

Sermon:
The Rev. Licia Affer
Epiphany 5 + February 7, 2010

My family has recently adopted a new rule.

We have now a 25 cent tax on the word AWESOME.

You have to know that I have a daughter who is (as they say)

7 going on 17

and having spent way too much time

with people the like of Hannah Montana

she now thinks that everything is just AWESOME.

A new haircut is AWESOME,

finishing her homework before dinner is AWESOME,

having olives on her pizza is AWESOME and so on and so forth.

So a few days ago,

we had a serious conversation about the meaning of the word

and mommy explained that it is actually used to talk about things

that are not just wonderful and exciting and beautiful,

but also AT THE SAME TIME a bit scary,

things that make us feel small and uncomfortable.

We then instituted a 25-cent tax for anyone who would

use the word inappropriately

and had lots of fun “catching” one another fall into another AWESOME.

A few days ago we were talking about the big surprise party

we were planning for my husband’s 40th birthday

and C said

“we will all come out of the closet screaming SURPRISE!

And it will just be AWESOME”.

And before I could say “gotcha”

with the impeccable logic of a seven-year-old, she told me:

no Mum this is the right word b/c when Daddy sees us he will be happy, excited and also a bit scared...”

Did I mention she’s 7 going on 17?

Now, Mr. Webster defines AWE as

“an emotion variously combining dread, veneration and wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime”.

And I don’t care how often you use the word inappropriately;

I am convinced that at some point you must have felt that too, for real!

Maybe in the beauty of creation –

staring at the stars at night and realizing the creativity of God.

Maybe in the glory of a baby –

looking into those new, fresh eyes that seem to know so much and feeling the purity and the wisdom of God.

Maybe in prayer or in the liturgy –

approaching this altar, celebrating our universal salvation

and feeling that there is really no greater love

than giving one’s life for another.

No matter what personal experience you have had,

I am convinced you have been in the presence of the Divine One

at one point or another.

So you must have a fair idea of what poor Isaiah
must have been feeling
as he was cowering at the very back of the Temple,
surrounded with smoke and flying Seraphims,
in the majestic presence of God.

The same emotion that Peter felt
as he fell on his knees in front of Jesus:
dread, veneration, wonder and that terrifying sense of being small,
unworthy, unprepared and totally out of place...
Being in the presence of such holiness
forces us to “look into” our own selves in ways
that we would rather not do.
It compels us to face up to
the very thing we least want to face up to . . .
that we are far from being what we would like to be . . .
far, in fact, from being what we know that we ought to be.

Woe is me, says Isaiah,
which in modern English means **Whoa, I am in trouble here**
I am way out of my league
and there is no way I can even pretend otherwise
because the one in front of me knows it.

And Peter, Peter who clearly recognizes that there is more
to this man Jesus

than what he first thought

seen as he moves from addressing him as Master
(a word of general respect) to Lord.

This Lord is an overwhelming presence for Peter,
a blessing surely but also a threat.

One does not stand in the presence of God with any degree of ease.

The beauty of it all is that

God's response to our sense of consternation
is love and forgiveness –

Don't worry Isaiah, the Seraph is sent to say:

your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

God loves you, you are NOT an insignificant little creature and God has a
plan for you.

And the same goes for Peter:

Do not be afraid – Jesus says, you are fine, you are loved and I have a
mission for you.

Isaiah's sinfulness was not to be a cause of separation from God

Peter's sinfulness was not to be a cause of separation from Jesus, God-in-
Christ.

As AWESOME as God can be,

God wants to be close to us, in a relationship with us;
a part of our lives.

God-in-Christ emptied himself of all those AWESOME attributes that would
have scared us and disconnected us from him

So that he could be near us.

So that he could share our lives and we his.

We are all unworthy when compared to God,
we are all unworthy when placed in front of the divine.

But that is not the point.

The good news is that we are all unworthy
but we are also all saved.

And God is calling us to respond to the gift of forgiveness,
to the gift of salvation that is graciously bestowed upon us.

When we are confronted with so much love and understanding

When we face the holiness of God and

at the same time the forgiveness of God

it is no wonder that we can only think of one way to respond:

Here I am, send me, I will drop everything and follow you.

After encountering God, Isaiah took up the mantle of the prophet and lived a full and difficult life as a vessel for the Holy Spirit.

After encountering Jesus, and seeing in him God, Peter left everything and followed him and became a catcher of people, bringing others to follow too.

We are all called to different ministries, of course.

We have different gifts and different responsibilities.

But we share one common mission,

which is to live a Christ-like life,
loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

So let us all be open to meeting God, to experiencing the divine presence
and let us all be ready to be transformed by it.

Because when the knowledge of God's love,
of God's grace, becomes a part of our inner being,
we start behaving in a different way,
we start asking different questions,
we start dealing with others in a new fashion.
We begin to love as God loves.
And we become just AWESOME