

Living Reverently

Psalms 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.*

One of the most troublesome phrases in our spiritual tradition is “the fear of God.” Why would anyone want a religion that promotes being afraid of God? People don’t need to be more afraid than they already are. Furthermore, how can you love a God you are afraid of? What a contradiction! How do you put these things together—loving God and fearing God?

Maybe we should just pitch “the fear of God” overboard as a relic from the past, when God was pictured as a celestial father always ready to lash out in anger at disobedient children. Before we throw out the “fear of God,” however, let’s revisit it. That’s what I’ve done in recent years, and I’ve come to appreciate and cherish deeply what I think “the fear of God” really means.

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 as we meandered along Route 11 through luscious green hillsides and fields, summer sunlight bathing everything in golden warmth. The smell of cornfields, plowed earth, and mown grass filled my senses.

Yet there was one place on that road that disturbed me, especially at night. You came around a fierce curve in the highway and 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 in the bowels of the Tennessee Eastman Company. The Eastman, as it was called, was a hellish-looking place, especially at night. Endless acres of pipes and chimneys spewed plumes of noxious vapor into the air, and a sulphurous smell saturated 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. 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 would have nothing of it. 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.

I have often thought about the contradictions I experienced--the splendor of the valleys and hills and fields, and the spiritual dis-ease represented by that stone cross and its ominous warning. Here were people whose souls always seemed soft and warm, gentle like the countryside, and full of music--a flat-picked guitar and the happy, jumpy sound of a claw-hammered banjo. And yet their souls were troubled by a religion that seemed to ignore the beauty of persons and the land, an imported religion of unhappiness and guilt. The doctrine of “original sin”, which I eventually came to reject as unbiblical, had wounded peoples’ minds, hearts, and lives. It was a religion of 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, making off with your coal or your forests or your music and culture.

Why did I go into all that? In part, to share with you something of where my own life has come from and how it has been shaped. It also has to do with this fear of God business. I was satisfied long ago to let go of such a religion and its pathologies. Yet I continue to encounter “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 actually 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. It must mean something else, and it does. The “fear of God” is an inadequate translation of a word that means something more like “reverence” or “awe in the presence of the sacred.” Who of us has not felt this kind of awe as we contemplate the beauty and intricacy, even the destructive power, of the creation? The mystery of birth and death, too, takes our minds to the limit of understanding and opens our spirits

wide. The psalm is saying that this kind of awe and wonder is the fountain of wisdom and right living. It is the source of true happiness.

Albert Schweitzer, the great physician, theologian, biblical scholar, musician, and mystic, was partial to the phrase “reverence for life.” Schweizer was very close to the biblical meaning of the “fear of God.” It means living with reverence, with awareness of God’s being, of God as the Source and Sustainer of life. And because all things come from God, as Paul writes in our reading from 1 Corinthians, it means a reverence for life itself—the earth, other people, ourselves. To have this kind of reverence, this kind of “fear of God” means that we could never harm the earth or other people the way we do. All of the public God language, whether in church or politics, is empty of this fear of God, this reverence for life, because it does not square with how we are actually living, the decisions we are making, the political and economic policies focused on greed, power, and violence. Far from getting rid of the “fear of God,” we desperately need to learn the wisdom that comes from it and practice it in our hearts and in our lives. When we are people who live in awe of the creation, with respect and reverence for all of life, we are living out of the “fear of God.” And this brings about the deep happiness the psalms speak of, the joy of living as God meant us to live.

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. It is a life not of competition but of servanthood. This is a connection I saw this week between the psalm and the reading from 1 Corinthians 8. Our love of and reverence for God is lived out in the ways we relate to other persons. Paul is addressing a tension that has arisen in the Christian community in Corinth. There are those he refers to as “weaker” Christians, those who come from idol-worshipping sects. They are shocked by “stronger” Christians who eat meat that was sacrificed to idols and then sold, never giving it a thought.

In this dispute, Paul lays primary responsibility on the so-called stronger Christians. They 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 these things. You are farther along in your thinking. Just because you are intellectually right, however, 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. 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 your actions affect your sisters and brothers.

Paul is not saying we should abandon our knowledge or get mushy-headed. He is not saying that the so-called weaker persons don’t need to mature in their faith. The main thing is living with reverence for God, and that means living with reverence for other people, especially those with whom we have disagreements or who do not share our understanding of things. It’s not how much we know about God or religion or spirituality or whatever. It’s whether we express our love of God by the way we live, with reverence for life. There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. That’s the point Paul is making. It is important to grow in our knowledge of God, to mature and deepen in our understanding of God and our lives in relation to God. That is why we lift up the importance of a commitment to our own spiritual life, to prayer and study, to greater self-understanding and insight through the inward journey. Yet the knowledge we gain can either be used to “puff ourselves up,” as Paul writes, or to become a wisdom that shows itself in relating to others in an effectively loving way, a way that honors their being. This is a real challenge for us. We live in a culture soaked with competitiveness and basing one’s own worth on being better than someone else. Most of us suffer enough hurt during our lives to feel varying degrees of low self-worth. We try to heal our wounds by wounding others, by distancing ourselves from others in some way. It doesn’t work. It only compounds our isolation and loneliness, and keeps the cycle of suffering going.

Paul’s solution is much better. It is the way of servanthood. It is the way of giving up our painful attempts to assert ourselves and not clinging to the kind of knowledge that sets us apart from and in tension with others. It is the way of reverential wisdom and love. Paul is saying to the knowledgeable Christians: Look, those who are weak in their faith, who don’t have the same knowledge you have, they are looking at how you act. They see you eating the meat that was offered to idols and they might feel that they should do the same, even though their consciences won’t allow it. It will cause them undue suffering. It’s not that important. We hope that those who are “weaker” will grow in understanding. But that’s not where they are right now. So, says Paul, if my eating meat causes undue struggle and suffering for them, then I will not eat meat. Paul has chosen a theological vegetarianism. It is something he does in order to not throw unnecessary obstacles in the way of others. He can let things go. His ego is not hung up on things that get in the way of a greater love.

Psalm 111 calls us to a life of wisdom that springs from living with reverence for God as the source of life. Paul shows us an example of how this wisdom is lived out when it comes to reverence for our brothers and sisters in life. When we are growing in the “fear of God” understood as reverential awe of God and life itself, and

when we are growing in our understanding that the wisdom of love is more important than being filled with knowledge, then we are on the path to true happiness and right living.