

The Journey to the Sacred, Part 2
“What is Holy Person?”

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: 1 Peter 1:14-16; Luke 18:18-25; Psalm 8:3-5; Psalm 139:13-14

Note: Manuscripts for this series contain a portion of the sermon that is actually preached. For the full sermon, visit Countryside’s video channel on YouTube.

For Christmas this year, Melanie gave me a completely traditional gift that you might expect any mainline minister to receive: a couple of sweater vests. To this she added a slightly less traditional present, especially for someone like me: a gift certificate for a tattoo! Yes, a tattoo.

Now, I’m not planning on becoming tattooed like Nadia Bolz-Weber – the minister who spoke at Countryside Church a few years ago and leads the House of All Sinners and Saints in Denver, CO. Up until a year ago, in fact, I swore I’d never get a tattoo. I’m not against them. I just don’t like the life-long commitment thing. Yet a year ago I realized that there is one particular tattoo I could conceive of having on my body for the rest of my life – somewhat discretely, like on my shoulder or calf. So I told my family last January that, if I still wanted a tattoo *this* January, I would get one.

The tattoo I plan to get sometime this year is of a salmon, probably engraved in the style of the Pacific Northwest natives. Those of you who know about my Pacific Northwest background, and the eleven summers I spent in Alaska as part of my prior life in the seafood industry, will know a little of why the salmon is a special animal to me. But salmon are actually beyond “special” to me. They are holy. They are holy in the same way water is holy to me.

Last week I suggested that “holy water” is any water that reminds a person that all water is holy. I noted that, since June, I’ve made a practice of drinking a glass of “holy water” every day with breakfast.

I’ve had a much longer association with holiness and salmon. These associations run so deep that pretty much whenever I see, smell, touch, or taste salmon in virtually any form, living or dead, I am instantly reminded that I am in the presence of holiness. So my tattoo is actually a way of reminding me not only of

my roots in the Pacific Northwest but of my roots in God, the Creator of all things holy.

The reason I mention my recent decision to tattoo my body is because I've recently been toying with another decision that, for me, involves a much greater commitment. What I'm asking myself is whether or not I would like to become a *holy person*.

Strange question, I know! I mean, on the one hand, we should all probably decide to become holy people if it is within our power to do so. After all, God says repeatedly in Scripture, "Be holy as I am holy." Yet, I must confess that I am not enamored in the slightest by what typically comes to mind when our society thinks of a "holy person."

For instance, I have no desire to be that blessed saint who sits atop a hill in lotus position, continually communing with God and receiving visitors who are drawn to their radiance like moths to a flame. Nor do I desire to give away all my possessions to the poor and become an itinerant preacher, like Jesus invited that rich ruler to do in Luke 18. And while I do plan to continue trying to become a better and better person – I have every expectation that, were I to commit the rest of my life to the path of holiness, I would be in as great a need for God's grace and mercy to enter eternal life as I am now. In other words, if I were to become a holy person at all, it has absolutely nothing to do with becoming a *holier-than-thou* kind of holy person! In certain respects, it involves just the opposite.

I want to be holy as a person in the same manner as a salmon is holy, and water is holy. A particular salmon, or a particular container of water is holy *to me* when it reminds me that all salmon or all water is holy. If it does not, then these things may still be holy, but they are not holy *to me* – at least not in any way that makes me think or act differently than I do already. In this respect, holiness is very much in the eye of the beholder.

So, for instance, the glass of water I drink with breakfast as a spiritual discipline every morning is "holy water" because I respond to it that way. I use this glass of water to remind me of how utterly precious water is in the Universe, on our planet, in our particular watershed, and in the food before me, and in my body. Through this daily reminder, my whole days have actually become more full of awareness of the holiness that surrounds me at all times ... including the holiness I experience through other people.

In fact, it is this increasing awareness of the holiness of people that has helped lead me to the question about becoming a holy person. For me, becoming a holy person means developing an eye to see, and a heart to acknowledge, the holiness of whatever human being is standing before me. Put another way, being a holy person would mean having as much respect and appreciation for a single person as I do for all of humanity.

Theoretically, it should be easier for me to recognize the holiness of human beings than salmon. And on the macro level, it is. But when I pull the view in more closely, I confess that salmon are often easier. After all, no individual salmon has ever done anything to harm me. No salmon has ever done something to make me think that the salmon is an idiot. No salmon has ever been critical of me, or exploited me or others in any way. No, salmon has only ever been good to me. I can't say this about human beings.

Becoming the kind of person who can look at every single person, no matter who they are and what they have done to me or others, and recognize that I am standing in the presence of holiness just as easily as I can do it with salmon is quite hard. And doing so with the kind of respect and appreciation one should have in the presence of human beings who are said to have been created in God's very image and likeness, seems just about impossible.

In certain respects, it would probably be easier to be that rich ruler whom Jesus asked simply to give away his material possessions and follow him. To become a holy person, I don't know what implications it would have on our material possessions, but I'm pretty certain we would have to give up Pride in exchange for Humility; Envy in exchange for Gratitude, Greed in exchange for Generosity; Gluttony in exchange for Mindfulness; and so on down through the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins and Lively Virtues.

So I'm just taking this "holy person" question one day at a time right now. I'm just starting my day with one glass of "holy water" and one person whose holiness I will focus my attention on during my morning meditations. Some days, I focus on someone I love and care about, which makes it quite easy to appreciate them as holy and treat them that way if I happen to interact with them. Other days, I focus on someone whose holiness is not nearly so easy to see or feel. I think these latter ones get me down the path to becoming a holy person faster than the former ones, though both are necessary!

In any case, if I'm still talking about becoming a holy person by this time next year, I'm going to ask Melanie to buy me a gift certificate for a total life change. Otherwise, I may just have to get another tattoo ...