

Acts 2:42-47  
May 15, '11

"AWW & AWE"

THERE AREN'T MANY PASSAGES IN THE BIBLE THAT LAY OUT PERFECTLY AN OUTLINE FOR A SERMON. THIS, THOUGH, IS ONE OF THE FEW THAT *DOES*.

WE LOOK AT THIS EXTRAORDINARY DESCRIPTION OF THE EARLY CHURCH & THE ASTOUNDING THINGS THAT WERE TAKING PLACE & LUKE TELLS US AT THE VERY OUTSET WHAT IT WAS THAT MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE.

THEY DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO FOUR THINGS – THE APOSTLES' TEACHING, FELLOWSHIP, THE BREAKING OF BREAD & PRAYER.

THERE IT IS.

THERE'S THE SERMON OUTLINE.

DIVIDE IT INTO 4 EQUAL SECTIONS, FOCUS ON EACH ONE & THEN SEND US OFF TO DO THOSE THINGS.

IT'S PRETTY SIMPLE, ISN'T IT?

WELL, AS EASY AS IT MIGHT SOUND, WE'RE NOT GOING TO DO THAT THIS MORNING.

WE'RE NOT GOING TO DO IT BECAUSE, FOR ONE THING, I'M AFRAID IT'S *NOT* THAT SIMPLE & FOR ANOTHER, I THINK THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE HERE THAT MAY BE OF EVEN GREATER IMPORTANCE.

IF IT WAS AS SIMPLE AS DOING THOSE 4 THINGS, WE'D HAVE IT MADE.

WE ALREADY DO THEM!

JUST LOOK AT OUR WEEKLY *MESSENGER* AND YOU CAN SEE ALL KINDS OF EXAMPLES OF THE WAY WE DEVOTE OURSELVES TO TEACHING, TO FELLOWSHIP, TO MEALS & COMMUNION AND TO PRAYER.

SO WHERE DOES THE PROBLEM LIE?

IF WE'RE ALREADY DOING THE THINGS THAT THE EARLY CHURCH WAS DOING THAT PROVED SUCCESSFUL, WHY DON'T WE SEE THE SAME RESULTS?

WHY ISN'T THE LORD "ADDING TO OUR NUMBER DAY BY DAY?"

LET ME SUGGEST THAT IT MAY HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WORD LUKE USES IMMEDIATELY AFTER HE HAS SET BEFORE US THIS WONDERFUL OUTLINE OF THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

IT'S THE WORD "AWE."

"*AWE CAME UPON EVERYONE...*" HE SAYS.

WE KNOW WHAT "AWE" IS.

SOMEONE HAS REFERRED TO IT AS "HOLY FEAR."

IT'S THAT JAW-DROPPING, HEART-POUNDING, CHILL-PRODUCING MOMENT OF EXHILARATION WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE IN THE MIDST OF SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY.

I'D LIKE TO SUGGEST ANOTHER CLOSELY-RELATED EMOTION THAT, IRONICALLY, SOUNDS & IS SPELLED ALMOST EXACTLY THE SAME.

IT'S NOT "A-W-E" BUT "A-W-W" AND, DEPENDING ON HOW IT'S SAID, THERE MAY BE SEVERAL MORE "W'S" ATTACHED TO IT.

YOU KNOW THE WORD I'M TALKING ABOUT.

I'M AFRAID I CAN'T PRONOUNCE IT FOR YOU, THOUGH, BECAUSE IT'S NOT A WORD THAT A MAN SHOULD EVER – UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES - PRONOUNCE.

IT'S LIKE THE TONGUE-IN-CHEEK BOOK BY BRUCE FIERSTEIN FROM NEARLY 30 YEARS AGO – REAL MEN DON'T EAT QUICHE.

THERE ARE SOME THINGS REAL MEN JUST SHOULDN'T DO.

YOU KNOW – REAL MEN DON'T USE UMBRELLAS.

REAL MEN DON'T *DO* LUNCH.

REAL MEN DON'T READ "TWILIGHT" OR WATCH "GREY'S ANATOMY."

REAL MEN DON'T DRINK ANYTHING WITH THE WORDS MOCHA, TAZO, CHAI, CARAMEL, DRIZZLED, TRUFFLED, OR CRÈME IN THE NAME – UNLESS THEY HAVE A COUPON.

