

Wesley United Methodist Church

May 31, 2015

"How Do You Act In the Presence of God?"

Isaiah 6:1-8

When George H. W. Bush was president, there was an article in the newspaper that read, A woman in our nation's capitol welcomed Queen Elizabeth II into her home in a warm and beautiful way. She gave her a hug. This simple act made headlines around the world because British protocol forbids commoners from touching a monarch.

The queen, accompanied by first lady Barbara Bush and Washington Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon, visited 67-year-old retiree Alice Frazier's home in an area formerly plagued by drugs and crime but now rehabilitated. It was on this occasion that Frazier shocked British sensibilities with her effusive hospitality. Frazier was simply showing her happiness at being visited by royalty. No one had explained to her that you don't hug a queen.

I was reminded of this incident when I read the Old Testament text for today. In Isaiah, we read about one of the most notable confrontations with God in recorded history. Isaiah writes: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and the thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'woe to me!' I cried. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"

There is some New Testament reading that makes the same point. It is the scripture where Jesus instructs the disciples to "Put out into the deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." They did let down the nets and caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. Soon both boats were so full they began to sink. and it began to dawn on Simon Peter that this carpenter from Nazareth was more than just a man. He fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man."

How you act in the presence of a queen is one thing. How you act in the presence of God is quite another. Suppose God appeared to us in this hour in this place. How would you react?

Some people may not know how to behave in the presence of God because they have not had much experience with God. But there is another reason why some of us may not maintain a proper decorum in God's presence. It has to do with the picture Jesus gave us of God.

Once there was a church in Holland which felt strictly bound to obey God's commandments to keep the Sabbath holy. On a certain Sunday there area was threatened by wind and waves. If the dikes were not strengthened, the people would not survive. The police notified the pastor of the danger. He was faced with the decision of whether to call off the services and urge his people to work on the dikes. Unable to make a decisions, he called a meeting of his church council. They concluded that God, being omnipotent, can always perform a miracle with the wind and waves. Their duty was to keep the commandment not to work on the Sabbath. The pastor tried one last argument: Did not Jesus himself break the commandment and declare that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath? Then an old man stood up and said, "I have always been troubled, Pastor, by something I have never ventured to say publicly. Now I must say it. I have always had the feeling that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal."

Jesus was a bit of a liberal, particularly when it comes to how we approach God. How can we maintain a proper distance from God, how can we maintain the stern, cold, stained-glass demeanor often associated with worship when Jesus teaches us to address God as "Daddy?"

A young boy burst into the great throne chambers of a medieval king. The boy was skipping and singing as children do. He was completely oblivious to the regal sobriety of his surroundings. Suddenly, he was intercepted by an armored soldier. "Have you no respect, lad?" hissed the soldier. "Don't you know that the man on the throne is your king?" The boy wriggled out of the soldier's grasp. Dancing away, he laughed and said, "He is your king but he is my father." And the boy bounced up to the throne and leaped into the king's lap.

Some people could never approach God with such freedom. They feel that religion must be painful if it is authentic. They do not have the freedom of Jesus. Indeed, they see him as a bit of a liberal in how he approached God. He was also a bit of a liberal in the kind of people he brought into God's presence. The poor, the outcast, the sick, the lost just to name a few. Look at the disciples and where they came from. They had no royalty in their blood. They did not mingle with Israel's high society.

There's one more thing to be said. Maybe none of us know exactly how to act in God's presence. Maybe that's why worship doesn't affect us more. Imagine

if we came into this room with the feeling that God really is in this place. There would be no yawn as we made our way through the service, no bored glassy-eyed stares. Instead, we would react just like Isaiah and Simon Peter. First, we would be conscious of our sinfulness. Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips." Peter said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Such a consciousness of our inadequacy is necessary for any real change to take place in our lives.

In the presence of the Divine, Isaiah and Peter suddenly realized they were sinners and needed help. Such an acknowledgement is needed if we are to be all God means for us to be. They also discovered something else. They discovered they had a mission. Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me." Peter heard Jesus say, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch people."

If we truly felt ourselves in the presence of God this morning, we too would realize we have a mission. That mission would be to go from this place to live the Jesus life, to reach out in love not only to those who are "our kind of people," but also take Christ's love to folks who wouldn't know how to act in our church.

And now, the good news for the day. God is here. He is seeking to make himself known to each of us. Don't you sense his presence? Are you aware of your own inadequacy? Do you hear his call to service?

How do we act in the presence of a queen? Protocol says you do not hug her. How do we act in the presence of God? God is fully aware of our sinfulness..he needs us to be willing to serve. He still loves us; he is our Daddy.