

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Acts 1:15-17,21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

May 16, 2021

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

---

How many times do you recite our liturgy and skim over words you don't really understand? Or, maybe you have gotten so familiar with certain terms and phrases that you take them for granted and assume that you fully grasp the impact of their meaning.

Most of us probably do it more often than we realize. This really hit home for me when I was working with students of different faith traditions at the University of Richmond. I noticed that we would use words and phrases all the time related to our specific faith tradition but we often only had a general sense of what they meant. From my own Christian perspective, I noticed that when we would talk to other Christians who shared a common "faith language" we could smile and nod together throughout the conversation. So, even if we couldn't define a word or concept in its full context, together we had a general sense of what we were talking about.

But, when I would work with folks of different faiths or maybe someone of no faith tradition at all, they would often ask...what do you mean when you say words like eucharist or communion? What do words like incarnation, justification, and sacrament mean? These words and concept were foreign to them and we had no shared understanding to fall back on. And if it was a word I had merely skimmed over through the years, I couldn't adequately define it for someone else. That recognition as I worked with my students pushed me to learn more about my faith than I had ever done before.

With that in mind, I wanted to focus on one example of what I'm talking about. I stumbled across one of these words this week in our Gospel reading and I realized I couldn't fully define it for someone else. To be honest, I realized that I couldn't fully define it for myself in a coherent way. Let's look at verses 17 and 18 where Jesus is praying to God for the future of his apostles...

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

Can you guess what word I got hung up on? The word I stumbled over is *sanctify*. I know...I should know this one backwards and forwards because I say it every week in the Eucharistic prayers. But as I read and considered our Gospel reading, I realized I had been glossing over the definition for years. So, I looked it up so that today we can all walk away with not only a basic definition of sanctification but an applied definition as well. Hopefully, by the time this sermon is over you will have a much deeper and richer understanding of this central promise of our faith. And, maybe you can even describe it to someone who doesn't share your common faith language.

Let's start with a basic definition. To sanctify simply means to make holy, to set apart something as sacred. To purify someone. To expand the definition farther to sanctify conveys that an *object or person* has been given a spiritual blessing or religious sanction. More specifically, that object or person has been set apart for God's special use and purpose.

Therefore, *sanctification* is fulfilled when the object or person is used for God's intention. Our holiness, our sanctification, is realized when we live and act according to God's will for us.

In our Gospel, we find Jesus sanctifying his apostles, He prays to God...*Sanctify them in the truth*. He sets them apart for God's purpose, to become who they are meant to be, to move into this new calling and to grow as God's own. They are blessed, prayed for and sent out. They are sanctified to carry out the holy work of sharing the love and redemption of Jesus Christ.

And notice that when we read our Eucharistic prayers every week we say, *"Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts. Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace...."*

When we recite those words, Jesus' prayer for his apostles should ring in your ears...Sanctify them in the truth. Send them out into the world as your own. Help them do the work they are called to do.

We sanctify the bread and wine. The bread and wine are made holy for the purpose of renewing our relationship with Christ. And, we are sanctified. We are made holy to serve God in unity, constancy and peace. We are set aside for God's holy purpose. We come back and participate in that sanctification process week after week. We commit over and over to do our best to live into the holiness that has been granted to us. We take on the responsibility to be God's own.

So now that we know what sanctification means, let's ask another question...how does it happen? Is it a wave of a wand, a lightning bolt, an instantaneous transformation? Did the apostles immediately change when Jesus prayed for their sanctification or was it a process that they had to live into? And, what about us? Are we fully sanctified at the moment of the eucharistic prayer?

I would argue (and this holds true for our Anglican tradition) that to be sanctified is a process. It isn't instantaneous. It's what some scholars call an applied sanctification. The prayers are the stated intention, the request. Sanctify us. Make us holy. Set us apart for your purposes. And then we enter into a commitment to live into that purpose. An applied sanctification is the action that follows the prayers. We grow into the fullness of the redeemed life over time.

What might that growth look like for you? Here are some thoughts...First, commit to wholeheartedly seeking to know God. And then, claim your sanctification by reading and studying the Bible regularly. Commit to a prayer practice and more deep engage in the fellowship and leadership of your faith community. Insure that your words and actions are honest reflections of your Christian life. Reach out to someone who needs God's love in their life and share how God's love has changed your life. Ask for forgiveness when you have done wrong or hurt someone and work to repair what was broken.

The process of sanctification, of living as God's own, puts incredible value on your life. Our commitment to that sanctification calls us to claim our value and live into it day in and day out. To keep coming back week after week to renew our commitment to Christ and to one another.

So now that you have a deeper understanding of what it means to sanctify...how might you tell someone about your sanctification? How might you share the beauty and the promise of this incredible gift? How might you share how it has changed your life?

*Sanctify them in the truth.* That was Jesus' prayer for his apostles and that is his prayer for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.