

Karen's Dilemma - August 11, 2019

Matthew 22:34-40

One day when I was out Ubering, I had to do a pickup at a veterinarian's office. A rather frazzled woman got into my car holding a small bag. For whatever reason, she said, "I hope you don't mind, I'm carrying my son's dead hamster in this bag. Don't worry, there are several layers protecting him. The Vet really tried to save him, but he was pretty old for a hamster."

I express my regret over the hamster and found out his name was Marvin. The woman, who introduced herself as Karen, told me that she had no idea why her son called his hamster Marvin, he just liked the name. I asked her what she was going to say when she got home and she replied she had no idea.

"You know," she said, "I don't want to just dig a hole and put him in the ground, Marvin meant a lot to my son, he's only 10. I feel like I should say something meaningful."

Of course, at that time, my suppressed pastor urges came out. I said, "Well, death is part of life, it might be a good occasion to remind your son that all life comes to us from God and God never stops caring for all creation."

She seemed a bit uncomfortable at my words. "Oh," she said, "we're really not religious. You know, I kinda see god in the sunsets and in nature. Yeah, I know something is out there, but I really don't know enough to talk to my son about it."

I shut up after that. We exchanged some pleasantries, my knowing that I really couldn't do much for her, or her son, or even Marvin during the remaining minutes of our ride. Shortly thereafter we got to her house. She still had a disturbed and sad expression on her face. "Goodbye," I said, "I hope you will find the right words to say to your son. It's important for him and for you." All she could say was Thanks. And she got out of the car.

I imagine all of us, at one time or another, have been faced with Karen's dilemma. Whether it is a time like hers, trying to explain the mystery of life and death to a child, or dealing with a friend or family member undergoing personal or health issues, we are in search of a wisdom beyond ourselves to make sense of whatever is happening to us.

Most people in our country accept the idea that there is a "higher power" or something or someone "out there" beyond our senses and intellect. In Karen's case, she felt it, but could not or would not put a name to it. She felt a sense of "awe" in the world around her, but did not know quite what to do about it.

Let's look at that word, "awe." Its original meaning is "a feeling of overwhelming reverence and admiration, produced by that which is grand, sublime, or extremely powerful." Certainly "awe" is what we experience when we witness a beautiful sunset, hear a baby laugh, or see nature's beauty revealed in the mountains. When we allow ourselves to break away from the routines of daily living, we will find awe all around us. Personally, I'm a bit sad that we've downgraded the meaning of the word awe when we use the word "awesome" as a substitute for "great" or "good job" like, "You did awesome out there playing first base!"

Awe is a wonderful word that describes a human experience which cannot be put into words. When we experience awe, the feeling should prompt us to ask, why am I feeling this way? Why should the sunset be moving me emotionally? Why should a baby's laugh create such inexpressible joy in me? What is going on?

For people of faith, not just Christians, but people of all religious traditions, awe is a pointer to God. I have experienced awe in my life, not once, but many times. I hope you have as well. The experience of awe truly has the power to transport me beyond the ordinary living of life and reminds me that there is something very true and very real beyond our senses, feelings, and intellect.

The act of worship is our human attempt, perhaps our feeble human attempt, to translate the experience of awe into something we can understand with our minds, feel with our senses, and experience in our emotions. Worship, when done well and consistently, should leave you transformed in your heart, mind, and spirit. Worship, when done well and consistently, should empower you to give voice to your experience of God. Worship when done well and consistently, should bring you closer in your understanding of God and motivate you to take the awesome feelings you have and share them with the world.

Now that's a tall order, isn't it! After all, what can we do during this hour to bring you closer to God? We meet and greet, we sing songs, we say prayers, we listen, I hope, for some words from the preacher that will be useful. Sometimes we celebrate a baptism or the Lord's Supper, then we fellowship together and go home. Somehow, all that is supposed to bring us closer to God. Does it?

