

Streams of Living Water 1 – Holiness Tradition: Discovering the Virtuous Life

Waterford Mennonite Church

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Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

I am deeply indebted to Richard Foster and his book *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (specifically chapter 3) which served as the key resource in the writing of this sermon. One will see the influence and insight of Foster throughout the sermon even and beyond the multiple references listed in the endnotes.

Today we begin our exciting journey through the six streams of spirituality as outlined by Richard Foster. These six streams articulate different lenses that are used by Christians to give shape and understanding to their faith and faith practices. Our dream of this series is that it will grant us a better understanding of the various streams and as a result we will also gain a depth of insight into how other Christians in the world understand their faith and spirituality. In addition though, our hope is that it gives us additional tools here at Waterford for us to grow in our capacity to understand and appreciate our brothers and sisters here within our faith community.

Crucial to this study though is the understanding that all six of these streams of spirituality can be found in the life of Jesus Christ. Each of the streams are needed for the full balanced expression of living in the Jesus way. So, to be clear then it is not as if some are right and some are wrong. Or that some are okay, oh but some are better. Instead they each are valid and needed expressions of distinct streams of spirituality. In addition, we humans often do not fit into neat little boxes. The same is true for this study. We each will most likely name a dominate stream we identify with. However, we each will most likely find multiple streams that have shaped us, or streams we find ourselves continuing to be formed in and through and by. The final thing to note is that during this series we challenge each of us to consider which streams we were formed in, which streams we find ourselves in today, and what are the ways we can begin or continue to connect with others who were formed or find themselves in a different stream.

Just as a reminder, here are the six streams in the order we will be studying them in this series:

Holiness: The Virtuous Life
Charismatic: The Spirit-Empowered Life
Evangelical: The Word-Centered Life
Contemplative: The Prayer-filled Life
Incarnational: The Sacramental Life
Social Justice: The Compassionate Life

This morning we focus on the Holiness Stream. Our task is to learn what it is and what it is not, to learn of individuals and groups who have emerged from this stream, and to look at Romans twelve which is a biblical teaching that embodies some of the main tenets of this stream. I will give you a heads up that historically Anabaptists as a group have fallen within this stream. I wonder what are the ways that you will or will not resonate with this particular stream?

So, let's dig in! The pastoral team spent multiple months working our way through this Richard Foster book. I remember when we began to study and talk about the holiness stream I had a gut reaction to the name. Holiness: the virtuous life. It sounded high and mighty to me, and something that evoked images of people who are sure that they are holier than thou. I doubt that many of us routinely compliment someone else by saying "you are so holy." Or "you are so virtuous." Instead we might use it as a put-down, "Well, aren't you holy." Or "virtues are good things, maybe you want to try to get some?"

So what is the stream of holiness? Well, thank you for asking! Richard Foster succinctly defines it as, "The Holiness Stream of Christian life and faith focuses upon the inward re-formation of the heart and the development of "holy habits."¹ Holiness is a lifelong process of being transformed. It is at the heart of discipleship, at the heart of desiring to be transformed to become more and more like Jesus. Perhaps it would be helpful to describe what holiness is and what it is not. (Again, the following lists are compiled by Foster.)

“Holiness is **not** rules and regulations... no single standard of behavior is dictated by the word *holy*. Holiness **is** sustained attention to the heart, the source of all action... it focuses upon the formation and transformation of this center. Holiness is **not** otherworldliness. Holiness **is** world-affirming... Holiness sees the sacred in all things. Holiness is **not** a consuming asceticism. Holiness **is** a bodily spirituality. It affirms the goodness of the human body and seeks to bring it into working harmony with the spirit. It utilizes appropriate Spiritual Disciplines for training the body and mind in right living.”ⁱⁱ

Holiness is **not** “works-righteousness.” “We cannot muster up our willpower to do good deeds and thereby become righteous. Sanctifying grace, just like justifying grace, is utterly and completely the work of... well grace. It is unearned and unearnable. It is a God-initiated and God-sustained reality; we cannot do it, conjure it up, or make it happen.”ⁱⁱⁱ “Holiness **is** a “striving to enter in.” ...Holiness is **not** perfectionism... Instead holiness **is** progress in purity and sanctity. We are set apart for divine purposes. Holy habits deepen into fixed patterns of life. We experience a growing preponderance of right actions flowing from a right heart. We are ever in the process of becoming holy.”^{iv} And finally holiness is “**not** absorption into God... Instead holiness **is** loving unity with God. It is an ever-expanding openness to the divine Center. It is a growing, maturing, freely given conformity to the will and ways of God. Holiness gives us our truest, fullest humanity. In holiness we become the persons we were created to be^v made in the image of God and fully yielded to the ways of Jesus.”^{vi}

