

Living Reverently

Psalm 111 *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.*

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.
Anyone who claims to know something
does not yet have the necessary knowledge.*

Few other words associated with the Jewish/Christian tradition cause more consternation and even repulsion than “the fear of God.” Why would anyone be attracted to a religion telling us to be afraid of God? People don’t want to be more afraid of life than they are. They want to be comforted, at peace, so they can live productively and happily. How can you love God if you are afraid, for instance, that God might at any arbitrary moment lash out in anger or hit you with punishment? I think this contradiction accounts for the ambivalence many people have who were raised in some of the more severe churches in our culture. And it may account for an ambivalence in our own minds. How do you put these things together—loving God and fearing God?

There has been a tendency, which is very understandable, to pitch the “fear of God” overboard as a relic of the past when God was pictured as a celestial father always on the brink of having a rageful meltdown. But before we chuck the “fear of God” overboard, let’s revisit it. That’s what I’ve done in recent years, and I’ve actually come to appreciate and cherish this business of the “fear of God.”

When I was a kid, we lived in Bristol, Virginia, not far from my maternal grandparents in Kingsport, Tennessee. I remember riding to Kingsport in the back seat of the family car—a marvelous 1957 Chevrolet, white with red interior! We drove on the meandering Route 11, winding through the luscious green hillsides and fields, the summer sunlight bathing everything in warm yellow. The smell of cornfields, plowed earth, and mown fields filled my senses.

Yet there was one place on that road that disturbed me. You came around a fierce curve in the highway and at night the headlights would suddenly illuminate a large stone cross planted on the roadside. On the cross were chiseled the words “Prepare to meet God!” Here was a monument to the popular form of Christianity in that part of the

country, a religion of the fear of God. My grandfather Fleenor was a blue-collar worker who, like his sons after him, labored all his life in the bowels of the Tennessee Eastman Company. The Eastman, as it was called, was a hellish-looking place, especially at night. Vast acres of pipes spewing steam and God only knows what else, and a sulphurous smell that saturated the air of the city.

My grandfather was a member of the Primitive Baptist Church. I grasped the full meaning of that name when, at age twelve, I attended my grandfather’s funeral. Loud, angry preaching. Crying and sobbing throughout the congregation. And the agonized wails of some family members as they were paraded past the open casket. The air was thick with spiritual anxiety and I resolved in that moment never to embrace anything like this in my own faith. If this was Christianity, I wanted nothing of it. But fortunately I had a father who was a minister of a very different spirit and understanding, and I knew that there was something healthier and more joyful at the heart of Christian faith.

As I developed my own sense of God over the years, I often thought back on the contradictions I experienced during those years. The dreamy splendor of the valleys and hills and fields, and the spiritual dis-ease represented by that stone cross and its terrifying message. A people whose souls always seemed to me to be soft and warm, gentle like the countryside, full of mountain music, the strum of a flat picked guitar and the happy, jumpy sound of a claw-hammered banjo. And yet souls troubled by a religion that seemed to ignore and discount the beauty of persons and those mountains, an imported religion of unhappiness and guilt. The doctrine of “original sin”, which I finally came to reject as unbiblical, had done its damage in peoples’ minds, hearts, and lives. A religion that was always longing for a life beyond this life. There were reasons for that longing to escape, I suppose. Life in Appalachia was and is hard. Poverty. Loneliness. Violence. And someone from some other place always coming in to rob you of your resources and leave you nothing, while they made off with your coal or your forests or your music and culture.

Why do I go into all that? Well, in part to share with you something of where my own life has come from and how it has been shaped. Yet it has to do with this fear of God business. I was satisfied long ago to let go of such a religion and its pathologies. But I have continued to bump up against the “fear of God,” especially in the Psalms. And I wonder if there isn’t something important there for me and for us, something we have missed, something that is needed in our own day and time.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it have a good understanding.” In the very next psalm, the 112th, are the words: “Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in God’s commandments.” If happiness and fear go together in our sense of God, then the meaning of the fear of God cannot be terror or anxiety or always expecting God to lower the boom on us. It must mean something else, and it does. The “fear of God” is, actually, an unfortunate translation of a word that means “reverence.” Reverence for God. It includes a sense of awe. Who of us has not felt this kind of awe? Contemplating the beauty and intricacy, even the destructive power, of the creation. The mystery of death and birth, taking our minds to the limit of understanding and opening our spirits wide.

