

## With a Hand at the Door: The Recovery of Reverence

2 Samuel 15: 24-29; Psalm 95: 1-7

When the Founder of the Cistercian Monastic Order would go to the chapel for prayers and worship, he would stand at the door and wait in silence before he opened the door and entered in. As his monks watched him, they sensed the importance of this moment, this gesture of reverence, and they all began to follow him in this act. They too put their hand on the knob of the door and waited. In the words of Samuel Miller, one of my early heroes in the ministry, “They refrained from haste while they prepared to enter the presence of the everlasting God.”

Reverence seems a lost element in our world today, in church and out of church. What can reverence mean for us today and for our world? One cannot command reverence—Be reverent!—anymore that one can command happiness—Be happy! But we can cultivate it, make it one of the habits of our heart. One key is in Miller’s word “haste.” Twentyfour-seven haste is no friend to reverence.

University of Texas philosopher, Robert Woodruff, published an important book twenty some years ago: *Reverence: A Forgotten Virtue*. He traced this cross- cultural virtue in many religions and societies.

“Reverence,” he writes,

“... is an ancient virtue that survives among us in half-forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe....”

It is, he writes, the *well-developed capacity for awe and respect*. And then this: “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations.”

I think he is right. Reverence begins as we acknowledge the limits of our wisdom, power and goodness. So we stop and wait at the door.

“O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.”

Kneeling and bowing are ancient gestures of reverence in worship. To quote Samuel Miller again, “There is no sign, no symbol, no act which characterizes worship more than the kneeling [person].”

And yet, when do we kneel and bow, if not with our bodies, with our minds and hearts? When Moses saw the burning bush he stopped. Had he not, he would have never heard the voice of God.

A few years back, a Religion Correspondent with the N.Y. Times, Ari Goldman took a year's leave of absence to enroll at Harvard Divinity School. He wrote about the year in a book, *The Search for God at Harvard*. He is an Orthodox Jew and wanted to learn about other religions and see what was going on at one of the nation's premier Divinity Schools. It was fascinating to read.

There was one page that stopped me in my tracks to reflect more deeply. He often attended the noonday worship at the Divinity School Chapel and occasionally dropped in alone to pray. "But" he wrote, "in an entire year at Harvard, I never saw anyone on his or her knees". He explained the way it took him aback:

"To my mind, kneeling is the ultimate expression of Christian supplication. It is something so Christian that, as a boy, I was taught never to fall on my knees." Even on the playground he was told, if you fall down, "keep one knee up." Jews don't kneel, he was taught. Jews pray standing up!

It struck me too, as I read, that he would spend a year at the Divinity School and never see a Christian kneeling. Where had kneeling gone? I'm

not talking about the physical act so much as a disposition of the mind and heart. Of course, one can kneel with spiritual pride. “Everybody, look, see how spiritual I am!”

And yet, there are those moments we experience reverence, kneeling moments.

When have you felt reverence in worship? Felt awe, felt the presence of God, and it stopped your busy mind or hurried heart? For me it sometimes happens as I hear a Prelude or Offertory played, or often for me, when the Scripture is read, and when we take Communion together.

How about outside of worship? I experience reverence as I prepare my sermons alone in my study that I might offer the sermon as a worthy offering to God. How about you—outside of worship?

I remember our going to worship with you to the local mosque. It was soon after then President Trump ordered a Muslim immigration ban. Our Muslim sisters and brothers were feeling threat and hate, and we went to worship with them. Susie Wiberg, no surprise, was one of the organizers.

What struck me and strikes me still was how we entered the Masjid. Someone was there to help us take off our shoes and show us where to put them in the entrance room. This place, this hour of worship was holy

ground. Then we experienced the holy ground of worshipping with people of so different a religion.

I went to pray in a Zen Buddhist temple in Berkeley one day. We left our shoes outside. It felt altogether right. A hand at the door.

Some churches have a baptismal font as you enter and you can touch the water to your forehead as you enter. Many churches light a candle or candles at the beginning of worship to symbolize the presence of God — as we do at Advent. How do you put your hand on the door as a gesture of reverence?

## II

What is the quality of heart or mind that characterizes reverence? As I've suggested above, it is in the moments we recognize the limits of our wisdom, power or goodness. *We have reached our limits and we reach for God.* Prayers of Confession in worship provide such a moment in worship — as our prayers of intercession and supplication in our worship.

