

“So Very Human, So Very Blessed”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Sermon Series: “Hearts Unbound”
Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 1, 2016
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Holy Scriptures: Mark 2: 23-28 and Luke 3: 10-17

Mark 2:23-28 (NRSV)

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ²⁵ And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Luke 3:10-17 (NRSV)

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” ¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Sermon

So Very Human, So Very Blessed

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 in 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.

A question crossed my mind, one raised in Psalm 8:

*“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?”* -- Psalm 8: 3-4

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.

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All were questioning in their hearts and minds, and all means all.
The Pharisees took their questions to God.

Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?

How can your followers possibly be reverent if not bound by ritual?

The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers,
the whole people of God raised their questions.

What then should we do?

How do we respond to those in need in our midst?

Teacher, what should we do?

What is it about eeking out a living that were tempted to bend the rules?

And we, what should we do?

How do I become more holy, more spiritual, more reverent?

All here today have at some point and time raised questions in our heart of hearts.

So we gather together and bring our questions to God.

We enter the presence of the holy in the sanctuary, on the Sabbath,

around the breakfast nook,

in the coffee shop and in our places of work and play,
alone with God, with a friend, neighbor or family member,

with the faith community, or the goldfish, a rapt,
captive audience.

We come from a long line of spiritual ancestors
who have lifted questions and discovered divine responses,

who have been reverent and listened for God's
guidance,

whether from around a manger or at the base of the Cross,
whether in the grain fields or in the garden of Gethsemane,
whether while on the road to Jericho or Jerusalem, Emmaus or
Damascus.

Again and again we take our questions from the human context to the

holy.
God meets us in our struggles and celebrations,
answering prayers for blessings and directions and healings.
Time and again we are met where we are by the prophets and
psalmists,
the judges of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, pastors and
parishioners alike
welcoming our questions,
our pondering souls and troubled hearts,
our faltering steps and daily struggles.

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Jesus yoked questioning with reverence
when he preached in the Sermon on the Mount, saying,
*“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches
finds,*

*and for everyone who knocks, the door will be
opened. --Matthew 7: 7-8*

Paul laid down a theology of reverence grounded in
unity.

*¹⁴For 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.” –
Romans 8: 14, 9*

The Psalmist lifted up a spirituality of reverence

grounded in the reality of our life and times.

She celebrated the presence of a Living God, as well,
and sang of the hospitality and historicity of the Holy One:

“Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” – Psalm
46: 10-11*

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

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?

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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 schools and cities and places of worship

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.

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Daring to raise questions 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 child 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.

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“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.

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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 the couple sits down at the
kitchen table
every morning and every evening
they need to have something else to talk about
besides their kids, pets, work, bills to pay,
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 help 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.

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On the Border Leaving Swaziland, Entering Mozambique, 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.