

“Reverence: Because We Are Not Gods”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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From *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* by Paul Woodruff

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. ... 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. ... Reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.

Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular. We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.

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Many Americans are still reeling from the outcome of the presidential election. Many Americans in this very sanctuary this morning count themselves in that category. This sermon would be my third in a row that considers the issues the campaign and election have raised.

Truth be told, I could preach four years of Sundays on said issues and never run out of sermon material to share from this pulpit within this sanctuary that is a beacon for liberal religious values. But that would make us all tired and weary. So as a preacher, I am walking a tender line that is not unlike the tender line each of you is walking right about now.

Like the tightrope walker, we depend on the balance pole to keep us upright so we can get across. While on one end of the balance pole is the need to hunker down in the darkness to absorb this new reality and nurture the courage to resist injustice the poet whispers these words from the *other* end of the balance pole: “*We must have the stubbornness to*

*accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. ... We must admit there will be music despite everything.*" ("A Brief for the Defense" by Jack Gilbert)

So pick up your pole and we'll attempt to stay upright and balanced together.

By grace this month's ministry theme is "reverence". The ministry themes are chosen in the spring for the following church year. We didn't dare imagine the place where we find ourselves now. But here we are. And we are being invited to consider reverence in this particular context.

As it turns out, it's just what the doctor ordered.

Let's go step by step ...

*Says Woodruff: 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.*

He names truth, nature, death, and God, as examples of things we cannot fully comprehend and therefore, inspire awe within our hearts and minds.

In our brokenness we seek meaning. We search for truth and when the truth makes its way through a cloud of confusion, we recognize it for what it is. It is awesome. And we are awestruck and in time, we are healed.

The brilliant color and light of New England's winter sky at dawn and at dusk. We who are so fortunate to live or work near the pond or river or the Sound also witness the sky's brilliance – orange, red, purple, blue - reflected in the water. Our hearts break open as we say outloud: this is awesome.

We witness the transition from life to death and wonder, "How could this be? One moment alive, the next moment: gone." Life unto death. We may understand the rational, factual, scientific, medical reality but the emotional meaning? It's awesome.

The Love that will not let us go. You may name that Love as God. You may name it as the Spirit of Life. As the Goddess. You may name it as Mystery. Or simply as Love. No matter how named, it is beyond our limited

capacity for understanding. It is beyond our control. But every time we feel the Spirit moving in our hearts; we are lifted up. And it is awesome.

Awe: beyond our understanding. Not in our control.

Woodruff continues:

*The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all.*

I think right about now would be a good time to grow our capacity for respecting our fellow human beings, flaws and all. Maybe we begin by going deep: naming the things that are beyond our capacity of understanding, nature, God, death, truth ... add what you'd like to this list ... and with humility and reverence accepting that there are things beyond our grasp. In other words, accepting that as humans we are limited. From this depth, our compassion is more likely grow. And we need to seriously grow our compassion and our courage, too.

I'm advocating for compassionate courage, which is the kind of courage that seems to be emerging in these daunting times. I'm hearing stories of people finding their voices in the face of cruelty when in the past the cruelty would be explained away out of fear of speaking up. Aren't you hearing these stories, too? Are you inspired to speak up more now than ever? Are you also trying to grow your capacity to respect your fellow humans, flaws and all?

There's the rub. It is a challenging charge in the best of times. Now it may feel next to impossible. Give it time, Beloveds.

*The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. From there Woodruff continues: This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment.*

*This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment.*

Who do you think is the boss of determining when exactly you have exceeded the normal human allotment of moral flaws? I'd say the mature grown-up human is themselves the boss of that determination. And

the ability to feel shame is the lighthouse that illuminates the truth of having exceeded that allotment.

I know that many of us struggle with useless shame and guilt. We're going to put that aside for another day. For today, let's just focus on how shame, as described here, is a *useful* force. As in when the incredulous question is posed, "*Do you have no shame?!*" Shame is inoculation. The ability to be ashamed keeps us from exceeding the normal allotment of moral flaws. And our ability to feel what I'll name as *useful* shame is fostered by our capacity to respect our fellow human beings.

Woodruff concludes:

*Reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.*

Please allow me to state the obvious: We are not gods. We control very little and understand even less. But we have a huge capacity for awe. For, yes, reverence and ultimately, for compassion. And these are virtues that we must demand of our leaders, in fact, and of our president-elect in particular.

At the very least – and this is no small “at the very least” – we need to be cultivating reverence as a virtue in our own hearts because we understand that we are not gods and should behave holding close that understanding.

There is an ancient story for this time that addresses this very thing. It is an Advent story. Advent: the season of anticipation. Of waiting in the darkness. Of going deep and sitting in the mystery of which we cannot possibly make sense. It is the time when we rest in that which is awe-inspiring. It is a time to build our capacity for compassion and humility.

Humility. Consider the ancient story of the ascension.

An angel comes to a young woman and announces that she has been chosen – by God, no less - to bear a child. Not just any child but the Son of God. Now, each year at our Child Dedication together we say that within every child there is a spark of divinity. A spark of divinity is one thing but it's not quite what the Angel Gabriel was saying to Mary! Hear his words:

*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. Luke 1: 28 – 32*

Mary asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

And we've arrived at the fork in the road where I ask you to please suspend your doubt for the sake of the story. It's a great story. You won't want to miss it.

Mary then speaks some of the most revered lines of the New Testament in what is known as the Magnificat. Some of the most gorgeous choral pieces have been composed setting these words to music. The Annunciation and Magnificat have inspired countless paintings this one among them:



"The Annunciation" John Collier. 4'x 4' oil

Jan Larson sent me photos of two paintings this week. This one includes all the classic elements typically depicted in Annunciation paintings: Mary in blue, a lily, a book, a dove. But it's contemporary (it hangs in a church in Texas) and is bold in offering an image of Mary as a young girl, really. The angel is humbled before her. It is stunning in its humanizing glory.

We'll hold this image as we hear Mary's words:

*My soul magnifies the Lord  
And my spirit rejoices in God  
for he has looked with favor on*

*the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed:  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me  
and holy is his name.*

Mary was a regular girl. But God looked with favor on her lowliness, as she so humbly names it. And although she is afraid she says yes. She trusts. And through this trust she feels her soul magnifying God.

So by way of translation ...

Today, in our context, we are the lowliest. We are just regular humans with limited capacity for understanding but limitless capacity for awe. Like Mary, we are reverently digging deep in the darkness. Preparing. Waiting.

We are preparing to birth deeper compassion. We are preparing to be more brave, more clear than we ever imagined was possible.

We are preparing to say yes despite our fear and heartbreak. Maybe because of our fear and heartbreak.

Every time we witness cruelty. Every time we witness injustice. Every time we are weary we will pay close attention to the angels in our midst who come to us in all manner of humanity and we will say yes.

And then, by doing so with reverence, our souls will magnify the Love that will not let us go. It will shine forth through our outreached arms; our righteous action; our tender care.

Reverence will run through the fabric of this community and reach beyond our walls.

The wise man says:

*We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.*

Such is my prayer. That I may be reverent. That you will be reverent. That together we will be a community of reverence and that through our

compassionate courage, we will be a beacon of hope, struggle and resistance ... knowing that there will be music despite everything.

Blessed be. Amen.