

Reverence  
Hebrews 12:18-29  
Luke 13:10-17

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe....”

Although the dictionary equates reverence with respect, respect cannot come close to containing the catch in our breath, the bowing of our minds, the arrest of our frenetic lives that reverence is as we find ourselves, literally *find our human being*, in the presence of truth or beauty or goodness, and as we find ourselves even now in the presence of God. Philosopher Paul Woodruff says that reverence begins “with a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity,” he says, “to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death.” Woodruff goes on to say that as reverence grows, it “brings with it, the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This, in turn, fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment.”

Unfortunately what more often grows in us these days is an attitude of irreverence toward anything or any person that threatens our limitations. An irreverent soul, Woodruff observes, is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the presence of things higher (or simply other) than itself. Hence the cynical disregard of creatures and creation and Creator, the secret delight in another’s fall from grace that momentarily elevates our sense of self-importance, the clever remark meant to make others think more highly of the mocker than the mocked.

Certainly this was the case with the leader of the synagogue who erupted with anger in the presence of Jesus and in response to his sabbath cure of a woman crippled for what must have been the better part of her life. He kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” Luke’s story hints that the underside of an irreverent soul is a faithless sort of fear and fear is the other place where the human mind goes when faced with those things that we cannot control—tyrants or terrorists or portents in the heavens, on one hand; the stranger, the opposition, and the exception, on the other hand. No doubt there are circumstances in which human fear is well-founded; nevertheless, as arrogance and indignation become the public face of our irreverent and fearful lives, then even if we profess belief in God, we become like those who no longer know how to bow down, when to keep silence, and where to step aside in wonder. In short, we forget how to be the merely human beings we were created to be. I cannot believe that this is how we really wish to spend our lives.

So let us begin again, this morning, where reverence begins: begin with the realization that there is something greater than ourselves, beyond our control, more astonishing than we can imagine or even understand. Anne Lamont’s shorthand for reverence is a one-word prayer: Wow! Wow, she writes, “is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can’t think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace. ‘Wow’ means we are not dulled to wonder...[but rather]...are stunned to the place beyond words, where an aspect of life [keeps us] from being able to chip away at something until it’s down to a manageable size and then to file it nicely away, when all we can say in response is ‘Wow.’”

While our minds go to God as the obvious candidate for reverence--this is, after all, Sunday morning and we are in a sanctuary—consider how often you are stunned beyond words by looking down instead of up. The first thing to notice about the reverent life is that it has as much to do with paying attention to what is lower on the chain of being as it does with acknowledging something greater than the self. “I am really here,” Annie Dillard writes,

alive on the intricate earth under trees. But under me, directly under the weight of my body under the grass, are other creatures, just as real, for whom also this moment, this tree, is ‘it.’ Take just the top inch of soil, the world squirming right under my palms. In the top inch of forest soil, biologists found ‘an average of 1,356 creatures present in each square foot....’ I might as well include these creatures in this moment, as best I can. My ignoring them won’t strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine, might add their dim awareness to my human consciousness....

Dillard goes on to cite the Hasidim who believe that one of the purposes of human existence is “to assist God in the work of redemption by ‘hallowing’ the things of creation.” Unlike respect, hallow *is* a good synonym for reverence: to make holy, to have reverence for somebody or something. Summer was once the season of hallowing the things of creation, of sitting under a tree and paying attention or of watching the ocean lap at your feet as you scanned the sand for the one perfect seashell. “The easiest practice of reverence I know is simply to sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water,” Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “and pay attention for at least twenty minutes.” Pay attention as the poet pays attention and thereby makes the depth of things resound. “Ten times a day,” poet Mary Oliver writes, “something happens to me like this—some strengthening throb of amazement—some good sweet empathetic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest, the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

Paying attention to nature is one thing, however, and paying attention to those creatures who are able to talk back to

you is quite another! The second thing to notice about the reverent life, as already noted, is that reverence brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. I think Woodruff means that, as we find ourselves bowed down and humbled in the presence of God, we also step aside from all our thinking and doing, from all our judging and justifying, until the person before us, with all of his pride and prejudice, with all of her flaws and foibles, captures our attention, inhabits our imagination and become as real to us as we are to ourselves. The late Roman Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen speaks of a kind of self-forgetting that creates in us an emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free.