For each of the six streams we want to name both the strengths as well as perils of that given stream. It is very important to name the strengths that each stream brings to the body of Christ, while also recognizing that similar to each of our unique gifts, there are also shadow sides or potential pitfalls along the way. The first strength of this stream is that the holiness tradition

constantly holds before us the “ultimate goal of Christian life: an ever deeper formation of the inner (life) so as to reflect the glory and goodness of God”.^{vii} The second strength is “the intentional focus on the heart as the wellspring of life.”^{viii} It is only through the transformation inside, beginning with our hearts, that we are able to reflect the life of Jesus. The third strength is that it gives us hope for genuine progress in character formation. By God’s grace and through God’s grace we can continue to be re-formed more and more to reflect the wondrous understanding that we created by God and called to grow into the likeness of Jesus. And finally the fourth strength is the ways it helps us understand how we embody the words of Second Peter to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).^{ix}

Now we look to the perils, perhaps the shadow side of this particular stream. I already named that historically Anabaptists as a group have fallen within this stream so perhaps you are already thinking of some of the perils. The first I would name is that of legalism. We define what it means to be holy and then we have a list to measure if we or others are achieving it. In the midst of that focus we forget about the truth that holiness only comes by and through God’s grace. The second peril is demonstrating that we believe we can earn our standing with God. This peril is the temptation to believe that any progress forward is somehow our doing. And the last peril I would name is that of perfectionism. We forget that this is a *process* of transformation, key word being *process*, with the key initiator and sustainer of the process being God not us.^x

I wonder if people you know, perhaps even yourself, have come to mind as I have described this specific stream? Perhaps people you personally know or people you have learned about by studying church history. Some key historical individuals of this stream would be James, author of the biblical book of James, Tertullian, Thomas a Kempis, Menno Simons, John

Wesley, Phoebe Palmer, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Significant movements within this stream would include Anabaptists, Puritan Movement, and the Holiness Movement beginning in the 18th century.

Leo Harshorn in the “Love is a Verb” resource for Mennonite Church USA shares that

“From its beginnings, the Anabaptist movement had a strong strain of holiness. The concept of *Gelassenheit*, or self-surrender, reflected a desire to wholly yield to God’s will. A strong ethical dimension in the Anabaptist tradition emphasized discipleship. At the center of that ethic was an active, demonstrative love for God and one another.^{xii}”

He adds that:

“The strengths and the pitfalls of the holiness stream are evident in the Anabaptist tradition. The virtuous lives of early Anabaptists admirably reflected Christ to the world around them. They were able to maintain a critical distance from the temptations of the world and the violent rule of its empires. And yet, the concept of the pure church and the disciplines needed to maintain it often turned into harsh legalism, moral perfectionism, and a graceless and merciless kind of works righteousness. For some, holiness became equated with dress and avoiding worldly pleasures.^{xii}”

Within the story of our denomination we can name both the strengths and the perils of this significant stream of spirituality. We see ways we have emphasized right living that flows from a right heart with God. We have been taught that our inner work is to become more and more like Jesus and as we do so we will become to have outward actions and speech and decision that more fully align with the life, death, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus. We as Anabaptists have been taught *Gelassenheit*, self-surrendering to the will of God.

For each of the streams of spirituality we can turn to the biblical narrative and find examples of it’s the teaching and understandings. I already mentioned that we see each stream within the life of Jesus. Beyond that we can also find teachings, examples, and stories that reflect the main tenets of a given stream. This morning I chose for us to look at Romans chapter twelve as a biblical paradigm to highlight the main tenets of this Holiness Stream. I would guess that many of us have memorized the first two verses, which that assumption alone helps to highlight how historically Anabaptists have found themselves within this stream.

Romans chapter twelve is a teaching on ethics that is built **around** love and built **on** the foundation of each of us willingly offering ourselves on the altar so that we might be transformed by God's grace more into the image of Jesus. It is out of this inner transformation that we are able to become more and more like Jesus and to love with a true, authentic, love... to love even our enemies.

