

“Radical Hospitality, Part II: Practice Reverence”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 12, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: Psalm 46 Romans 8: 6-17

Psalm 46

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,

though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,

though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,

the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;

God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;

he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;

see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;

he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;

he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.”

¹¹The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Romans 8: 6-17

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die;

but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴
For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did
not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a
spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit
bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children,
then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer
with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Be still...

Be still and know...

The Apostle Paul stilled his soul to contemplate the majesty of God.

Out of his spiritual contemplation came his writings to the Romans,

a letter which celebrates the oneness

we have with God, Christ and one another

through the Holy Spirit,

a mighty Spirit who dwells in us

and makes us one, heirs of God,
children of a Living Hope.

Paul said, ^{“11} *If the Spirit of [the One]*

who raised Jesus from the dead

dwells in you,

[God] who raised Christ from the dead

*will give life to your mortal bodies also through [God's]
Spirit*

that dwells in you.

¹⁴ For all who are led

by the Spirit of God

are children of God.

...you are in the Spirit,

since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

Paul laid down for us

a theology of reverence grounded in unity.

The Psalmist lifted up a spirituality of reverence

grounded in the reality of our life and times.

The Psalmist stilled herself and listened for the Holy One to speak.

She celebrated the presence of a Living God, as well,

and sang of the hospitality and historicity of the Holy One:

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge!

The Psalmist goes on to affirm the presence of God here amongst us

even and especially in times of war and urban challenges,

dysfunction and disconnect, El Nino and climate change.

Psalm 46 testifies to the closeness, the intimacy, the grace of God, saying,

¹ *God is our refuge and strength,*

a very present help in trouble.

² *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,*

though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ *though its waters roar and foam,*

though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁵ *God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;*

God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ *The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;*

[God] utters [God's] voice, the earth melts.

⁷ *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

How shall we draw near to such a loving presence?

What have we learned from Paul, from the Psalmists, from Jesus Christ,
from our souls?

Instructions which come from the beyond dwell deeply in our heart of
hearts.

The instructions are as clear as day and as simple as can be:

“Be still, and know that I am God!”

Be still...

Be still and know...

Hlane Royal National Park

Swaziland

July 2010

Three of us – my brother David, son Henry, and I – had driven all day

to get from David's home Mozambique

to the Hlane Royal National Park in Swaziland

to explore the wonders of creation in their natural
habitat.

Night was falling and the temperature was dropping

– remember that summer here is the Southern Hemisphere's winter.

We were staying in a small cabin on the veldt.

That night after dinner we walked outside and ventured a few feet away.

Now, I say a few feet because the cabin was set

in the happy hunting grounds of lions and leopards.

We looked up at the night sky,

and beheld the most amazing sight.

Stars.

Stars, planets, and galaxies beyond imagination were there, before our very
eyes.

Lights twinkled and reflected from horizon to horizon.

We froze in awe,

and we froze because it was so cold.

We were still, being in the moment.

And then we did what any good, modern citizen would do in 2010.

We dialed home to share the good news.

That night, in the cold,

far from home yet together with family,

underneath a canopy of lights offered to the universe

by the One who created and creates,

in the overcoming of fear of being dinner for Simba and Nala,

in the midst of admiring and paying attention to the
wonders of God,

we were happy.

Be still...

Be still and know...

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book

on a “geography of faith” entitled, An Altar in the World (2009).

She speaks of the practice of reverence.

Reverence is difficult to define,

but you know it when you feel it. (21)

She says, “Reverence [is] the proper attitude of a small and curious human being

in a vast and fascinating world of experience.” (p. 19)

In a sense, one could say that our attitudes feed our practice,

and our practice of reverence is lived out

in ritual and relationships,

in being still and paying attention,

in welcoming the Spirit who dwells in you
and in me,

in us and “them”

in ways vaster and
greater than we can imagine.

In the world of human experience there is ritual

that connects us with what we are doing and being.

Ritual introduces us “to the practices

that nourish reverence for human life:

paying attention, taking care,

respecting things that can kill you,

making the passage from fear to awe.” (p.
20)

Philosopher Paul Woodruff said,

“Reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods.

“To forget that you are only human,” he says,

“to think you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence.”

While most of us live in a culture

that reveres money, reveres power, reveres education and religion,

Woodruff argues that true reverence cannot be anything that humans can make or manage themselves.” (p. 21)

“Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self

– something that is beyond human creation or control,

that transcends full human understanding.” (p. 21)

My friends, you and I can relate to this conversation about the practice of reverence.

You know this feeling, this attitude, this faith experience and expression and ecstasy.

When we get to a place of reverence,

when we stand in awe of something greater than ourselves,

to see and appreciate the full extent of our limits and limitations,

we make room in our spirits

to see and appreciate one another

more reverently, as well. (p. 21,
adapted)

Chances are that we've also experienced the opposite,

the troubling side of irreverence.

We may have seen it in others and felt it within.

