

# “The Recovery of Reverence”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”(Isaiah 6:8)**

This past week several people sent me a copy of a video that appeared not only on “YouTube” but also on the ABC Evening News entitled “Dancing down the Aisle.” The video was taken from the wedding of a young couple named Julie and Kevin Heinz. Both the bride and groom were avid dancers and the video shows the entire wedding party (though not the minister) dancing down the aisle of the church with great exuberance and laughter, doing handstands and flips as they came down the aisle of the church. The video was an instant hit.

Over the years, like most ministers, I have done a few “destination” weddings that have taken me to Jackson Hole, Wyoming and a host of other places as well. One of the most memorable weddings I conducted was in the Hill Country of Texas, when I was a minister in San Antonio. A family in our church had the wedding of their daughter on their ranch near Bandera, Texas. I remember that the ceremony was at sunset and behind the wedding party were a herd of longhorn steers. The music was provided by a group of Mariachi singers and when the other minister and I came down the aisle, wearing our black robes, someone called out, “Here come the penguins.”

As I watched the video, I was aware that the session of our church had recently reviewed the wedding policy of our church. One of the key issues that our worship committee dealt with is the nature of a church wedding. In the Presbyterian Church the wedding is an act of worship. While, of course, it is a joyous occasion, our church, like many others, attempts to conform the wedding service to the practices of worship that govern all our worship services.

With all due respect to Julie and Kevin Heinz I don’t think that wedding would have made it at First Presbyterian Church.

## I.

This morning I want to deal with the recovery of reverence. The passage of Scripture that serves as our text is taken from the call of the prophet Isaiah.

The account of Isaiah in the temple at Jerusalem is properly a “call story,” where a prophet is called by God. In the Old Testament there are two basic types of these narratives. One is dominated by the word of God ((Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah). The other is a theophany where the person called is carried into the presence of God.

The call of the prophet Isaiah in chapter six is an example of this latter kind of call. In this case the prophet, who is probably worshipping in the Temple at Jerusalem, is suddenly carried into the heavenly realms. He sees God seated on a throne, surrounded by the Cherubim, these six-winged creatures.

Scholars have noted for some time that this passage probably comes from a later time in the ministry of the prophet. It does, however, move through a number of stages: a description of the vision, the cry of distress, the cleansing ritual, divine consultation, declaration of fitness for the task, and the commissioning of the prophet.

One of the important things about this passage is that it serves as a model for the worship of this church. Like our worship service, it begins with the adoration of God, moves to confession, an assurance of pardon, and finally the commissioning of God through God’s word.

This passage, however, does remind us of the importance of reverence and worship and of the intimate relationship between the two.

## II.

For one thing, worship reminds us of values that the world would sometimes have us forget. That is what the word “worship” means. It is the recognition and appreciation of real worth.

Several years ago, Vince McMahon of the World Wrestling Foundation introduced a new sports sensation to this country when he created what he called the XFL version of professional football. The “X” stood for “extreme,” as in extreme violence, sex, and attitude. The game opened, not with a traditional toss of a coin, but with a mad scramble for the ball, making it the only sport in the world in which you can get hurt before the game starts. Players openly used four letter words and McMahon made a point to emphasize that the cheerleaders are encouraged to have sexual relationships with the players.

But there are other signs of this “coarsening of culture.” Two of the most obvious evidences of this are language and dress. The appearance of four letter curse words is so common in our society today that most of us are indifferent to them. Whether we are at a sporting event, a movie, or even in a restaurant, often we hear language used without any regard of those who may be listening.

The same is true with our dress. Several years ago I mentioned that when I was a seminary student, my professor of Preaching was Dr. Ben Rose. When I preached my senior sermon, he chided me for wearing a striped tie with my black suit. He believed that a minister should wear a dark suit, white shirt and a solid tie.

Well, thank goodness styles do change! But, there are some things that do not change. Once, when I asked Jim Wright, the director of Opera Carolina, why people dressed so formally to attend the opera, he replied that it was out of respect for the music. Do we not think that when we come to worship, we ought to show the same respect to God that music lovers demonstrate to opera?

Certainly, worship is rooted in reverence for God.

### III.

There is something else that worship does for us. It is an experience that rebukes the evil in our lives. In the world in which we live there are many forces that undermine a person's conscience. After all, there are plenty of other people who live worse lives than we do. But in worship we confront something else. When our worse selves come face-to-face with our better selves and our better selves come in contact with something even better, that is a humbling experience without which there is no spiritual health. None of us can be our best until we stand in the presence of that which is superior to even our best.

To be sure, worship has often been abused and misused as a substitute for authentic faith, as though God could somehow be placated by pious observances and flattering praise. Alongside all the passages in the Bible that speak to the value of worship, there are a number of other passages that condemn the ritual of worship by those who practice social unrighteousness. The prophet Micah, watching the terrible abuse of worship in his own day, protesting by saying, "What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God."

Let us be sure that we recognize that God is not deceived by empty hymns, anthems, sermons, and prayers.

### IV.

But we should never underestimate the power of worship and reverence to change a person's life. Several summers ago when visiting some friends in Maine, we stopped at the little church in Brunswick, Maine across from Bowdoin College. Across the street from the college is a small chapel where students often worship. In the church there is a plaque that commemorates the pew where Harriet Beecher Stowe once sat in worship. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a brilliant woman, who was the sister to Henry Beecher and the daughter of Lyman Beecher. She was bitterly opposed to slavery. It was during the worship service that she was inspired to write a novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that probably did more to end slavery than all of the sermons that her famous father and brother preached.

One should never despair of worship. It was in a worship service that John Wesley found his heart “strangely warmed” and from that Moravian prayer meeting in London set out to preach a gospel that set the English-speaking world on fire.

It was in the temple of Jerusalem that a man named Isaiah, seeing in a vision the Lord high and lifted up, deeply aware of his own sinfulness, yet hearing the question of God, “Whom shall we send and who will go for us?” answered without hesitation, “Here am I. Send me.”

When that happens to a person, not only are lives changed, but society is changed as well.

God grant us his mercy that in this place we may encounter the Holy God and find our lives transformed.

Amen!