Noted Native-American writer, Scott Momaday, tells of his beloved grandmother and her long and rambling prayers that came out of suffering and hope. She was of the Kiowa people, and had become a Christian along the way, but she still prayed in her Kiowa language. One day earlier in his

life he stopped by unannounced to see her and maybe get some milk and cookies. He went in and could not find her. Then he went to her bedroom door and peeked in. There she was kneeling by her bed praying in her plaintive voice for every one of the Kiowa people, and for all the world and its troubles.

Scott quietly backed out of the room saying, "I am not worthy, I am not worthy." What he felt was reverence.

Where have you experienced reverence? In nature? In seeing something so beautiful, something so good that it feels holy? When we feel that there is a goodness and beauty beyond us, a greatness beyond us. Sometimes reading the prayers of others brings a moment of reverence to me. I don't generally say a prayer before the sermon, some call it the Prayer of Illumination. Perhaps I should. Here is one I especially love:

Our God,

Help us to hear your word,

And hearing your word, love your voice,

And loving your voice, do your will.

### III

What about reverence as a civic virtue, a virtue that helps strengthen the social fabric, deepen the civic bonds? We start again with reverence as a recognition of the limits of our own wisdom, power and goodness.

In the Preamble of our Constitution, we say the we seek to form a “more perfect union”, not “perfect”, but always striving toward our goal. Our balance of powers in the three branches of government, executive, judiciary and legislative, is built on the assumption that we humans *need* checks and balances.

And the opposite of reverence? When people say they know exactly what God wants for the nation. When our most sacred emblems are bought and sold as trinkets. When simple respect is lost.

Think about the reverence you feel as you visit a place like Gettysburg or go to Arlington Cemetery. The ultimate sacrifice of those who have fought for our nation and its values brings tears or a lump in the throat. This is national holy ground.

Or think of those occasions when the flying of the American flag has brought a sense of reverence. Of course, there are many ways that the flag can be desecrated, by burning it, or by using it for partisan advantage, or when you see it plastered everywhere as if it were a commodity. Or when you see it on a flag pole along with the Confederate flag. What brings the

reverence are the values we stand for as a nation. So we place a hand over our heart.

We are talking about the reverence for *life*, as lives have been given for the things we hold most dear. For Christians, we must say, this is a *secondary reverence* to our reverence for God who is our ultimate loyalty and reverence, but it is a worthy reverence. There is a difference between a worthy patriotism and an unworthy nationalism. In the latter the nation becomes a golden calf.

#### IV

The deepest reverence is when we place our lives in the hands of God, whom we cannot control and whose workings are beyond our full understanding. So now I turn to the story of King David and the episode you heard today.

David's son Absalom, has mounted a revolt against his father and begun a civil war. What an excruciating moment for King David. He is fleeing his Capital, Jerusalem. On the way out of the city, he meets his two high priests carrying the ark of the covenant. The ark was the sacred chest that contained the Ten Commandments. It was like the flag, the Bible and the Constitution all rolled up into one. It stood for the presence and



protection of God. It was sometimes carried into battle invoking the protection of the living God.

But David did something almost incredible for a king or ruler of a nation. He stopped the two priests and said,

Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you', behold, here I am, let God do what seems good to him.

Where do we see such civic and religious reverence today? I think submitting to the votes of the people in an election is one. Perhaps the best example I know is Abraham Lincoln, who as President did what he believed to be right as he "was given to know the right", but acknowledged we do not always know what is right, and who bowed before a divine Providence he could not fully know.

His Second Inaugural Address, set in the middle of the Civil War, is a political and spiritual masterpiece, as powerful an example as I know of civic and spiritual reverence. Hear again his words:

Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude , or the duration, which it has already attained....Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each has invoked His aid against the other....The

prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

And then the closing, as important now as then:

With malice toward none, and charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

These words and the spirit of them could guide us today in our sundered nation. What can heal our land? Reverence, and its close companion, Humility.

What can make our worship more real? Reverence. And so, as the spiritual goes,

Let us break bread together on our knees,

Let us praise God together on our knees.

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun

O Lord, have mercy on me.

And we add:

Let us do justice together on our knees,

Let us love kindness together on our knees,  
and let us walk humbly with our God  
with an ever-deepening reverence.

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1. Samuel H. Miller, *The Life of the Church* (N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 40.