

BOWING BEFORE MYSTERY

(01/26/2020)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 100
Acts 17:16-29
1 Corinthians 4:01

“Worship the Lord with gladness.” (Ps. 100:2)

“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” (1 Cor. 4:01)

Early in the last century, in a cave nestled high in the Swiss Alps, explorers found a little shrine made of the skull and the long bones of cave bears. From the positioning of the bones, with the long bones sticking through the eye sockets of the skull, from the remains of a fire in front of it, and from the drawings on the cave walls, it was clear that this little area had a religious significance and function.

We don’t know what the early humans or humanoids who inhabited this cave and constructed this shrine thought and felt. We can only guess. We do know they were hunters. It seems a not unrealistic assumption that these early humans, these members of a hunting and gathering community, were witnessing to their experience of the mystery of life through the establishment of this shrine and probably a corresponding religious ritual.

These early humans knew that the cave bear provided them with the food and clothing that were necessary for life. Through a primitive religious act, they expressed their gratitude to the cave bear for sacrificing, for giving its life for them.

In our own religious tradition, we thank God for providing us with the bread of life, both material and spiritual, when we say grace before meals. In the prayer of thanksgiving in our Eucharistic service, we thank God for sending us the Christ who gave his life for us and whose body and blood we receive in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. What I find so amazing is that these early humans, living so long ago, had the same sense of the spiritual dimension of life, the same realization that this mysterious life comes from somewhere else and that it does not end with death. Through this ritual, they were asking the spirit of the cave bear to return in a new form, to once again give them what they needed in order to live. They promised that, if the cave bear would return, they would continue to honor its spirit in their little rituals and shrines.

Joseph Campbell, the eminent mythologist, has suggested that this shrine had to have been set up before the last glacial period in Europe, for during that period, the entrance to the

cave was entirely covered by ice. It could not have been set up after the last glacial period, for after the last glacier, there were no longer any cave bears in the world. Campbell reasons that, in light of these factors, this little shrine had to have been constructed approximately two hundred thousand years ago. Two hundred thousand years ago! This was a long time before Abraham, before Moses and David. Long before the advent of Islam, which is 1500 years old, before Christianity, which is 2000 years old, before Buddhism and Taoism, which are 2500 years old, before Judaism, which is 4500 years old, and even before Hinduism, which is 8000 years old, people were bowing before the sacredness and the mystery of life.

What were these early humans or humanoids thinking and feeling? What possessed them to construct a little shrine and bow before it? Jane Goodall has observed that chimpanzees react with what looks like a mixture of fear and awe in a thunder-and-lightning storm, but the response of chimpanzees to thunder and lightning is still a long way from consciously constructing a shrine and creating a ritual that not only witnesses to the human awareness of the great mystery of life, but actually seeks to build a deeper relationship with it.

This dimension of religious faith, this dimension of awe in the presence of mystery, is unique to human beings. Goethe says that this sense of awe in the presence of mystery is the greatest and most noble of all human emotions. From this sense of awe, we humans feel the need to connect with this source of mystery, to invoke its presence, to bow before it, and to build or deepen our relationship with it.

On our driving tour of this great country a little over twenty years ago, Darlene, Kristen and I were not specifically embarking upon a pilgrimage to sacred places. We did, however, see some beautiful churches. There was a little Roman Catholic chapel nestled into the hills of Sedona, a quiet, meditative chapel dedicated to St. Francis, that felt like a sacred space. In the beauties of nature, the sense of mystery that was palpable in the Badlands of South Dakota, Bryce Canyon in Utah, and Mesa Verde in Colorado, we could see why ancient people regarded these areas as sacred spaces. In the cave drawings of Canyon de Chelly in New Mexico, the symbolic depictions of the sun, the moon, the wheel of life, and the Navaho fertility God, Kokopelli, we saw how ancient people depicted and bowed before the great mystery of life.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, has said that it is easy to be a monk if you live in a monastery. It is easy to be a scholar if you live in a library. The trick is to live the core elements

of the monastic life, the contemplative life, while living in the real world. The challenge, at least my challenge, is to continue to read, to study, to grow while shouldering all the family and professional demands of a very busy life.

It is easy to have a sense of the sacred if we are standing in the midst of a beautiful and mysterious canyon, or if we are meditating in the sanctuary of the cathedral at Chartres. It is more difficult to experience a sense of the sacred while we are living our normal, everyday life in the real world, to see the spiritual dimension of life which infuses the material world, to see the blending of the sacred and the profane, and, with all our knowledge and technology, to bow, as those primitive cave dwellers bowed, before the great mystery of life whom we call God.

