

The Journey to the Sacred, Part 6 **“What is Sacred Art?”**

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Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Exodus 31:1-11; Psalm 50:1-2

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.

Now that we’ve reached the end of our present series on finding holiness, or the sacred, in our lives, let’s recap what we’ve found briefly through the following definitions:

- **Holy water** is any water that reminds or reveals to you that all water is holy.
- A **holy person** is any person who reminds or reveals to you that all people are holy.
- A **sacred vocation** is any vocation that reminds you that all true vocations (“callings”) are sacred.
- A **sacred animal** is any animal that reminds or reveals to you that all animals are sacred.
- **Sacred music** is any music that reminds or reveals to you that all music is sacred.

Based on what we’ve found so far, what would you guess is the definition of **sacred art**?¹ If you guessed, “Sacred art is any art that reminds or reveals to you that all art is sacred,” you get a silver star for this series. If you want a gold star, then start looking around you – the people you meet, the things you see, the sounds you hear, the food and beverages you consume – and see them through the lens we’ve established in this series. When you do so, you soon realize two things: (1) All of God’s creations are holy, and (2) while you are literally immersed in holiness, none of it is holy to *you* until you start treating it that way.

In this respect, holiness is more like a *process* than a thing – or at least our experience of holiness is a process. It starts with paying attention. From there, the process moves in any number of directions, which almost certainly will involve appreciation, gratitude, and offering thanks to God. The process of holiness often involves the imagination as well. For instance, if the glass of water you drink in the morning is to become holy water (holy to you), then you’re likely to envision some of the ways all water is holy, such as when it makes possible the food you’re eating, or when water gushes from a newly created well in sub-Saharan Africa and the people sing and dance because they, more than most, recognize the holiness of all water.

Given the pattern for recognizing holiness, or sacredness, that has already been well established through this series through considering holy water, holy people, and so on, you might wonder why we bother adding one more holy, or sacred, thing to the series. I wanted to cover sacred art because it provides us a window not only into how a piece of art might be holy to us, but how the very process of creating art can be holy.

¹ In this series, I’ve used the word “holy” and “sacred” interchangeably, going with one word or another according to which one is typically used in society with respect to the object in question (e.g., “holy person” vs. “sacred person”).

The holiness of artistic creation was first recognized in our tradition in the Book of Exodus. Our passage this morning is, actually, the very first mention of art in the Bible. The fact that this is the first passage is significant because it focuses not so much on the art itself (i.e., the works of art and furnishings for the Tabernacle that the Israelites constructed to worship God on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land), but on the artists – Bezalel and Oholiab. Specifically, the passage says that God has filled these artists with the “Spirit of God” in order to create their artistic pieces. This is only the second time the “Spirit of God” is mentioned in the Bible, by the way – the first being in Genesis 1 (written by the same author as our Exodus story) where the “Spirit of God” is said to have hovered over the primordial waters – which I think lends extra significance to what is being said.

I think the author is trying to tell us many things by focusing on the creators of the art as much as on the art itself, and linking the Holy Spirit to both the creation of the world and the creation of art, but one of them is this: That the process of creation is spiritual in nature. It is holy.

Recently, I’ve been experiencing this holy process first-hand, through learning to play the ukulele. Some of you know what inspired me to pick up this rather odd instrument, the music of which never really appealed to me until last August. When I was leading our Ireland Retreat last August, a few of us visited a Belfast Pub called The Sunflower that happened to be holding a “Ukulele Jam.” I thought I’d last five minutes, but I could hardly pull myself away after two-and-a-half hours! The sight of 40 or so Belfast residents who have been so divided in their past by tensions between Protestants and Catholics, all coming together and playing their hearts out to songs like “Love Shack” by the B52s and “You Sexy Thing” by 70’s band Hot Chocolate – as well as a hymn or two – brought an unforgettable spirit of joy and elation to us onlookers who’d been studying the conflict.

I thought to myself, wouldn’t it be great if we could get a handful of Christians, Jews, and Muslims together through the Tri-Faith Initiative and start “Ukuleles for Peace”? I came back home determined to learn to play – only to discover that Amy Luckenbill had just ordered a handful of ukuleles for our Arts Affirmation program and Rabbi Brian Stoller already plays!

I’m not very good at the ukulele yet, and I doubt I’ll ever reach a high level of accomplishment, but I can’t believe how fun it is! And spiritual. Who would have thought that practicing the ukulele could bring you closer to the Holy Spirit? (Actually, probably most people who have ever played an instrument would relate to this, whether they use the word “Holy Spirit” or not ...)

In my little foray into artistic creation, I’m beginning to understand some of the reasons why the process of creating any piece of art can be so God-bearing. I’ll offer just two among the many.

First of all, I doubt anyone picks up an instrument and sticks with it unless they have experienced its holiness in some way. For Joe Bonamassa – one of the world’s premiere blues guitarists – it was watching a VHS recording of Eric Clapton playing Royal Albert Hall in London when Joe was around 6 years old. He asked his parents for a guitar at Christmas, and by age 12

he was playing with B.B. King. He hasn't put his guitar down since. For me, it was that crazy experience in the Sunflower Pub. Every time I pick up my ukulele, it reminds me of that ecstatic experience.

This fact alone is intriguing to me. My guess is that every time I hear a professional musician, or an amateur who loves her craft, this musician is playing under the influence of whatever deeply spiritual experience of music that got them playing to begin with. Likely, that experience arose in the back of their mind the second they picked up their instrument. The best musicians are probably those who are able to convey something of their original spiritual experience of music through what they themselves are now playing.

I can't do that yet! But what I do know is that, just as every time I preach, I am brought back to the ecstatic moment in 1981 that got me into ministry, every time I pick up my ukulele, I am brought back to that ecstatic moment in August of 2017 at The Sunflower.

The second thing I'm beginning to understand about the holiness of the artistic process is related to the first, though it's not as "sexy." It's actually about repetition and monotony. Learning to play an instrument for the first time takes lots of practice. Long, difficult, monotonous practice filled with mistakes. Just ask Melanie ...

Once you've learned how to actually hold the instrument and strum it, then you've got to start learning chords. For me, this means squeezing my large fingers into comparatively tiny spaces in ever-changing positions that, at least at first, are hard to remember. I think it took me six hours just to learn to play a simple three chord progression without making a mistake and ten or twelve hours to play my first simple song. Again, just ask Melanie.

In my younger years, I tried picking up the guitar and quit after just four weeks of lessons. Now, I've probably spent 200 hours on my ukulele and am actually looking forward to the next 200. Why? To some extent, the difference may be age-related. I'm a lot more patient now than I was in third grade. But even at age 54, I have little patience for repetition and monotony.

What really accounts for the difference is that, when I picked up the guitar in third grade, I did so because I thought it would make me cool. This was pretty much the only reason. I'd never had a "Joe Bonamassa" moment of deep spiritual significance that would transform all those hours of practice into hours of connection with the Holy Spirit. Now I do. It is little wonder that the closest feeling I can compare to the peaceful bliss I feel when I'm practicing my ukulele is the feeling I have when I've been meditating.

I'm not very good at the ukulele despite my 200 hours of practice. And the music I create from it may not be holy to you. But it is holy to me. It is holy to me not because the artistic *product* is holy but because the artistic *process* is holy. It is a process that has revealed to me (and continues to remind me) that all artistic creation is a holy process – whether or not the product of the process is considered "art" by anyone else. Is there any creative process in your own life that connects you to the Holy Spirit?