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How Sweet and Pleasant It Is

Several years ago, my husband Jay and I took our sons to Rome. We toured lots of churches. As a pastor, it fascinated me. There we were in front of Caravaggio's painting of a busty Virgin Mary with Jesus and St. Anne; the painter chose a well-known sex worker as the model for Mary; and Cardinal Borghese purchased it for his own residence. I wanted to reflect on all of that. But as the spouse of a pastor, Jay had reached his limit. "How many more Madonna's are we going to see?"

Marriage requires negotiation. We agreed that on our next trip that I'd only take us to two churches. So, there we were in Krakow, exploring the old Jewish quarter, visiting our fifth synagogue. Jay protested, "you said just 2 churches." "Yes, but this is a synagogue!"

Now we have a new rule. Two religious buildings per trip. Church, synagogue, mosque, Roman temple, ancient Druid ruins all count.

Instead of buildings, Jay finds his spiritual moments outdoors – a hike, a canoe trip, camping, wilderness. You get the picture – basically more mountains, less Madonna's.

The memory of those trips came back to me recently as I tried to puzzle out changes in my own spirituality and what I observe in our culture more broadly. I've come to notice a difference in what people mean by spiritual.

For some, spirituality comes synonymous with sacred. It's an interesting word – sacred. From Latin, to cut off or restrict. A sacred place gets marked off, made less accessible. The absence of people can even make it more sacred, the holy of holies. Many of us think of our church buildings this way, as sacred places set apart. And many church buildings mostly sit empty, which isn't a problem if we connect sacredness to the restricted use of something.

But others experience spirituality in a different way – spirituality as awe and wonder. The profundity of a moment makes it spiritual. Awe comes from Greek, a word meaning pain but that I might translate as "empathy." Awe can arise amid worship, a beautiful moment when we experience a deep sense of connection to others. But it might also happen while in the middle of a social justice march or in deep conversation about life with a friend. A spirituality of empathy arises out of a sense of connection to others.

How do you experience spirituality? The spirituality of the sacred, the place set apart? Or spirituality as awe, the connection and empathy for others?

I want to lean further into these two elements of spirituality: sacred vs awe, set-apart vs. empathetic connection. But before going further, I also want to clarify that this difference between sacred and awe isn't simply buildings vs. nature.

Think about your favorite national park, perhaps even the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. Our national parks are literally set apart, restricted. And some people most appreciate the national parks for that sense of otherness, of remoteness, of sacredness.

But when I go to national parks, I feel wonder and awe. Yes, I love the natural beauty of the place, but I treasure in my heart the time spent with family or friends, the connections that develop between us.

We can experience spirituality as the sacred or spirituality as awe anywhere - in buildings, in nature - because these are two basic orientations to experiencing the divine.

Where do you experience the divine?

The wisdom of our spiritual tradition talks about God as both transcendent - God beyond us - and God as immanent - God present with us. Transcendent - heaven. Immanent - here and now. Transcendent - God whose name can even be said. Immanent - God as Immanuel, God with us.

For a long time, congregations focused on the transcendence of God. We built this concept into our sanctuaries. Think of the classic church building - we climb up the stairs from the world outside, separating ourselves. We enter a space with light diffused by stained-glass, transcendent mystery. We're oriented always to look up.

We built most of our church building at a time when people longed for transcendence in their lives. They desired something bigger, something beyond. I think of the ways my grandfather and great-grandfather lived. The extended family gathered every Sunday. Most walked the few blocks over to the family row house; my granddad drove in from 15 minutes away, the farthest from home. The family not only gathered weekly but almost all the men worked in the plumbing business my grandfather and his brothers started. And if they didn't work for that company, then they ran the plumbing supply store; or worked as a plumbing inspector. A rich, intergenerational network of care and connection. My grandfather's longed for transcendent experiences of art and beauty, something that could transport him away from his every day; a desire to have some part of his life set apart from the intensity of a tightly knit family.

But eighty years later, the world of my grandfather seems like a distant echo of memory. I grew up on the "Bowling Alone" generation, and certainly since the 1980's we've seen the tight fabric of family and community weaken. Sociologists measure it. In the 1990's, only 3% of American men said they had no close friends. Now that number comes in at 15%, or 1 in 7 men say they have no close friends. Which means 5000 men within a 2-mile radius of this church lack a close friend. It's not just an issue among men; adults of all ages report such significant feelings of loneliness that the Surgeon General declared it a national health emergency, a pandemic of isolation.