It seems to me this is the space Jesus creates on the sabbath in the synagogue for the woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. While she likely had been lost in the crowd at the synagogue for years, Jesus “sees her”—pays attention to her. “...ought not this woman...be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?” Jesus asks the arrogant and indignant leader of the synagogue. Is this not the space Christ’s church gathers to create for each bounded soul who has come to worship the God that alone sets us free? But surely whatever it is in this space that bows us down before God’s presence also ought to open us up to the presence of the other: prayer, for instance, an ancient means given us to create space for the other in our hearts and minds or offering Christ to the one sitting next to us as we pass the bread and cup, or singing psalms and keeping silence and listening together for a word that is not our own. It is “just about impossible to do [these things],” Barbara Brown Taylor says, adding to the list, Episcopalian that she is, the laying on of hands, the anointing of the sick and the bathing of the dead, “without suffering a sudden onset of reverence.” This happens in these acts that mean to turn our lives Godward, we “are present to the present moment for once. For once you are not looking through things, or around them, toward the next thing, which will become see-through in its turn. For once, you are giving yourself entirely to what is right in front of you, and what is right in front of you is returning the favor so that reverence is all but unavoidable.”

Then notice, in the third place, that reverence takes time. We give away the time of our lives to what? I guess you could say that keeping up with Facebook posts and your favorite twitter feeds or responding instantaneously to texts is paying attention, is revering the one on the other side of the iphone. But think instead of the time necessary for a face-to-face encounter with a two-legged or four-legged or hundred-legged creature whose recounting includes words such as delight, graciousness, openhandedness, thankfulness, trust, tenderness, kindness. Here is reverence embodied in time. To relate yourself to another or to the things of God’s good creation in this way “demand time and occasion—time,” Marilyn Robinson says, “because every one is an art or a discipline, an occasion because not one of them exists except as behavior.”

Reverence begins not only as a deep understanding of our limitations, but also as an expansive habit of feeling that requires practice and discipline. Know that the only way there will be time between now and the hour of our death for reverence is if we take the time, if we discipline ourselves to practice delight, graciousness, openhandedness, thankfulness, trust, if we let another capture our attention for twenty minutes or two hours or a whole wasted afternoon. In this ordinary way, reverence begins to take hold of our character, begins to grow in us and become a “habit of feeling.”

Finally, I cannot help but think that this habit of feeling is best nurtured in a community of reverence and alongside friends and strangers who practice paying attention to God week in and week out together by offering an acceptable worship in reverence and awe. This is not always the case, even when we show up. While the folks in Luke’s synagogue had gathered for worship, their worship was missing the reverence and awe that would open their eyes to the other. As for us, you would have to say that the discipline of worship is practiced more, these days, in the breach than it is in our regular keeping of a holy day. I was asked the other night around a dinner table what I thought of worship attendance in our congregation and I began to make excuses for our busy schedules and the frenetic lives of our children. And even when I began to get that the questioner had more in mind the disincentive imposed by impenetrable sermons on worship attendance, I simply made more excuses for the inability of most everyone to pay attention. Yet how can busyness or boredom excuse us from our part in the worshipping community that, for hundreds of years, has offered to God an acceptable worship of reverence and awe and so has wrought in human beings the habit of reverence? “Sitting in the Piazza Navona, eating a gelato,” writes Barbara Gruzutti Harrison,

I am reminded of the Trinity: A fountain is an archetype of a self-giving, self-renewing God. It is as absurd to think one has to go to church to think of God in Rome as it is to think one has to go to a museum to see art in Rome. But I am Roman Catholic, I need and want the necessary discipline of praise, the rhythm—the great swinging movement of dark to light—of the liturgical year, and, most of all, the Sacrament of the Eucharist (life’s food and blood). I am not happy when I do not go regularly to church, and not (I think) because I am oppressed by the consciousness of wrongdoing, but because I am weightier, having missed the opportunity to meditate, express adoration, contrition, thanks and supplication in loving and dignified communion with others.

For this regular opportunity to practice paying attention amid lives too frantic to find us on our knees, let us never cease to give thanks and even to whisper “Wow!” now and again, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe. Amen!