Reflection: The Difference Between Sacred and Holy

We often hear that “holy” means “set apart,” but it doesn’t. That’s what “sacred” means—sacred, sanctify, sanctuary, saint, and even sanction. These are all from Latin “sanctus”—“set apart.”

“Holy” and “hallow” come from Old English “hāliġ,” from a Germanic root meaning “whole” or “healthy.” A holy thing is a thing restored, cured, or preserved. Becoming holy is becoming the person you are meant to be, as God helps you recover from the terminal illness that we all share. We are all sick, and God is the great Doctor. That’s why we call Jesus Savior and Healer.

“Savior” and “salvation” come from the same root as “salve” and “salutary:” Latin “salus,” which means “health.” Salvation is healing.

But more beautiful still is the Old English word that “Savior” replaced: “Hǣlend.” This word is a gerund: an “ing” verb acting as a noun. It’s rarer in Modern English to use gerunds for people, but we still speak of the working, the living, the dying. The Hǣlend is “the Healing”—or rather, the one who is healing you, the one making your soul healthy and yourself holy. Is, at every moment, because healing is a lifelong process.

In this light, it doesn’t make sense to ask God for the grace to desire that others may become holier than I, provided that I may become as holy as I should. If by God’s grace you and I ever become completely whole, recover completely from the inherited disease of our fallen humanity, neither of us will be holier than the other. We will just be holy. The idea of being set apart has its place, but it can create a feeling of “us and them.” But holiness is about “us:” being together, loving each other as we were meant to.