We have church buildings structured for transcendence. But all around us people desire immanence. Sanctuaries set-apart in a society where people yearn for connection. I've long listened to people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." People started saying this twenty years ago, or more. At first, I agreed with Lillian Daniel that people meant, "I love Jesus, but I can't stand his friends." And there might be an element of this in that comment. But I've come to hear it more about how they experience the divine: I'm seeking spiritual connection and awe; I don't want religious transcendence and separation.

What might congregations look like if we more fully embraced a spirituality of connection?

An answer comes from our reading today. Psalm 133 belongs to a section of the Book of Psalms known as the "Songs of Ascent." Tradition holds that these fifteen psalms were recited by pilgrims as they made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Psalms move from an experience of estrangement to a sense of homecoming. The first of these pilgrimage prayers laments, "Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace." Do you hear the sense of isolation? Then prayers progress until the final one, in which the pilgrim arrived, "Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD!" What a journey - from estrangement to homecoming. That's the spiritual journey we all make: from estrangement to homecoming, from exile to embrace, from disconnection to integration, from discord to concord.

In my own spiritual journey, our reading stands out as my favorite psalm, not just of this section but of the entire collection. So important, in fact, that Jay and I chose it as a reading at our wedding. "How sweet and pleasant it is when siblings dwell together in unity."

The Psalm uses the language of families - siblings, brothers and sisters, kindred depending on your translation. It points to familial harmony as a tremendous delight. Of course, the irony is that so many of our families do not know this harmony - we have arguments, unresolved hurts, estrangements, sides of the family tree we've long stopped talking too. And this might be why I treasure it - I'm estranged from my brother but my heart longs for how sweet and pleasant it can be when siblings dwell in unity.

Stories of messy families fill our scripture too, from the moment Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery to when David's son attempted a coup. The Psalm speaks more to the longing for connection than for the reality of it.

Yet more goes on in this Psalm. The evocative hope of unity ends with what can seem like flowery language. "It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore."

Wisdom about connection lies underneath these lines. Hermon stands as a snow-covered mountain in northern Israel, part of the Golan Heights. In Biblical times this was the northern boundary of the kingdom of Israel. Then as now, snow melting from Mount Hermon watered the Jordan valley. The Bible often called Jerusalem Zion. The Psalm compares the pleasure of a united family to the importance of water coming from the snowy peaks of Hermon to the parched land around Jerusalem.

But people began reciting this Psalm when Jews lived divided between two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Hermon was the leading mountain in the north; Zion the leading one in the south. To imagine dew from Hermon falling on Zion is to imagine the people of the northern kingdom reconciled with those of the southern kingdom; the people of Hermon nourishing the people of Zion.

We can paraphrase this Psalm in American geography because we stand so divided between red America and blue America. So, we might say, "It is like the music of Branson, Missouri, played on the streets of Detroit." That always seemed like an apocryphal vision until Beyonce released her country album. Now I say, "you can keep Madonna, I'm a Beyonce country kind of queen." How sweet and pleasant. And we can discover this in our own lives too. I always thought of myself as a city guy, but I love living in rural Wisconsin. Jay started hunting deer again; and now my conservative, evangelical neighbor is teaching me how to butcher them. It's not the gay life I imagined, but how sweet and pleasant it is when gay guys and conservatives can live together in unity.

This spirituality of awe, this hope for connection, doesn't just imagine people in community. It longs for communities to be transformed, broken relationships healed, enemies embraced, and strangers welcomed as cherished loved ones.

A spirituality of awe doesn't just happen on Sunday mornings at 9:30am. It's not one hour set apart, but a way of living in community, and of inviting people into relationships.

This congregation uses as a motto, "The Church of the Open Door." It speaks to the commitment to hospitality, to welcome, to inclusion. But what if we understood this as more than just welcoming people into our sacred place? Doors can be both entrances and exits. Could the open-door slogan also be a commitment to go out into the community, to greet neighbors, to form relationships, to renew and restore?

What would it mean to build on this commitment to your community? What would need to change for this congregation to be more oriented to awe and wonder? To answer the yearning of many for deeper friendship by attending to empathic connection? For people to be more present with one another?

The Gospel of John opens with the promise, "[God] became flesh and lived among us, [so that] we have seen the divine glory." This is the wonder of Christian spirituality – God lived and lives among us. You've built this into your sanctuary – the cross hangs out over the community gathered in prayer, a sign of God forever among us. Friends, our God does dwell with us. The divine calls us into connected, deep, awe-inspiring relationships. And how sweet and pleasant that is. Alleluia and Amen.