If we lose a sense of the mystery of life, if we lose a sense of the sacredness of life, if we lose a sense of the spiritual dimension of life and of ourselves, we have lost something precious. Without this, our daily life becomes absorbed with the mechanics of survival, survival oriented toward and accompanied by the pleasures of a nice house, car, and good food, but survival, nonetheless. When this happens, the meaning of life becomes distorted. Darlene, Kristen and I found it sad to see people in Reno, Las Vegas, and Native American reservations leaving their little children in the casino restaurant while they bowed before slot machines, praying that the goddess of luck would bestow endless riches upon them. Nature abhors a vacuum. When we do not place God at the center of our life, the center will be filled with something else.

The core of the universe, the core of life, the core of our own being is shrouded in the great mystery we call God. We cannot fully understand this mystery, but we need to try in our own limited way with our own little brains and our own limited language. It is presumptuous to even name this mystery, but we are told by Jesus that we not only are allowed to do this, we are encouraged to do it. We can call this mystery "Abba." We know that this mystery is impersonal, that it fills the entire universe, that it has created and continues to create all that is, but we are also told by Jesus that it is personal, that it cares about us like a father or a mother cares for a child, that it is more intimately connected to us than we are to ourselves.

Heinrich Zimmer, the great historian of religions, has said that the most important things in life cannot be put into words and cannot be understood. The second most important things in life can be put into words, but the words are misunderstood. The least important things in life are what we can put into words and understand clearly. I believe God falls into the first of these

categories, though some of my colleagues in ministry not only disagree, but even reverse the three options. When we lose touch with the great mystery that is at the core of life and of our life, we have made a grave mistake. We do need to give this mystery a name. We do need to try to understand it. We do need to build and deepen our relationship with it. On a deeper, more fundamental level, we need to bow before it. We need to bow before the great mystery of God.

Near the close of our worship service this morning, one of the members of the Diaconate will issue a Call to Communion, an invitation to partake in this sacrament next Sunday. In our church, we offer the Sacrament of Holy Communion to all who wish to partake. There is no requirement that you be a member of this church to receive, no requirement that you believe what we believe (especially since most of us don't really know what we believe—because our faith is constantly evolving).

Some churches will not serve communion to children because they believe that a pre-confirmation child does not fully understand the meaning of this sacrament. What a joke! If we only served communion to those who fully understand this sacrament, we would not need to prepare many pieces of bread or cups of grape juice! At the core of this sacrament is a mystery we can never fully understand. I hope, in the midst of all my teaching and preaching, we don't lose a sense of this mystery and our need, in the final analysis, to bow before it.

This is why we worship. Every once in a while, I hear people say that they feel no need to worship God, that the term “worship” is an outdated concept. I understand what they are saying. However, I think they fail to grasp a sense of the transcendent that is an integral part of our Sunday worship. The transcendent is that which is beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical experience. It refers to something so excellent that it is beyond the range of human understanding. Worship is an organized, symbolic, ritualized attempt to enter into the presence of the transcendent, to experience its great mystery and majesty, to bow before it.

Angelus Silesius, the 17th century German Catholic priest and physician who was really a mystical poet, once wrote:

God cannot be grasped.

God is pure nothing, untouched by now or here: the more you reach for him, the more he evades you.

God is a spirit, a fire, a being and a light.

And yet at the same time he is also none of these.

God beyond creation.

*Go where you cannot go! Look where you cannot look!
Hear where there is no sound or echo: then you will be where God speaks.
Silent prayer.
God is above everything, so that nothing can be spoken:
Therefore, best of all, pray to him in silence, too.*

This is what we long to experience in worship. Worship and prayer are an experience of making the transcendent immanent. We long for a sense of what the desert father St. Anthony describes when he says that “the prayer of the monk is not pure until he no longer knows who he is or that he is praying.” In those moments when we experience only a glimpse of what St. Anthony or Angelus Silesius are describing, I think we are bowing before mystery.

Next Sunday, as we partake in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us bow before mystery. Those early cave dwellers knew that something which they didn’t understand and which they couldn’t even name had sent them the cave bear for food and clothing. They bowed before this mystery in gratitude. We know God sent us Jesus who showed us what this mystery looks like in human form, who taught us how to live, and who then died to the body of Jesus, to the world of human existence, to live inside us as the Holy Spirit.

When we lose a sense of the transcendent dimension of life, of this great mystery that is at the core of our religion as well as our life, worship can become as mechanical as our daily life. When this happens, we have lost something very special. Next Sunday, when you hold that little piece of bread in your hand, when you hold that little cup of grape juice, open yourself to Christ’s guiding presence. Take Christ into you, literally as well as symbolically.

But above all, in worship, bow before the mystery of this sacrament, the mystery of Christ, the mystery of God, and the great mystery of your own life, your own special life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
January 26, 2020*