to me that these toll systems are geared to serve the needs of the local people and not the alien, the occasional visitor like me. I obviously don't have an Illinois E-Z Pass. I never keep loose change in my pocket or my car. And trying to read all the signs and pick the right lane can be difficult.

On this particular trip, we had a unique experience. As is typical in tollway travel, we easily paid to get on the tollway, with a number of clearly marked and staffed toll booths that allowed us to still pay if we didn't have exact change. Getting off the tollway was the problem. As we turned into our exit lane, it became clear that it was completely unstaffed, with a collection machine that read "Exact Change Only." Bear in mind, we're processing all this while decelerating from 70 miles per hour. After coming to a stunned stop, we finally had to shrug our shoulders and drive through the toll lane without paying, knowing that we were beginning our Chicago adventure as outlaws.

We were able to avoid further penalties by going to an Illinois Tollway website after we returned home, but it wasn't easy. Their system required us to identify the tollbooth number we had gone through, which completely unrelated to the exit number we had written down. It took Jana and I, both Ph.D.s, about a half hour to ferret out the information we needed by using Google Maps and other assorted websites to satisfy the system and pay the toll (all of 60 cents, by the way), hopefully absolving us of our sin and restoring us to good graces with the law.

Maybe you've had the same experience or a similar one, a time when it seemed unavoidable to break some technicality of the law and then almost impossible to rectify your

transgression. Honeywell once overpaid me by over \$800 and there was nothing I could do to convince the payroll department to take the money back because the rigid system just couldn't handle it! That's the way holiness used to be before Jesus. Old Testament holiness pointed to God's law to prescribe a means to make things right with God, by completing rituals like ceremonial cleansing or the sacrifice of animals. Just like the tollway epidemic afflicting our roadways, the law was neither simple nor easy to satisfy, so that the need to "pay the toll" just kept coming up every few miles. That was never really God's purpose or intent. Thank God that Jesus offers us a better way. The Apostle Paul describes our new relation to holiness in his letter to the Galatians. I'm reading from chapter 2, verses 19-21 in The Message.

{Read Galatians 2:19-21, The Message}.

Trying to keep up with all the rules didn't work for Paul. It was like trying to have exact change for every toll. As Paul put it, "If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily."² And that takes us right to the heart of what holiness means to us as Christ followers. Holiness is found in a living relationship with God, a relationship in which we identify with God so much that the way we see the world, the attitudes of our hearts, the thoughts of our head, and the actions we take become expressions of Jesus.

3 I have a video to share with you this morning that describes in one way what it's like to make the shift from being secular, seeing the world through our own eyes, and being sacred, seeing the world through the eyes of the Holy One...

{Play DVD, "Holiness" 1:40}³

4 As someone who wears glasses with progressive bifocals, I am keenly aware of how the glasses on my face impact the way I see the world. Recently I misplaced my regular eyeglasses and I had to walk around indoors with my prescription sunglasses on. Have you ever been there? Or try closing one eye- go ahead try it! Swivel your head around a bit. Do you see how different everything becomes when you lose one of your eyes?

Growing in holiness is like getting an eye exam and discovering that there are colors

² Galatians 2:21, The Message

³ <https://skitguys.com/videos/item/disciples-holiness>

in the world that you've never seen, or details that you've been missing. Your vision might have changed so gradually over time that you're surprised to realize that it's changed at all. It's like living with one eye and then discovering what it means to have binocular vision. God sees the world so differently than we do. Recently I described to you how impactful my Unidos En Christo weekend was, how I felt like Dorothy stepping out of a black and white movie into a world of full color. Sometimes changes come dramatically on this journey of holiness, and sometimes slowly. As followers of Jesus, we're called to be on a journey of letting go of the way we see the world and adopting the way Jesus sees the world. We're not expected to be perfect, but we are expected to want to be perfect. You might say that in addition to asking, "What would Jesus Do?" we might start with "How might Jesus see this person or situation?" The actions we take in this world are important, but holiness consists not just of actions, but of the orientation of our hearts.

5 There's another way that holiness is like getting our eyes checked. Anyone who's worn glasses can tell you that people notice when you make a change. "Oh, did you get new glasses?" Glasses have become a fashion statement today, something designed to attract attention. Some people actually buy eyeglass frames without any prescription added to the lenses. In a way, holiness is like wearing fashion eyewear. It sets us apart from others. It invites questions from people who notice the change. Holiness at its most basic level, whether applied to people, places, things, or even God, means "set apart." The people of God have always been called to be set apart for other people, with the express purpose of drawing attention and praise- not to us, but to God.

As Christians, we're to be the salt and light of the earth. Just as salt enhances the flavor of food, our lives are meant to enhance the lives of others. Just as light reveals the world to us, our lives are meant to bring revelation to the lives of others. Without holiness, we're salt without the saltiness. Without holiness, we're like a lamp hidden under a basket. Our saltiness and our light come from the living presence of Christ in our lives. So you see, while acting in holy ways is important, holiness begins, not with doing all the right things, but by seeing the world the God does, by putting on Jesus glasses, and letting our corrected vision and God's Holy Spirit transform our lives, propelling us forward into missional action. If our lives aren't oriented to the mission of Jesus in some way that makes

sense given the context of our lives and circumstances, then we have a heart problem. If we have a heart problem, we most likely also have a vision problem. All of us, in fact, could benefit from an occasional trip to the spiritual eye doctor, whether that's a small group, a friend or family member, or your pastor.

6 Here's the bottom line. Do you have a hunger in your heart for the things of God? Ask yourself if you honestly want to grow in your love and knowledge of God's Word, the Bible, and God's people, the Church. Do you want to treat your neighbors with greater love? Do you want to be the hands and feet of Jesus in bringing about healing and justice in this world? If that's you, then hear the Good News: You can have all those things and more, poured out abundantly in your life, because God has the same desire for you: that you grow in holiness.

But maybe instead you're where I've been at times: Showing up to make sure that you don't get a fine for skipping a toll; wanting not so much for the Holy Spirit to transform your life as to avoid eternal punishment, fearfully trying to meet the minimum daily requirements that God's law has specified for our salvation and consistently failing. If that's you today, then there's Good News for you as well. Jesus has paid your toll. In fact, Jesus has paid every toll, and every day is a chance to start a new life. You have nothing to fear by driving through the gate and choosing to trust your life into the hands of Jesus.

Please pray with me now. *Holy One, we give you thanks for your Spirit who makes us holy from the inside out. Oh God, for those here today who might be afraid of your judgement because of past and present misdeeds, I ask that you might break through with a clear revelation that you love them and are waiting to receive and forgive them. For all of us, oh God, give us clean hearts and clean hands, and may our lives be unmistakably marked with the joy of your Spirit. Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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