



A Longing for Holiness
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Lenten Message
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I am Marilyn Spurrell, Co-Superintendent of the Eastern Sunrise District Superintendent and Senior pastor of Fargo First United Methodist Church.

Think with me about what it means to *Long for Holiness*.

For what do you long? For what do you yearn? For what do you desire?

During my last two years in high school, I yearned to be an organist. A new organ had been built at Watertown First United Methodist. The organ builder became our organist. The music I heard on Sunday mornings was amazing. I wanted to be the one at the organ leading the congregation in worship.

There was another motivation. I accompanied the Girl's Chorus at Watertown High School. 3 semesters in a row I played for all of the rehearsals and then my friend got to accompany the choir at the concert. Why? Because, she played the organ and the director thought the pieces would be best accompanied by organ. It was more than just a thought or an idea. It was a longing, deep desire of my heart.

One of the happiest days of my high school life was when my Grandpa offered to pay for my organ lessons.

John Wesley longed to become holy, to become like Christ in heart and action. John and his brother Charles longed for greater relationship with God. They desired nothing more than to grow into the image and likeness of Christ.

They took seriously these words from I Peter 1: 14-16.

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "you shall be holy, for I am holy."

John Wesley went to the extreme to become like Christ. He rose at 4 or 5 in the morning for individual prayer and scripture study. He prayed with a small group of like minded Christians. John, his brother Charles and their friends studied scripture as well as the lives of faithful Christ followers throughout history. They served the least and the forgotten. Still there was something missing. John longed to grow into greater Christ likeness.

This longing permeated his teaching and preaching. You can imagine how popular John was within the Anglican Church when he called the priests and people *almost Christians* and instead urged them to become *all together Christians*.

I confess that the language of "becoming holy as Christ was holy" has not always been helpful for me. Longing for holiness was a concept with which I grew up. My paternal grandparents attended and graduated from Central Holiness University in University Park, Iowa. They graduated with Grandma's older sister who with her husband served as missionaries in South Africa for most of their lives. The idea of greater holiness was a common theme as I grew up.

What I didn't understand about *longing for holiness* was that it isn't about seeking perfection by virtue of one's own human effort. Rather holiness is about both the work of the Holy Spirit at work within us as well as our human effort to grow into greater Christ likeness.

In many ways it is like a restoration process. The image of restoration has become for me a helpful way of thinking about becoming holy. My Dad in his retirement years has enjoyed taking old John Deere B tractors, as well as a couple other pieces of equipment, and making them "like new." He has restored them to what they were.

The tractors had all been used for years to do the work that tractors do. They were dirty. They were rusty. The paint worn off--parts were not working as they should. They either did not run or did not run well. Then Dad and his mechanic friend went to work. They tore the tractors apart. They replaced parts, fixed parts, sanded off the old paint and rust. They painted the tractors so they looked brand new. Dad even added decals like the originals. When the work is done, Dad has "restored the tractors to what they had been."

Restoration is another way of talking about the work of holiness. We were created in the image and likeness of God. But then life happens. We fall short. We get up. We lose hope. We find joy. Inside and out we are changed, marked, until the day we realize that somewhere along the way we started to feel rusty, broken down, even dirty.

God does not give up on us. God yearns to make us whole. God longs for us to be holy. When God works on us through the Holy Spirit and we long for and go to work on becoming more like Christ, we are "restored". In God's spirit we find that we have been cleansed and oiled. We are running smoothly once again. In the words of our text, we become "more like Christ."



During the Lenten season, I invite you to "long to be holy, to be like Christ in heart and action."