If you have your Bibles I would invite you to turn with me now to Romans chapter twelve. "Paul's opening frame is absolutely startling in its demand and scope. It would be difficult to think of a more radical foundation for ethical conduct in the church... life in the Christian community must be reshaped by who God is, by what God has done, by what is acceptable to God, and by what is consistent with the will of God".^{xiii} To this end Paul employs the image of sacrifice and an altar. While it is not common for us today,

The language of sacrifice was common in the ancient world. No institution was more important in the Jewish world than the Temple, and the central act of Temple worship was sacrifice. Many, if not most, other ancient religions also practiced it... Such a sacrifice had multiple meanings. It was an act of thanksgiving to God, or the gods, for a gift. It also put a person or people in contact with the transcendent world. In the awesome moment when the victim's life ascended to God and its body lay on the altar as a gift, the patron shared in the total consecration of the victim and vicariously crossed the boundary into the presence of God.^{xiv}

Here Paul instructs us to keep in mind God's mercies and then to offer ourselves as the sacrifice on the altar. As we yield ourselves to God's will and God's plan we commit to not conforming to the pattern of this world, but we are transformed from the inside out. The passage continues to describe how what some of this transformation looks like. It begins to describe the transformation of relationships within the body of faith. Share with those in need, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior... where else have you heard similar teaching? Oh yes, from the mouth of

Jesus, specifically in Matthew chapters five, six, and seven known as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Interesting to note, the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most linked biblical passages with the holiness stream as well as one of the foundational texts for Anabaptists.

Paul takes this transformation a step further to broaden the community to those outside the faith community. Do not repay anyone with evil for evil... live at peace with everyone, if your enemy is hungry, feed him for doing this you will heap burning coals on his head. Excuse me?! Have you ever wondered about that? I mean here Paul is going on and on about what a transformed life looks like once we place ourselves on the altar and God's grace transforms our heart and mind... and then we are told if our enemy is hungry we should feed him because we will heap burning coals on his head? How in the world is that a good idea, or an idea that speaks of a life of holiness and transformed living?

Well in the ancient world individuals needed to keep their fire going all the time in order to insure fire for cooking and warmth. However, in the event one's fire went out they would have to go visit a neighbor to get some live coals to bring back to their house to start their fire again. To do this one would carry a container on their head, venture to a neighbor to ask for some live coals... the neighbor would heap burning coals on their neighbor in need's head and then that one would carry the coals by to their house to start their fire again. If the neighbor for sure granted a heaping amount of coals the one in need would be able to get back to their house with enough coals to start their fire again.^{xv}

This image, although foreign and beyond our daily living, gives a clear picture of what it means to live a life with a transformed center, a life of holiness. Not only if your enemy comes to you are you to show signs of respect, but you are to go an extra mile or two to extend hospitality, to take from what you have to give to them to meet their needs.

And this type of love, this type of living like Jesus is only possible when we crawl up on the altar, yield ourselves to God and ask for God to be about a work of transformation within us so that we can become more and more like Jesus. It is not something that we do on our own or with our own strength of power. It is recognizing the ways we are being pushed from various angles to fit within a certain mold and then seeking God's help to break out of that mold and to begin to be molded into the mold created for us by God; a mold meant to reshape and re-form us so that we look and act and think and breathe and love, definitely love, more and more like Jesus.

Instead of looking at each other and saying "Well, aren't you so holy?!" may we look at each other and say "You are holy, and I see Jesus at work in you and through you." May we continue to remember that the one who began a great work within us will continue it on to the day of completion (Philippians 1:6). And may we continue to lay down on the altar while we proclaim to our Creator and Savior, I am fondly, earnestly longing into thy holy likeness to grow.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (Harper San Francisco: San Francisco, California), 61.

ⁱⁱ Foster, *Streams*, 83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foster, *Streams*, 83-84.

^{iv} Foster, *Streams*, 84.

^v Foster, *Streams*, 83-84.

^{vi} Foster, *Streams*, 84.

^{vii} Foster, *Streams*, 85.

^{viii} Foster, *Streams*, 86.

^{ix} Foster, *Streams*, 85-88.

^x Foster, *Streams*, 92-95.

^{xi} Leo Hartshorn, *Love is a Verb: A one-year spiritual practices resource* (Mennonite Church USA), 39.

^{xii} Hartshorn, *Love is a Verb*, 39.

^{xiii} John E. Toews, *Romans: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 300.

^{xiv} Toews, *Romans*, 298.

^{xv} Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Study from the Greek New Testament, volume 1* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 220-221.