WELL, IT'S THE SAME WITH THE WORD SPELLED "AWW...W..W..W."

YOU KNOW IT WHEN YOU HEAR IT.

YOU KNOW THE KIND OF THINGS THAT ELICIT THE UTTERING OF THE WORD.

THEY'RE THINGS THAT WARM YOUR HEART – THINGS THAT MAY EVEN BRING A LUMP TO YOUR THROAT – THINGS THAT ASTOUND YOU BECAUSE OF THEIR GENTLENESS, EMPATHY, COMPASSION & KINDNESS.

A MAN CAN *EXPERIENCE* THOSE THINGS.

HE CAN *FEEL* ALL THE EMOTIONS OF THE "A-W-W."

HE JUST CAN'T SAY IT.

BOTH KINDS OF "AWE" ARE WHAT LUKE IS TALKING ABOUT HERE.

"AWE CAME UPON EVERYONE" AND, ASIDE FROM THE TEACHING, FELLOWSHIP, MEALS & PRAYER, THIS IS WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH WAS EXPERIENCING.

THIS IS, I WOULD SUGGEST, THE DIFFERENCE IN THEM & US.

THE REASON THE LORD ISN'T ADDING, DAY BY DAY, TO OUR NUMBER, IS THE ABSENCE OF AWE.

WE AREN'T FILLED WITH "HOLY FEAR."

OUR JAWS DON'T DROP, OUR HEARTS DON'T POUND, AND WE DON'T LOOK AROUND AT THE THINGS THAT TAKE PLACE IN OUR MIDST & SAY "AWWW."

(THERE – I SAID IT – ONCE. BUT I WON'T SAY IT AGAIN. AND THE ONLY REASON I DID THAT IS BECAUSE WE NO LONGER RECORD OUR WORSHIP SERVICES!)

I THINK THE ABSENCE OF "AWW" IN THE CHURCH TODAY IS THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US & THE EARLY CHURCH.

BUT WHY IS THAT?

WHY DON'T WE ENTER OUR SANCTUARY EVERY SUNDAY MORNING WITH A FEELING OF WONDER, EXCITEMENT & EXPECTATION?

IS IT, PERHAPS, BECAUSE WE THINK WE'RE SO VERY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE FIRST CHRISTIANS WHO GATHERED IN JERUSALEM FOLLOWING THE ASCENSION OF JESUS?

WE DON'T MEASURE UP.

LOOK AT ALL THE WONDERFUL THINGS THEY WERE DOING.

LOOK AT HOW WELL THEY GOT ALONG WITH ONE ANOTHER.

LOOK AT HOW THEY GAVE COMPLETELY OF THEMSELVES ON BEHALF OF OTHERS.

I HATE TO BE THE ONE TO BURST THE BUBBLE OF YOUR IDEALIZED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, BUT THEY WEREN'T ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM US.

LUKE WAS WRITING LONG AFTER THE PERIOD OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

HE WAS WRITING AN IDEALIZED ACCOUNT HIMSELF.

AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO READ MUCH FURTHER IN ACTS TO SEE THAT THE CHURCH IN THAT TIME HAD PROBLEMS OF ITS OWN.

JUST TWO CHAPTERS AFTER WE'VE HEARD ABOUT THE WONDERFUL WAY IN WHICH THESE CHRISTIANS GAVE EVERYTHING THEY HAD TO SHARE WITH THOSE IN NEED, WE READ ABOUT ANANIAS & SAPPHIRA WHO TRIED TO LIE THEIR WAY OUT OF GIVING.

LATER ON, THEY ARGUED ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT TO LET THE GENTILES IN ON THE GOOD NEWS.

THEN THERE WAS GRUMBLING AMONG THE GREEK CONVERTS WHO COMPLAINED THAT THEIR WIDOWS WERE BEING NEGLECTED IN THE DAILY DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD.

BECAUSE OF THIS CONCERN, THEY ESTABLISHED THE OFFICE OF DEACON SO THE APOSTLES COULD CONTINUE TO PREACH, TEACH & PRAY.

