

Being the Church at Brentwood

Reverence for Jesus Christ

Ps 127 & I Timothy 2:1-7
(428, 462, 440, 479)

November 18, 2012

I took an afternoon off a couple of weeks ago
and did something I love to do,
but have not done for a long time.
I spent three hours wandering through
a second-hand bookstore.

These kinds of sacred spaces
(at least sacred for me)
are gradually disappearing.
They are often owned and operated
by older men with white beards
hunched over piles of recently-acquired books
surrounded by rough wooden shelves
groaning with more books.

This time, I went over to Lawrence Books
at the corner of 41st and Dunbar.
The prize I discovered was a book on reverence.
It was written by Paul Woodruff,
a professor of humanities at the University of Texas in Austin.
His field of interest is ancient Greek philosophy and political thought.
In the book, he claims that reverence is a forgotten virtue
and explores the importance of taking it seriously again.

Here are some of the words and sentences
he uses to help us understand reverence better.

Reverence is an ancient virtue that survives among us in half forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures. ...

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, 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. ... To

forget that you are only human, to think that you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence.

You can see, then, when I ran across the word ‘reverence’ in the passage we read this morning from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, how it would have attracted my attention.

Timothy is one of Paul’s protégés in the leadership of the early church. He travelled and ministered with Paul as new churches were founded and tended throughout the Greco-Roman world in the first century. He dealt with all the problems that we have noted in the early church as we have been exploring the epistles in the New Testament – divisions within the congregations based on culture and ethnicity, distorted teachings about the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, and distress at both persecution and indifference.

As we have seen over and over again, the advice in the face of these challenges is to turn them into opportunities to witness to the true grace that saves the world. That grace is present in power in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, everything God promised is accomplished. In relationship with Jesus Christ, we enjoy a full and flourishing life that pleases God and serves God’s mission of reconciling the whole world with all its peoples to himself.

At the heart of our faith in this grace lies the kind of reverence Paul tells Timothy of in this letter. Quiet and peaceful lives, lives lived in joyful communion with God in Christ through the Spirit, arise from a deep reverence for God. From those attitudes of reverence arise behaviours and conduct that bless others and show how God’s love transforms people. These attitudes and behaviours are formed when the Christian community gathers for worship and learning, when it gets together to petition, pray, request, and gives thanks. This all happens because the Christian community is confident that the God wants all to be saved and to know the truth about salvation in Jesus Christ. That is the mission for which we are being formed – To make God’s salvation of the world in Jesus Christ known through everything we do and say.

Paul clearly feels strongly about this point. He emphasizes in vs. 7 that he telling Timothy the truth!

Anne Lamott is one of my favourite writers about faith.
Her latest book is about prayer and the kind of reverence we have been exploring.
It's entitled *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*.
It's the Wow factor that roots our reverence for God in Jesus Christ.
Here are some passages
in which Lamott explores the meaning of reverent prayer:

[Prayer] is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let's say it is communication from one's heart to God. Or if that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don't need to define or have proof of or any established contact with. Let's say it is what the Greeks called the Really Real, what lies within us, beyond the scrim of our values, positions, convictions, and wounds. Or let's say it is a cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L's.

Prayer can be motion and stillness and energy—all at the same time. It begins with stopping in our tracks, or with our backs against the wall, or when we are going under the waves, or when we are just so sick and tired of being psychically sick and tired that we surrender, or at least we finally stop running away and at long last walk or lurch or crawl toward something. Or maybe, miraculously, we just release our grip slightly.

Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken. (In fact, these are probably the best possible conditions under which to pray.) Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up.

There are times,
for me at least,
when sermons turn out to be a bit like book reports.
“Look what I found in this great book!”

This sermon has turned out to one of those.
Woodruff in his academic and philosophically sophisticated words,
Lamott in her emotive and street-smart words,
both capture the essence of reverence
when they point to the awe that comes when God in Jesus Christ
genuinely encounters us through the gracious workings of the Holy Spirit.
It is the awe that comes when we know we are loved unconditionally.
It is the awe that comes when we can accept our humanity as a gift.
It is the awe that comes when we connect with Life and Love.

Amen

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church