

REVERENCE

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August 30, 2026

Text: A sermon related to Micah 6:6-8

CENTRAL FOCUS:

Reverence as a theological and spiritual virtue of humility and limits leads toward peace, civility, and right relationship.

*“With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the Holy One be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
8 The Divine has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does God require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?”*

These are the words of our ancient tradition.

May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

“If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.”

This quote is from Paul Woodruff, a former professor of ancient philosophy at the University of Texas from the book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (2001).

“that all may be reverent....”

It is a big claim to say where peace can come from.
So, what is the kind of reverence that becomes a path to peace?

Let me clear up right away that reverence is not necessarily being really serious or dour, or overly restricted, or even compliant in the face of any aspiring authority. On the contrary, reverence is not inconsistent with humor, especially satire of the pompous and the tyrannical. What is called *irreverence* can often be a form of reverence expressing its displeasure and critique of those and of that which has lost reverence by being pompous and ridiculous and out of touch with reality.

So, what is reverence?

Reverence is a kind of capacity to sense and perceive. It begins in a deep understanding of human limitations and from this understanding grows the capacity to be in awe and respect of all that is so much bigger and beyond our human making and control; the cosmos, truth, ideals of justice and love, death. Reverence is a virtue that keeps human beings from acting like gods and brings with it the capacity for respecting other human beings who are in the same humble predicament as oneself. There is a kind of humility in reverence, a grounded feeling of one's proper place in the scheme of things, a place where one has their feet on the ground, knowing both the ground as one's place of origin and as a base from which one can rise up when necessary.

Over these last many decades, we have heard the reports or read the history of one group or persons demonizing and seeking to dominate another group or confusing their liberation with the slaughter of another group; terrorists associated with different faiths, mass shooters in this country, Nazis in Germany, the Apartheid government in South Africa, Hutu soldiers in Rwanda. Anyone, any religion or any group who are so convinced that they have God on their side, that they speak for God without doubt or limitation, have lost their sense of reverence. All tyrants and Empires are an expression of a loss of reverence, for as they rise above others and seek to dominate them, they have lost their reference to that which is greater and which keeps them in their proper human place. All religions have those in them who have lost touch with reverence in their belief and expression and ritual of that tradition.

In our congregational tradition, at our best, we try to keep a sense of reverence by opening the Scriptures and our minds rather than closing our minds and fists around the Bible so that we can grip it to strike another. We listen reverently knowing our human limitations and the limitations of our human ancestors of faith as we seek to learn about and to serve God, that Mystery greater than ourselves. Reverence knows that Truth is important and is just beyond the reach of all our human attempts to know truth fully and absolutely. Reverence allows for space between Truth with a capital T and the truths which we hold. Reverence brings the gravitas of knowing we are all mortal and made of dirt.

In our congregation, at our best, we nurture reverence by feeling into our worship, by letting our ritual nurture us in awe and respect and wonder for the Circle of All Creation, for the great Circle of all People, for the teaching and courageous, compassionate witness of Jesus, for the ideals of peace and justice. Reverence helps us remember what these things point us toward—and where that places us in relationship.

Today's Scripture reading is from the prophet Micah who is bringing a complaint from God to the people. Micah calls the very mountains and foundations of the earth as witnesses that the people have lost their way, that somehow they have forgotten that they were once slaves and have been liberated, that they have let their ritual become hollow and their lives together are now marked by dishonest business practices, violence, and deceit. In the midst of this way of living, their religious rituals will not please God. The people have lost reverence for Something Greater, and with it, the humility, civility, and virtue that mark good human relationships that hold society together and promote peace.

In a sense, Micah is offering them a path to reverence, reminding them of who God is and who they are supposed to be. God is the liberator and the one who calls for justice and kindness. The ancient Israelites are supposed to be the grateful, humble humans who know that they were once slaves, that they are all human and have no business treating each other dishonestly.

Likewise, Micah speaks to us. Without the reverence that translates into the way we live our whole lives and our whole week, our Sunday worship and ritual will also not be what God is interested in, not what Spirit seeks.

Protagoras, an ancient Greek, tells a story:

Whenever they gathered into groups, early human beings would do wrong to one each other because they did not yet have the knowledge of how to form society. As a result, they would scatter again and perish. And so, Zeus, fearing that our whole species would be wiped out, sent Hermes to bring Reverence and Justice to human beings, in order that these two would adorn society and bind people together in friendship.

In the great Greek sagas, humans had already received fire and technology from Prometheus when Hermes was sent. But they needed something else to keep from scattering and perishing. We, too, have the fires of carbon and the plenty of technology. But do we remember to nurture the reverence that will keep us in friendship and peace with each other, all humanity, and all Creation?

Reverence is not easy to explain in each life situation. It must be felt and explored. Here's another passage from Paul Woodruff's book *Reverence* (p. 13):

"Why write about reverence? Because we have forgotten what it means. Because reverence fosters leadership and education. Most important, because reverence kindles warmth in friendship and family life. And because without reverence, things fall apart. People do not know how to respect each other and themselves. An army cannot tell the difference between what it is and a gang of bandits. Without reverence, we cannot explain why we should treat the natural world with respect. Without reverence, a house is not a home, a boss is not a leader, an instructor is not a teacher. Without reverence, we would not even know how to learn reverence. To teach reverence, you must find the seeds of reverence in each person and help them grow."

In the ancient Greek tragedies, there often was an energy in the center of the story that was the opposite of reverence Hubris.

And there was a simple way to redeem oneself from hubris: to remember one's humanity, to remember who you really are, a human being, no less, no more. The Message version of Micah describes plainly the implications of this kind of human remembering...

*"But the Holy One has already made it plain how to live, what to do,
what God is looking for in people.
It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,
be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don't take yourself too seriously—
take God seriously."*

I pray that we would be a community of reverence, nurturing the seeds of reverence we all have through our ceremony, our art, our play, and our service, and that these all remind us of who we truly are as blessed children of God, mortal creatures of the earth, siblings to all, no more, no less.

Let us pray that we may be reverent. AMEN