

Defining Words of Faith 3: *Sanctification*

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

September 25, 2022

1 Timothy 6:11-19

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. ¹⁷As for those who in the present

age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

John 17:9-19

⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

During this Fall sermon series we are considering *Defining Words of Faith*. We are exploring some basic biblical tenets to help us recover a common theological lens through which to see the world, to understand God's promises for our lives, and by which we can be united in our sense of Christian ministry together. The words chosen for this series are key theological concepts of the Christian faith and of our Presbyterian heritage. Words like *Incarnation, Sacrament, Sovereignty, Discipleship, Grace, Hope* and *Love*. Some of these words are so familiar we run the risk of losing their theological import; and others - pose the challenge of being stale religious language, once so historically relevant, and now obscure, old-fashioned, confusing.

Old words like *Justification* from last week's sermon topic, and today's focus on *Sanctification*. As I said last Sunday, these two words go hand in hand: *Justification* – the declaration that we are made right with God through the person of Jesus Christ. And *Sanctification* – is how we respond to *Justification*, the process of growing in faithfulness and holiness in gratitude for God's saving grace. We considered how the sixteenth century debate about *Justification* gave rise to the Protestant Reformation. While the Medieval Roman Catholic Church was preaching the necessity of doing good works, going to the priest for confession and making financial penance to the church in order to be in right relationship with God, the Reformers argued that we are not justified by good works. Through Bible study, particularly the Letters of Paul, they began to understand the scripture to say we are *Justified* by grace through faith. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, given new life and brought into right relationship with the Living God. Faith itself is our acceptance that God first reaches out to us in love and grace.

So the Reformers' biblical insights called into question the Medieval organization of the church with its two-tiered arrangement in which there was a class of professional religious people – monks, nuns, priests, bishops and the Pope – between God and everyday secular people. For the Protestant church, the revolutionary impact of the Reformation was a departure from this two-tiered, rigid separation

between the sacred and the secular. The Reformers refused such distinctions. If God is sovereign over all creation, they argued, then all of life is sacred. There is no separation between sacred and secular because every square inch of creation bears the imprint of God the Creator. All of life is to be lived before God and every vocation is a holy calling, because all of our labor can be expressions of tending God's world. The result was what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "the sanctification of ordinary life."

You see for us, the Reformation had a leveling effect: the monk is no holier than the farmer; the nun is no holier than the mother of children. Religious vocations are no longer a necessary intermediary between the regular secular person and God. This is so fundamental to the way we engage our Protestant congregational life, that we don't even think about it anymore. There are Bibles out there in the pews, for example, because the congregation does not need the clergy to interpret scripture. Third graders read the Bible! The Holy Spirit blows through us all equipping us to discern God's word. We ordain our elected lay leaders – Elders and Deacons – because governing the church and serving communion belong to anyone called into church leadership; clergy do not have elevated status. Clergy do have a particular calling to interpret the Word and administer the sacraments, but that calling has no standing unless confirmed by the people we are called to serve. Our work is no more holy than your work.

So, while the Reformation brought the religious vocations down a notch, the status of the laity was raised up. As Charles Taylor put it, "Engagement in a secular trade or domestic life is no longer a free pass from pursuing holiness." Ordinary, secular life is taken up and sanctified. "So the butcher, the baker and candlestick maker are called to serve God through their life's work, even as they are affirmed in their "worldly" stations. This interplay of worldly-holiness and holy-worldliness is what Max Weber would later call "The Protestant work ethic."

All of life is worship. Whether we are in a laboratory, florist shop, or classroom of three-year-olds, an operating room or a kitchen, a law office or custodial supply closet, at an artist's easel or in a yoga class, life is holy and every work is to give glory to God. We ourselves are sanctified, set apart for holiness in everything we do. The sanctification of ordinary life then becomes a directive to vacate the sanctuary. And here's the really good news about *Sanctification*! We can get better at it. We can grow in faithfulness and holiness. As we defined *Justification* last Sunday: it is won and done. We are justified, we are made right with God by the grace of Jesus Christ. But *Sanctification* can grow and increase as we live into our unique callings whatever they may be.

As we heard the Apostle Paul charge his young student in the faith, Timothy, saying: *Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life*, Paul says, and then respond to God's grace in the living of your days.

