

To Be Spiritual is To Be Alive

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Elizabethton, Tennessee

*What has our arrogance profited us? And what good has our boasted wealth brought us? 'All those things have vanished like a shadow, and like a rumour that passes by; like a ship that sails through the billowy water, and when it has passed no trace can be found, no track of its keel in the waves; or as, when a bird flies through the air, no evidence of its passage is found; the light air, lashed by the beat of its pinions and pierced by the force of its rushing flight, is traversed by the movement of its wings, and afterwards no sign of its coming is found there;
The Wisdom of Solomon 5:8-11*

On my blog, Shuck and Jive, I am having a conversation with a colleague and friend of mine, Bob Campbell. I met Bob when we were both pastoring congregations in upstate New York. We have been talking about a lot of things, and most recently we have been discussing essentials of faith.

What is essential about faith?

To put it another way what is the essence of faith?

Some in the church want to have a list of essential beliefs. The Presbyterian Church was divided over this issue in the 1920s. For many years, beginning in the late 1800s in response to and in anxiety over higher criticism of the Bible, ministers were required to subscribe to five essentials of faith, at that time, known as the fundamentals of faith, from whence we get the term fundamentalism or fundamentalist.

Those five fundamentals included:

- 1) The Virgin Birth and the Deity of Jesus
- 2) Substitutionary Atonement
- 3) The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus
- 4) The inerrancy of the Bible
- 5) The imminent return of Christ or the authenticity of his miracles

This conflict in the early twentieth century was called the fundamentalist/modernist controversy and the Presbyterian Church was its grand stage. To shorten the story, In 1925, the Presbyterian Church decided that ministers did *not* have to subscribe to these fundamentals. This opened the door to the embrace of higher criticism of the scriptures and our tradition. At that time, a new denomination then split, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church which required its clergy to subscribe to those fundamentals.

For the next 80 years, the main branches of the Presbyterian Church (since reunited in 1983) have contained a mixed bag of folks. With that we have retained a tension under our large umbrella. You will find clergy and members all along the spectrum from those who hold those fundamentals in some form or another to those who do not and embrace higher criticism, the sciences and so forth as sources for Truth in addition to the spiritual wisdom of our tradition.

The Presbyterian Church has thus far said that we have essentials but no list of them. We have a *Book of Confessions* containing eleven historical confessions. The most recent approved in 1989. It reads quite differently than the Westminster Confession or the Apostle's Creed. Yet they are all there.

We do not have a list of subscribed beliefs. Some are more comfortable with that ambiguity than others. We have, to put it simply, some who want us to have a list of essential beliefs and some who like to speak of the essence of faith. I wish to speak about the essence of faith for the next several weeks as a starting point rather than essential beliefs.

What is the essence of faith? There are many ways to pose that question. What *is* the essence of spirituality or the essence of life? What is the *essence* of Christianity or the *essence* of the Reformed Presbyterian tradition?

Today and for the next several weeks I am going to offer some ideas not in any particular order. Just because I mention it first, that does mean it is necessarily the most important.

An essence of faith, an essential of faith, if you like, is, in my view, *awe*.

A synonym is wonder.

This is the experience of transcendence. It leads one to the feeling of

“Yes!” Or “Wow!”

Traditional Reformed language might call this the sovereignty of God.

The universe and God are so much larger than I am.

I am overblown.

Like Job who experiences YHWH in the whirlwind, I am speechless.

This means that my problems, even Earth's problems, are very slight in the sight of the Universe and God. It also means that my attitudes, opinions, and accomplishments are dwarfed by God's light and wisdom.

Today's text is from the Old Testament Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon:

What has our arrogance profited us? And what good has our boasted wealth brought us? 'All those things have vanished like a shadow, and like a rumour that passes by; like a ship that sails through the billowy water, and when it has passed no trace can be found, no track of its keel in the waves; or as, when a bird flies through the air, no evidence of its passage is found; the light air, lashed by the beat of its pinions and pierced by the force of its rushing flight, is traversed by the movement of its wings, and afterwards no sign of its coming is found there;

For me, my faith requires humility which is expressed in Awe and Wonder before life and the author of life.

There is a sense of cynicism that creeps up on us if we aren't careful. A cynicism that tells us there is not much out there of which to be in awe or wonder. “Been there, done that” is a phrase so often repeated. I have seen it all, done it all; there is nothing new. The poet from Ecclesiastes wrote:

*8All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
9What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:8-9*

We may think that way about our own lives on occasion. There is nothing new. Nothing we haven't seen. Nothing else can be done. If we are not careful this cynicism can take us over. Our world becomes smaller. We become more and more focused on ourselves. We don't see anything we have not seen before.

But that does not mean there is nothing new to see. It means we have allowed our vision to become clouded so that we do not see. That is why I suggest that wonder or awe is an essential of faith. When we allow ourselves to be amazed again, to wonder and to marvel we will see things we have not seen even though they were in front of us all along.

This takes some practice.