Have you ever seen an Icon in the Christian Tradition we call Orthodox? An authentic Icon is not produced in the course of a day, a week, or even a month. The people who produce such works of art and beauty do not think of themselves and painters. They think of what they do as a sacred duty. You see, the creation of an Icon is a mysterious mix of brushstrokes and prayer. When the

creators mix the colors, they pray. When they apply a stroke of paint, they pray. When they begin their work in the morning and end it in the evening, they pray. The paint they use is thin, so it takes many brush strokes for the color to develop and shine. It takes a long time, but the result is something truly unique and incomparable. When you look upon an Icon appreciate the work and prayer that has gone into its creation, you are looking upon the face of God.

The act of regular worship is like creating an icon. In the beginning, when you start painting, it can be days or weeks before anything of beauty or substance emerges. Likewise with worship, it might be weeks or months before you feel that you're "getting anything out of it." After all, for a newcomer, our words, songs, and prayers may seem a bit strange. It may take some time to make sense of what we do here. Of course, some you may have been here for years and you still aren't quite sure as to why we do what we do! And that's OK! Christian worship has been evolving for thousands of years. Sometimes, it is very useful for worshippers old and new to ask questions and think about what works and what does not.

I also said that when we engage in public worship, it must be done well. What is true worship about? The prophet Amos, whom we read today, said, "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." In the day of the prophet Amos, the worship of God was quite an elaborate thing. The priests wore expensive and beautiful robes. There was wonderful music from the harpists, drummers, and cymbal players. I'm sure there was incense and singing, and well rehearsed readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. In one sense, worship was done well. It was an event.

We at Collingswood are blessed with a beautiful building and a magnificent sanctuary. This place just screams "God" from the time you see it on Fern Ave. to the time you walk through the wooden doors, to the time you see the stained glass, high ceilings and wood paneling in our worship space. There is no mistaking what the intention of this building is.

But worship done well is not just about the beauty of our building and sanctuary. Worship done well is not just about the quality of the music or the delivery of the prayers. Worship done well is certainly more than whatever comes out of the preacher's mouth.

No! Just as the Icon creator labors and prays to produce a work of ineffable beauty which points viewers to God, the point of our worship is to so touch, transform, and heal you that you are pointed ever closer to God. And how will we know that? Our worship will have succeeded when

everyone who attends these services reorients themselves to making justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream in their own lives, at home, at work, and in the world.

That, friends, and that alone is the answer to Karen's dilemma. Poor Karen, all she wanted was a few words to share with her son after his hamster died. But choosing the right words and understanding the right words in her heart, and mind, and spirit is the undertaking of the lifetime.

Look, the words and prayers we say are easily available on the internet. There are hundreds of sermons on every scripture in the Bible also available for download. There are YouTube videos of thousands of worship songs, each with a special slide show. In other words, anybody could recreate a worship service just like this anywhere. You don't even have to believe in God!

But "saying the words" is not enough. I imagine poor Karen went on line, googled, "How to bury a pet," and found something she thought was useful and meaningful to her son. Perhaps it was.

But we are here in worship not just to say the words or sing the songs or meet and greet our friends. We are here to slowly, steadily bring ourselves closer and closer to understanding the mystery of our creator God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And yes, it is the work of a lifetime!

Yet, it is the most worthwhile work a human being can undertake. Slowly, slowly, and slowly, we make the feeling of "awe" more accessible to our limited human hearts and minds. In worship, we are building within ourselves an awareness of God, the creator of the Universe. We are learning to trust and accept that Jesus Christ is not just a nice guy who lived and died a long time ago but a friend and companion who loves us even when we are at our most unlovable. We are allowing the Holy Spirit to permeate us to the root of our soul, literally becoming part of our being, and reveling in the love of a God who desires nothing more than to be with us. All God wants is to show us God's plan and God's way — a way that will make us and keep us happy no matter what is going on in our lives.

I invite the Karen's of the world — perhaps it is you, perhaps it's someone you know — to set forth on a magnificent journey. In this hour of Worship, we can leave the earthly world and catch a glimpse of what God's world can be. In this hour of Worship, we can grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally, In this hour of Worship, we can find true meaning and purpose for our lives. In this hour of Worship, we can learn that Jesus Christ loves us more than we love ourselves. Then, so enlightened, so educated, so equipped, and so embraced by God, we, yes, we can go forth from this place and literally change the world!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.