

An Invitation to Awe

In case you haven't heard about it or figured it out yet, I love my grandson, Aidan. For all the sadness we have experienced in the death of our son-in-law, Matt, God seems to have endowed Aidan with the special ability to bring us joy and to ease our sorrow. One of the things that is really wonderful is to watch Aidan take delight in learning new skills and in experiencing new adventures. Three weeks ago we were in Pittsburgh to celebrate our oldest son, Stephen's birthday and to see the circus ole' (Cirque du Soleil). After the show we were waiting in the parking lot for a family member to come back from the restroom. Aidan was a bit restless and getting heavy to hold, so I put him on the hood of the Subaru. He thought that was a fun place to be, and using the windshield wiper arms as toe holds, he promptly climbed to the roof. With two sets of grandparents all around to keep him from falling off, he climbed back and forth across the roof racks and then slid back down the windshield, obviously very proud of himself. About two weeks ago Aidan took his first steps forward without holding on to anything. He giggled with pleasure in his new accomplishment. Then he learned to wave "bye-bye." On Memorial Day he was sitting in his high chair and extended his right hand palm facing me, and pushing it out toward me. At first I didn't get it, but then I had a hunch. I went over and pushed my palm against his. We did "high five's" for the next five minutes. Last Saturday we were at Gwen Burket's picnic, held in memory of her husband Cliff. Her son Brian was offering Kawasaki "mule" rides back through the woods. A Kawasaki "mule" is a four wheeler utility vehicle--like an all-terrain, four wheel drive, golf cart. I thought Aidan would enjoy the ride, so we climbed on board. Brian left to get a drink before starting off, so I sat Aidan in the drivers seat. He took the steering wheel and played with the gear shift. He kept looking at me with a question on his face. Though He isn't exactly talking yet I knew exactly what he was saying: He was saying, "I want to drive; how do you make this thing go?" I love to see Aidan coming because I can't wait to see what new thing he has discovered or learned to do.

I also love being around Aidan because I know Aidan has something to teach me about being a child of God. Most of us, I think, are familiar with the Scripture passage in Matthew 18:1-3 which says, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'" You can envision this however you want, put your own little child in the picture, your child, grandchild, great grandchild, or some other little child you know, in the picture. But when I read these verses I see Jesus pointing at Aidan. And, I hear Jesus saying, "If you want to enter the

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kingdom of God, I want you to be like this kid. Take a page out of his play book, and you will be on the right track.

And the one thing that impresses me most about Aidan is that he is highly alert and extremely sensitive to his environment. I noticed it again last Saturday in Gwen Burket's barn, where the picnic buffet was served. Aidan was looking all around, observing the people, taking in every sound, paying attention to every detail of the barn, the yard, and when we went on the ride with Brian, sensitive to the sights, sounds, smells, and feeling of the woods and to the motion of the vehicle in which we were riding. Our Kawasaki "mule" had soft plastic windows in canvas side curtains. Aidan was fascinated with the look and feel of the transparent material and kept looking at it and feeling it between his thumb and fingers.

It seems to me that when Jesus calls us to be like a little child, this is a big part of what He is saying; He is saying, "Wake up to your environment. Quit going through life with your eyes, ears, noses, skin, and hearts closed to the wonder of the things around you. Take time to experience and to encounter joy in the present moment." Jesus at least once asked His disciples, "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

I think God wants us to be in awe of His creation. Like a human artist or craftsman, God creates for His own pleasure. In Revelation 4:11, John tells us that the twenty-four Elders around God's throne in heaven fall down before Him and proclaim, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." But also like a human artist or craftsman, God creates for the pleasure of others and takes pleasure in their pleasure with what He has done. I think this is represented in the creation story in Genesis 2, where God brings Adam the animals and gives him the privilege of naming them. We also see it in the response of the Psalmist where he says at the beginning of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." We should be living in awe everyday at the creation of God.

Another thing I notice when I am around Aidan is Aidan studying the faces of people. As with everything else around him, Aidan thinks people are fascinating and he is interested to interact with them. Aidan sees stones, insects, blades of grass, petals on flowers, feathers on

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birds, and Aidan also sees and appreciates people. I've always been drawn to the story in the gospel of Mark where Jesus performs a two stage healing of a blind man.

Mark 8:22-25 says, "They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

This Scripture suggests to me that when Jesus truly heals the eyes of our hearts, we will see each other and everyone else in a new way. We won't see people as trees walking around, as objects to be used, competitors to be beaten, customers to be satisfied, enemies to be killed or as irrelevant. Instead, we will see all people as precious--men, women, girls, and boys made in the image, the sacred image, of God. In his book, *Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis says that if we were to see someone as they will someday be when they have become all they were meant to be in Christ, we would be tempted to fall down and worship them!