Paul Woodruff says,

“An irreverent soul who is unable to feel awe

in the presence of things higher than the self

is also unable to feel respect

in the presence of things is sees as lower than the self.”

For example, one cannot claim to revere and love God

while at the same time claiming that entire populations of neighbors are evil.

Irreverence of the holiness around us and of one another

opens the door wide to practicing fear.

The Light of God is mighty and the darkness shall not overcome it,

yet we all know that fear has a big mouth
and demands our full attention.

Fear insists on its own way.

Fear insists on irreverence, on selfishness, on being right and in control.

Irreverent behavior may encourage one to respond

to the recent mass shootings in Colorado and Wisconsin

by standing in the long line of folks who purchased guns.

Reverent behavior, on the other hand,

may encourage one to foster curiosity and wonder

about neighbors yet to be known,

about what we can do together

to build a safer, healthier, less-violent
world.

Be still...

Be still and know...

Being still leads to curiosity and wondering.

When we quiet ourselves

and connect with the Spirit who dwells within,

we find ourselves starting to ask questions, real questions, living
questions.

I wonder why they live the way they do?

I wonder what we have in common?

I wonder how we can find a way to work and play together?

Choose to abide

live into faith, rather than subsiding and sliding into fearful living.

Hospitality begins with practicing reverence.

When you appreciate, respect, and revere

that there is something greater, larger, awe-inspiring in the world
that is larger than yourself,

you begin to foster a sense of wonder about others.

Wonder and curiosity lead us

to want to know more about each other.

Reverence leads us out of our cocoons;

it makes us open our windows and garage doors;

it helps us to pay attention to those who are around us

whom we may have taken for granted as if they
were invisible.

I remember as a kid seeing a book on our family bookshelf

by Ralph Ellison called, The Invisible Man.

*(At the time I thought it was about that really cool guy in the old movie
who became invisible, and then started to lose his mind...)*

Actually, The Invisible Man is a 1952 novel

about a grown man living in the community

who feels as if he is socially invisible,

that he is physically present yet not seen;

he is alive yet ignored due solely to the
color of his skin.

When we practice reverence

we pay attention to our surroundings,

to our place on this earth,

to our relationships with family and friends,

as well as to those we come in contact with regularly

yet may take for granted.

“Welcome to Moe’s!”

When you enter the burrito restaurant

does your heart skip a beat that you are welcomed?

Are you surprised to be greeted at Quick Trip?

Do you know why the McDonald’s in Moscow is so popular

even though it is cost prohibitive to most Russians?

The McDonald's employees at the counter smile at the customers.

That is it.

Folks in Moscow line up around the block for a smile.

The practice of reverence in any institution or family or friendship

begins by paying attention,

by becoming still enough to acknowledge those in our
midst,

especially the folks who tend to become invisible.

Be still...

Be still and know...

One of the areas I cover in pre-marital counseling

is for each family to have something that is larger than themselves.

The way I put it is that when they sit down at the kitchen table

every morning and every evening

they need to have something else to talk about

besides their kids, their pets, their work, their bills,

and what they are going to watch on TV.

Have something else that you can talk about

and share together and do together

that is bigger than the two or three or four of you.

I encourage couples to consider a variety of options.

Go ahead and join a local church;

volunteer at Habitat for Humanity;
tutor a child from across the railroad tracks;
get involved in your neighborhood association;
or participate in a mission trip
to rebuild a home or a school or
someone's life.

Whatever you decide, do it so you can practice reverence as a family;
if nothing else, your conversation over dessert
will be infinitely more interesting.

By practicing reverence
the lives you save may be your own.

Be still...

Be still and know...

Leaving Swaziland, Entering Mozambique

On the Border

July 2010

A broad-shouldered border guard stepped away from his post
and walked purposefully toward me.

I had just stepped out of the car
and was preparing to present my passport to enter Mozambique.

My brother David, my son Henry, and I had been in Swaziland for three

days,

and we were returning to the capital city Maputo,

where David and his wife lived and served international nonprofit agencies.

As the border guard approached me,

David – who speaks Portuguese -- left his space on the visa application line

in order to run interference in case there was a problem.

The guard drew near, smiled, and said, *“Pastor James!”*

David was taken aback.

How was it possible that someone knew his youngest brother,

almost 9,000 miles away from his home,

and called him by title and name

at an isolated border crossing in Southern Africa?

After a millisecond of thought I recognized the guard;

we had worshipped God together the previous Sunday

at Malhangalene Parish in Maputo.

“I remember you,” I said to the border guard.

“You served as a deacon and wore a sharp blue suit.

Please tell me your name,

and what are you doing over a hundred kilometers from Maputo?”

Urias Temotes Simango said that he patrols the border during the week

and lives in the city on the weekends,

where he is a member of the United Church of Christ congregation.

In worship, at home, and while patrolling the border under the stars and the sun,

Mr. Simango practiced reverence, which made him most hospitable.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.