A couple of weeks ago one of the English teachers at TA Dugger Middle School across the street brought her students to our church. I drove in to the parking lot and I saw these students sitting around the grounds under trees, on the grass, each with a pen and paper. Every year she brings them over to our church to sit and to write. They write what they see, hear, touch, smell, maybe even taste.

She may not say it is a *spiritual* practice, but she is teaching them the spiritual practice of wonder. In an age in which we are filled with images from television, music on our ipods, and text messaging on our cell phones, these students are learning the task of noticing this beautiful creation.

My hunch is that it probably isn't easy for them at first. They have to sit and listen and watch without being entertained or by having all their senses flooded with advertising. But if they sit long enough, soon, they begin to notice things that they have not noticed before. *And they write.*

Wonder is an essential of faith.

I have not been in the South long enough to be cynical about cicadas. I had never heard them before I moved here. I am still impressed. Sometimes I sit on my deck and I pretend to direct them as they crescendo and decrescendo. That is their purpose--to entertain me on my deck!

Sometimes when I drive home from church I will take the Old Elizabethton Highway. As I turn onto my shortcut onto Hilltop Road, there is a tree next to the building on the corner that has the hugest leaves I have seen yet. They must be a foot and a half long and a foot wide. "Why do you need leaves so big, Tree?" I wonder.

I would like to wonder more about things. I tend to get narrowly focused. I focus on my problems or my accomplishments. Maybe you do as well. A spiritual practice might be to allow yourself time to sit in awe at what is around you. Isn't it funny that a squirrel's tail is longer than its body? Why is my grill so interesting that a huge blue butterfly sits on it for twenty minutes opening and closing its wings? It is the spiritual practice of observation, listening and wondering that can soothe our tense nerves.

For the next three Thursdays we are going to read Rev. Horace C. Atwater's book, *Incidents of a Southern Tour or The South as Seen Through Northern Eyes*.ⁱ Rev. Atwater was the pastor of this congregation from 1870-1877. I preached one of his sermons two weeks ago for Heritage Sunday. The book of which I am speaking was written in 1857, when he, a Yankee, was touring the South. He was filled with wonder.

From October till April I can testify from experience, it is all that heart can wish. It is just that medium between heat and cold, that makes it the joy of one's life to be abroad in the open air. Out in the glorious sunlight, where God intended we should be, if we would enjoy health; rather than within, breathing the vitiated air of our closed rooms, as is the custom with but too many, in our bleak New England clime....

The South is the land of fruits and flowers, sunshine, and song. From July till December, the most delicious peaches are ripening. Figs abound, of a flavor so rich that when once eaten, they can never be forgotten. June, the month of roses with us, flies quickly past, and leaves only a pleasant memory of itself. But there, this queen of flowers may be almost said to sway her sceptre for the entire year. In the beautiful city of Vicksburg, in November,

the sidewalk was literally strewed with roses, which, in trimming away the luxuriant growth, had been cut off, and thrown into the street. In Natches, at Christmas, the finest and fairest of flowers were blooming, as if awaiting the hand of beauty, to weave them into crowns and chaplets, fit ornaments for the temple of the living God.

The grounds of a gentleman, whose hospitalities I enjoyed, were adorned with more than one hundred varieties of roses, with an uncounted number of other beautiful flowers, easily cultivated in that clime, where winter is unknown. But which few northern eyes are allowed to rejoice in the beholding. At Baton Rouge, the Capital of Louisiana, on the first Sabbath of the new year, one of the fair worshipers brought and placed upon the communion table, in front of me, a splendid bouquet of flowers, gathered fresh from the garden. And, certainly, it would take a sterner Puritan than myself, to condemn or declare out of taste or place the beautiful, the fragrant offering. Nor would we dare deny, but that some of the inspiration of the hour, was derived from that splendid gift. (pp. 13-16)

That is wonderful writing from an author who knows how to be impressed. He is not afraid to rejoice in the wonder of it all—to observe what he sees—and to regard what he observes as “fit ornaments for the temple of the living God.”

It is our arrogance, cynicism, and obsession with our personal possessions that clouds our minds into narrow self-centered thinking. The antidote for that arrogance and cynicism is awareness of the majesty, the transcendence, the awe of Creation. We have not “been there and done that” by any means. We can learn from watching the birds. According to the Wisdom of Solomon:

What has our arrogance profited us? And what good has our boasted wealth brought us? ‘All those things have vanished like a shadow...as when a bird flies through the air, no evidence of its passage is found; the light air, lashed by the beat of its pinions and pierced by the force of its rushing flight, is traversed by the movement of its wings, and afterwards no sign of its coming is found there;

The strong poets, such as the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, or even Rev. Horace Atwater, can inspire us to open our senses toward awe and wonder. This sense of wonder can strengthen our faith in the goodness of

God and of creation. It can make us more lighthearted. It can increase our trust. It all will pass. Good and bad alike. So will you and I. While life is here, while we are here, while we have breath, let us experience the wonder of life to its fullest.

ⁱ <http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=mayantislavery;idno=06837301;view=image;seq=1>