OF COURSE, RIGHT AWAY, ONE OF THE DEACONS, STEPHEN, STARTED TO PREACH, TEACH & PRAY – SOMETHING THAT WAS RESERVED FOR THE APOSTLES!

DON'T TELL ME *THAT* DIDN'T CAUSE A BIT OF A "YOU'RE STEPPING ON OUR TOES" STIR WITHIN THE CHURCH!

SO, YOU SEE, THE EARLY CHURCH WAS REALLY NO DIFFERENT THAN WE ARE.

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NOW, AT THIS POINT, THE SERMON WAS GOING TO TAKE A DIFFERENT DIRECTION, BUT RECENT EVENTS FIT WONDERFULLY INTO THIS PASSAGE.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE AWARE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MAKING THE NEWS THIS PAST WEEK, IT WOULD FEEL LIKE THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IF I DIDN'T ADDRESS THE ISSUE THAT CREATED THAT NEWS.

I WILL TRY, AS BRIEFLY AS POSSIBLE TO FILL YOU IN ON WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, WE HAVE BEEN DEBATING THE ISSUE OF ORDINATION STANDARDS FOR MINISTERS, ELDERS & DEACONS.

I KNOW WHEN IT STARTED BECAUSE THE FIRST TIME IT CAME BEFORE THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY WAS 1978 – THE YEAR I WAS ORDAINED.

WE HAVE GONE BACK & FORTH OVER THE PAST 3 DECADES AND OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, PRESBYTERIES HAVE BEEN VOTING ON AN OVERTURE THAT PASSED THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY LAST SUMMER TO CHANGE THE WORDING ON ORDINATION STANDARDS IN OUR BOOK OF ORDER.

LAST WEEK, THE MINIMUM NUMBER REQUIRED TO APPROVE THAT CHANGE WAS REACHED.

THE HEART OF THE ISSUE IS WHETHER IT IS PERMISSIBLE FOR A HOMOSEXUAL TO BE ORDAINED TO CHURCH OFFICE.

THE CHANGE MAKES THAT POSSIBLE.

MANY OF YOU KNOW THAT I HAVE NEVER SPOKEN OUT ON THIS ISSUE.

THAT DOESN'T MEAN I HAVEN'T BEEN INVOLVED WITH IT AT THE PRESBYTERY LEVEL.

A FEW YEARS AGO, IN A CONTENTIOUS TIME OF DEBATE OVER THE ISSUE, I WAS ASKED TO LEAD OUR PRESBYTERY IN AN EDUCATIONAL EVENT TO LEARN MORE FROM ONE ANOTHER.

MORE RECENTLY, I WAS ASKED TO PREACH THE SERMON AT A PRESBYTERY MEETING ON THE DAY THAT DEBATE & VOTING TOOK PLACE ON THE ISSUE.

I HAVE HAD NUMEROUS PHONE CALLS OVER THE YEARS FROM LEADERS, REQUESTING MY ASSISTANCE BECAUSE THEY HAD IT, ON GOOD AUTHORITY, THAT I WAS ON THEIR SIDE.

INTERESTINGLY, THOSE CALLS HAVE COME FROM LEADERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE!

I ALWAYS FOUND IT INTERESTING THAT WHEN MEMBERS OF MY OWN CONGREGATION DIDN'T KNOW WHERE I STOOD ON THIS MATTER, SOMEONE ELSE THOUGHT THEY *DID!*

LET ME NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, TELL YOU WHAT I THINK ABOUT IT.

FIRST OF ALL, I AM VERY FIRMLY IN SUPPORT OF THE CHANGE THAT WE'VE MADE TO OUR BOOK OF ORDER.

I'M IN SUPPORT OF IT BECAUSE I THINK THE WORDING IS FAR SUPERIOR TO WHAT WAS PREVIOUSLY THERE.

THE NEW WORDING TAKES ORDINATION VERY SERIOUSLY & PLACES A CLEAR RESPONSIBILITY UPON GOVERNING BODIES – SESSIONS & PRESBYTERIES – TO WORK DILIGENTLY WITH PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATES TO OFFICE TO DISCERN GOD'S CALL IN THEIR LIVES.