If you are with us at the picnic this afternoon or if you are with people somewhere else, I would encourage you to notice the people around you with fresh eyes. Don't assume that you already know them, even if it is someone you have been aquatinted with your whole life. Instead, think of them as creatures made in the image of God. See them as children of God in the making. Look past their flaws and imperfections and imagine what they will be like and what they will look like when God has finished shaping them into the image of His Son. See the glory that is already visible and imagine the glory that will be. To stand in awe of God's creation is also to stand in awe of one another.

We need to be awake to the world around us and awake to one another. Thirdly, we need to be awake to stand in awe of God. C. S. Lewis is clear in his choice of words when he says that if we could see Christians as they will be one day, we would be "tempted" to fall down and worship them. God's word is insistent that we must not worship anything or anyone other than God Himself. We are not pantheists who see everything as God; nor are we New Ager's who see ourselves as gods. Yes, in one sense God is in everything and in everyone, but only in the sense that an artist is revealed in his art or in the sense that a

composer is revealed in his music. God remains distinct from His creation and cannot be totally contained in it or defined by it. The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is self-contained and self-sufficient. He doesn't need us in the same way we need Him. But, He gives Himself to us and invites us to give ourselves to Him as an expression of His love; it is His nature to create and then to bless His creation.

The Alpha Sunday School Class has been struggling with the question for a number of weeks now about what it means to fear the Lord. Should we fear God or love God? And, if we are supposed to both, how can we love the one we fear? There is a notion in psychology that love and fear are mutually exclusive, a notion that would seem to be born out in I John 4:18 where it says "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." We may be tempted to hang our hats on this one verse and claim that fear of God has been eclipsed by the love of God so that we should fear Him no more.

The problem is that we aren't there yet. Do we fully understand and have we fully received the fullness of God's love for us? Do we truly love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength? No, I think we are all works in progress, aren't we? Fear will remain until we are made perfect. Perfect love and perfect fear are mutually exclusive, but partial love and partial fear dwell together quite naturally. The incompleteness of the one will always leave room for the other.

Theologian Dr. Paul Thigpen lists three reasons why fear is still an appropriate response to our loving God. "1. We fear God's superlative attributes as our Creator because we are mere creatures. a natural fear of the Creator by the creature -- is healthy for us because it humbles us. It reminds us who we are by reminding us who we are not: The Boss. The universe does not revolve around us. We are not omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, or omni-anything. We have limits. He does not.

2. We fear God's utter holiness because we are sinful. . . . We fear God because we fear the pain caused by the light of His holiness. His very presence provokes in us a discomfort; as it was for Isaiah in the temple, when we stand before a God who is "holy, holy, holy," our sinfulness makes us cry out, "Woe to me!" (see Is 6:1-5). But once again, the fear is healthy; it's a sign that we're standing in the Light,

which is the source of our healing, and the flaming coals of God's righteousness can burn us clean.

3. We fear God's justice, because we deserve punishment and need chastisement. When we first learn the truth that there is a just God who "comes to judge the earth" (Ps 98:9), we fear Him, for we know we're guilty. . . . This can be healthy if it spurs sinners to repent and seek forgiveness. If fear drives people away from hell, it can drive them straight into the arms of God." *

At the end of his very fine discussion of the relationship between fear and love of God, Dr. Thigpen uses an illustration that resonates with me and with my relationship with Aidan. He says:

"When my son was a preschooler, I used to chase him around the house as a game, roaring like a lion. Being a small child, he felt a genuine chill of fear -- Daddy was indeed bigger, faster, stronger and (maybe a little) smarter than he was. But when Daddy finally caught him, scooped him up in his arms, and held him tight in a big, growling, loving hug, the little boy squealed with delight. His fear was one with his love, and that love was heightened and sharpened by the fear.

The creepy chill had become an exquisite thrill. *Just imagine, my son exulted; this person who is so terrifyingly big and strong and fast and smart is the same one who loves me and wants me close!* And so it is with God." *

We are invited to stand in awe with open eyes, ears, noses, hands, minds and hearts taking in the grandeur and wonder of God's creation. We are invited to stand in awe of one another, wonderfully and fearfully made, and being made, in the image of God. We are invited to stand in awe of God who is at the same time terrifying in His power, perfection, justice, and perfect in His love.

*<http://www.paulthigpen.com/theology/lovinggod-fearinggod.html>

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**Deuteronomy 29:2-12; 30:1-6;
Mark 8:15-25**

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