The church has a swinging door, you see! What happens in worship sends us into the world to grow in holiness; and whatever the good fight needs to be in the world, is of our concern when we gather at church together. The *Sanctification* of ordinary life is about:

The good fight against racism,
the good fight for the environment,
the good fight against hunger and poverty,
the good fight for justice and peace.

The God whom we worship in here sends us out there with the gale force winds of the Holy Spirit to grow in holiness. Theologian James K. A. Smith puts it this way: "Christian worship is the space for the Spirit's transformation of us. The practices of gathered Christian worship have a specific *shape* about them precisely because this is how the Spirit recruits us into the story of God reconciling the world to Godself in Christ. Worship performs the gospel over and over again as a way to

form and re-form our habits... If we are going to be caught up in God's mission of remaking the world, thereby sanctifying ordinary life, we need to be sanctified by the Spirit through Word and Sacrament. If all of life is going to be worship, the sanctuary is the place where we learn how.”¹

Friends, this is not easy work – to be caught up in God's mission of remaking the world into a fairer, more equitable, kinder, more redemptive place for all of God's children. So thank God we know that Jesus himself is praying for us. In John's gospel, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his coming death and resurrection when he will no longer be with them as he has been up to this point. The part of his prayer we heard this morning is from a longer section of the gospel called the Farewell Discourse. You could say this is a kind of Commencement Address. Jesus is launching them into the world to continue the good work he started among them – feeding, healing, confronting the powers of the world that perpetrate evil and injustice. So Jesus prays to God on our behalf: ¹⁷*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹*And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

In our time when that word *truth* is blurred and obscured with lies accepted as truth, with misinformation and a refusal to deal with facts, what is the gospel's meaning of the word *truth*? In our tradition, as theologian Thomas Torrence put it, the truth is a person, and our faith entails a relationship with that person.²

Truth is the word which faith uses to bring us closer to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. *I sanctify myself*, Jesus prays, *so that they also may be sanctified in truth.* We grow in faithfulness and holiness when we hold fast to and follow the Truth of Jesus Christ himself.

¹ James K. A. Smith, “Sanctification for Ordinary Life” includes this and Charles Taylor quotes.

² Barbara Wheeler, *Windows*. Austin Presbyterian Seminary, Summer/Fall 2022.

Collette Pichon Battle is of Creole descent and has spent her life in south Louisiana. After Hurricane Katrina – which she has described as “a crack in the universe” she founded the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy. She became deeply committed to helping rebuild lives and communities devastated by Katrina, and now continues her work for environmental justice, noting that wherever we are from we have storms to contend with. In Oklahoma it’s tornadoes; in Minnesota, it’s snowstorms, in California it’s fire; in Georgia it’s flooding; A Pacific Typhoon hitting western Alaska followed by Hurricane Fiona which headed from Puerto Rico to Bermuda to Canada, and now Ian bearing down on Florida. Everyone is being affected by storms.

So, Collette Pichon Battle approaches her work, her advocacy for people affected by Climate Change, and for the health of the environment from a deeply spiritual place. “I organize prayerfully,” she says. “If you don’t cry deep, hard tears for the state of this planet and all the people on it, you don’t yet understand the problem. And so once you get to that place, the only thing that can bring you out of that kind of darkness is belief in something greater than yourself. And for me, my work is fueled by that spiritual connection,” she says. “It is understanding a greater purpose. And then your job becomes less about passing a piece of legislation – as important as that is – and more about making a better world. My work is absolutely a spirit thing. She concludes on a personal note, “I recognize my last name is Battle. What am I supposed to do? I’m supposed to fight. I’m supposed to fight with tools that build people up, not tools that take people down and take them out. That’s love; that’s patience. That’s all those things they taught you in Sunday School. And they were right. These storms are as much a moral issue as a scientific issue, and the challenge requires us to recognize a power greater than ourselves and a life longer than the ones we will live.”³

³ Colette Pichon Battle, “Placed Here, In This Calling,” Interview with Krista Tippet, On Being, March 3, 2022.

That, my friends, is a very good example of Sanctification from the perspective of one unique vocation. It's an answer to Jesus' prayer for us. So – whatever our individual vocation or calling, may our lives be organized prayerfully, that we may grow in faithfulness and holiness through the Spirit at work in us for the sake of God's world.

AMEN.