THE PREVIOUS WORDING – IN MY ESTIMATION – WAS ALMOST EMBARRASSING BECAUSE IT LACKED THE KIND OF SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION THAT WE SHOULD EXPECT FROM OUR BOOK OF ORDER & CERTAINLY FROM OUR ORDINATION STANDARDS.

HAVING SAID THAT, LET ME ADD THAT I AM PERSONALLY NOT IN FAVOR OF CHANGING A STANDARD FOR ORDINATION THAT HAS BEEN IN EXISTENCE FOR CENTURIES.

I'M NOT AT A PLACE OF SAYING THAT I THINK WE CAN THROW OUT THE HISTORICAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH ON THIS MATTER.

NOW THAT DOESN'T MEAN I WON'T CHANGE MY MIND IN THE FUTURE.

I MAY & I WANT TO BE OPEN TO THE LEADING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND I WANT TO BE OPEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO LEARN FROM BROTHERS & SISTERS IN FAITH WHOSE VIEWS DIFFER FROM MINE.

THE MOST EXCITING ASPECT OF THIS CHANGE IN THE BOOK OF ORDER, TO ME, IS THAT IT DOESN'T TELL ME I HAVE TO BELIEVE THIS WAY OR THAT WAY.

IT SAYS THAT INDIVIDUALS, CHURCH NOMINATING COMMITTEES, CONGREGATIONS & EVEN ENTIRE PRESBYTERIES HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING LED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS ISSUE & THE MANY OTHER ISSUES THAT SURROUND IT.

IT SAYS THAT WE NEED TO TAKE ORDINATION MORE SERIOUSLY THAN WE HAVE TAKEN IT IN THE PAST.

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

FOR SOME, IT MEANS THEY'LL LEAVE.

IN FACT, ENTIRE CHURCHES MAY DO SO.

FOR OTHERS, IT MEANS THEY'LL BEGIN TO RE-EVALUATE THEIR THINKING.

IT MEANS THEY PUT GREAT TRUST IN OUR PROCESS AS A CHURCH.

THEY PUT TRUST IN THEIR BROTHERS & SISTERS IN THE FAITH WHO HAVE BEEN LED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THIS MATTER & ARE TAKING US IN A NEW DIRECTION.

FOR STILL OTHERS, IT MEANS THEY'LL DECIDE TO BE LIKE THOSE FIRST BELIEVERS WHO STUCK WITH THEIR FELLOW BELIEVERS, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIDN'T AGREE WITH THEM & THEY'LL TRY TO PERSUADE THEM TO *THEIR* WAY OF THINKING.

THIS, TO ME, IS THE CHURCH AT ITS FINEST.

IT'S NOT JUST A BUNCH OF PEOPLE WHO SEE EYE TO EYE ON EVERY ISSUE & MOVE MERRILY ALONG WITHOUT CONFLICT, WITHOUT PROBLEMS, WITHOUT DISAGREEMENTS.

THAT'S CERTAINLY NOT WHAT WE FIND IN LUKE'S DESCRIPTION OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

THE CHURCH IS AT ITS FINEST WHEN IT IS FILLED WITH "AWW" & "AWE."

THE CHURCH IS AT ITS FINEST WHEN WE ARE FILLED WITH HOLY FEAR – WHEN WE SEE PEOPLE OF WIDELY-DIFFERING POINTS OF VIEW – LEARNING TOGETHER, HAVING FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER, SHARING COMMUNION TOGETHER & PRAYING TOGETHER.

THE CHURCH IS AT ITS FINEST WHEN OUR JAWS DROP & OUR HEARTS POUND & WE BECOME OVERWHELMED AT THE WONDERS GOD IS WORKING IN OUR MIDST.

THE CHURCH IS AT ITS FINEST WHEN WE SEE LOVE OVERFLOWING TOWARD ONE ANOTHER AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY TO THOSE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

**THE CHURCH IS AT ITS FINEST & THE LORD WILL ADD, DAY BY DAY TO OUR NUMBERS, WHEN WE DISPLAY TO THE WORLD A LOVE SO BIG, SO DEEP & SO PROFOUND THAT WE – AND ANYONE WHO SEES US - CAN'T HELP BUT SAY "AWWW" – WITH A WHOLE BUNCH OF "W'S" AT THE END OF IT. AMEN.**

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