As I was writing those reminiscences of childhood last Wednesday afternoon at the dining table in my mother-in-law’s house in Paris, Kentucky, the Hospice nurse, Ann, came for a visit. I had a chance to visit with her before she went in to see Mildred, whose brain tumor is advancing. We talked of this great mystery of dying and how like birth it is, asking of us great care, awareness and attention. When Ann went in to see Mildred, she brought with her this flood of love and caring that filled the whole house. That evening I invited Mildred to share with me a time of prayer and reading of scripture. We lit a candle. I read from the psalms. We prayed. And I experienced what for me has come to be the meaning of the “fear of God,” a sense of the deep, yet gracious mystery that envelopes us, that at once gives us life and fills us with awe and wonder.

Where do we see what it really means for a human being to fear God and practice it through wisdom? In Jesus, his compassion, nonviolence, self-giving. A life, not of competition, but of servanthood. How do we practice the wisdom that comes from the fear of God, from reverence for God and life? By the compassion and love that we know in Jesus, that he awakens in us. This is the connection I found this week between the psalm and the reading from 1 Cor. 8. Paul is addressing the issue of “weaker” Christians, who come from idol-worshipping sects, being shocked by “stronger” Christians who eat meat that was sacrificed to idols and then sold. In this dispute, who does Paul call into his office, as it were, for a chat? The so-called stronger Christians, those who are mature enough in their faith to know that idols have no reality, so the sacrificed meat has no spiritual taint. Paul says, look, you have a deeper knowledge about things. You are farther along in your thinking. You are aware of the one God and that idols have no reality. But, just because you are intellectually right does not mean that your behavior is

right. You know stuff in your heads but you are offending your sisters and brothers by your actions. You are long on knowledge and short on love. So, if you are really mature, if you are really strong, then take another look at how you are living. That’s where the rubber hits the road. Where is your true knowledge of God? Are you living compassionately? Are you focused more on your own rightness of religious beliefs than you are on embodying the compassion of Jesus? So, go back out there and be mindful of how you act and how your actions affect your sisters and brothers. I’m not saying abandon your knowledge or get mushy-headed. But the main thing is how we live. Living with reverence for God means living with reverence for yourselves, for other people, and for the creation. That’s how we display our knowledge of God, by the way we live. It’s not how much you know about God. It’s whether you love God and show that love by the way you live, with reverence for life.

Let me go back to the Hospice nurse’s visit at Mildred’s last Wednesday afternoon. We talked together for forty-five minutes and I don’t think we mentioned God once. And yet I knew that here was one who knew God, who lived by the reality of God and felt no necessity to talk about it. She simply exuded knowledge transformed into wisdom, which in turn was transformed into compassion and loving-kindness. In the end, that’s all that matters. Not what or how much we know, but how we live, whether the knowledge of God we have gets transformed in our hearts so that it flows through our actions and words and how we are present with people, how we live upon this earth.

As Ann and I talked that day, our conversation turned at one point to Appalachia and its people and culture. She had a great interest in that. I shared with her something of my own family and its roots in southwest Virginia and east Tennessee. She told me she had a beautiful book she wanted to leave with me, a coffee table type book of watercolor paintings of the people and the places of Appalachia. Later, after she had left, I took the book in to show it to Mildred. Together we looked at the pictures, which sparked in her mind several memories and reminiscences. And I felt in my own heart a renewed appreciation of all those things I had remembered from my childhood and youth. Somehow, through the experiences of that afternoon and the visit of this “God-fearing” person, my reverence for God was deepened and strengthened. And with it, a renewed resolve to live with reverence for all of life.