



**“Filled with Awe: Fellowship”
Westminster Presbyterian Church**

September 17, 2023
Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith
Matthew 13:1-13, 18-23

Let us pray. **May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.**

OK, I want to give you Presbyterians a heads up – there will be two occasions today when I ask you to talk, to actually speak words out loud during the sermon. Not yet. I’ll let you know when. But I wanted to give you all fair warning so you know it’s coming and you’re not too shocked. Ok, here we go:

So this morning we continue to consider what it means to be a community, a group of apostles, who are both filled with awe at God’s world around them, and inspire in others the kind of awe we hear about the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.”

And just to recap, on the first Sunday we defined the word “awe.” And this is the first opportunity to talk, and it’ll be short, it’s just a warm up. So what is awe? What are the two characteristics to awe? *Something vast, and so vast that we have to realign our understanding of the world to comprehend it*

And so the first week we said, that awe can happen anytime, not just in the designated special occasions of life. And then last week, we thought about the darker side of awe, the vast events and experiences that shake us to our core and inspire a realignment of our thinking, yes, but not necessarily out of beauty, right. We might be filled with awe in response to horror and fear. So fear is a part of awe, but as discussed, we are designed to face those fears in community, in fellowship with each other, and most especially in loving covenant with God, remembering that the God we worship does not have plans for our destruction, but for a life abundant.

So OK, we’ve been talking about “awe” in a pretty conceptual way, getting our definitions down and acknowledging that things aren’t always positive when it comes to awe, yes yes yes. But given that we’re halfway through this sermon series, I want to

ask, or challenge, or just maybe check in and say: has it made a difference? Have you felt more of a sense of awe at the world around you, a sense of awe with your loved ones, a sense of awe, dare I say, when it comes to this church, this community? Since we started discussing it, have you seen anything, or talked with someone, or experienced something that filled you with awe?

And, here we go, this is the second opportunity to talk, in worship, but not to me, to each other. In Memphis, we call this the ol' "turn to your neighbor." So I want you to turn to your neighbor in the pew, maybe someone behind or in front of you, find a new friend, and just have a little chat together about, 1) have you had an experience over the last few weeks that filled you with awe? If you did, what was it? And if you didn't, maybe why do you think you haven't?

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Now, some of you might have immediately had something to go to, something that popped into your mind. That's fabulous. But I bet for some of you, this is maybe the first time you realized, hm, I don't really remember experiencing any awe. I've listen to Stacy go on about it for two weeks now, but I don't know, I'm not exactly in seeing a lot of awe around me right now. Mostly what I'm seeing is schedules, and agendas, and prescriptions, and bills, and laundry, and dinner, not exactly awe-inspiring. And even if things are going pretty well, if you know, you're feeling content in life these days, is uh...is that really an occasion for awe?

Well, first of all, for someone who can't cook, I'm sort of always in awe of someone making dinner. But beyond that, I think it's pretty normal to not exactly see your life as something that is routinely filled with awe. And yet, we seek beauty, we seek love, we seek meaning, we seek God. And maybe it's not too much to ask that every now and then, when we seek these things, we actually find them.

This weekend, I did have an experience of awe. I went to the Corning Museum of Glass, and I truly felt a sense of awe. From the parking lot, you come straight into the gift shop, which is the most dangerous way to enter a museum. And it was so beautiful, all the colors of glass, art and jewelry and dishes and pumpkins! There were hundreds and hundreds of blow glass pumpkins in all colors and sizes, and it was just a beautiful, brilliant parade of color. But then, once you get through the giftshop and up to the main gallery, the entire vibe changes. You enter this huge white space, with the most beautiful light, and all this contemporary glass art. It's such a stunning change from the excitement of the colorful, bustling giftshop, to the beautiful airiness of the gallery. It

really did fill me with awe, I went back through the main door three times just to get see the light again and feel awe, that overwhelming sensation of experiencing something vast and beautiful, and then trying to wrap my head around it.

And that may sound a little, I don't know, in Texas we'd call it high-falutin', you know going to a fancy museum and talking about it. But it's not a given at all that I should have this experience at the Corning Museum of Art. I'm not an art girl. I know basically nothing about art. I have no artistic skills. I never have. I am nowhere near patient enough to draw anything, my use of scissors gives way to some frankly violent outcomes, I don't craft very well, I don't paint. After Kevin died someone gave me one of those coloring books that adults are supposed to like, it was like mandalas or flowers or something like that, and coloring them was supposed to be relaxing and contemplative. I worked on one for about five minutes and was just like, this is mind-numbingly boring. I'm just not that arty.

But I know enough now to, at a minimum, go to someplace like the Corning Museum and let the art that I don't really understand inspire me still. And that's because, over the years, I've learned about it. And not because I really tried or wanted to. But I have had the best teachers, my friends. Basically every single one of my closest and best friends, throughout my whole life, is a working artist. I just noticed it one day, I guess it's who I'm drawn to. My best friend in elementary school ended up being a curator of contemporary Jewish art, best friend from middle school is a poet, best friend in high school is a musician, best friend from college is a photographer, best friend from seminary is a mixed-media, paper artist. And my friend that I went to the Corning Museum with, she is a pastor and a liturgical artist. And so over the years, they have all taught me about art – how to let yourself experience it, understand it, and find awe in it.

I remember visiting the MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York with Bri, my #1 best friend, who's a photographer and a professor of art. We were walking through a gallery and there was a black painting on the wall. Just a completely black painting. And I said something like, look Bri, I know that all of this is the finest contemporary art in the world, but like I just don't get it. It's just black. The artist might have meant something super serious with it, but at the end of the day, they just took a canvas and painted it black and hung it on the wall. That takes, like, no talent.

And she smirked at me, the way that best friends who are about to be proved right can only do, and said, go look closely at it. And when I did, I realized it's not black. Or rather, it's not only black. The painting is cut up in thirds: one part is black with clear green tones underneath, one is black with blue tones, the last section has vibrant red

tones.¹ And I was wrong, which was annoying, and I was filled with awe. There is no way I would have ever seen the colors in this painting if I didn't, well, make fun of it in front of my friend, and then if she didn't tell me, no, listen to me. I'm an expert, I have studied this stuff, I know this painting, I know why it's special, and I know why it's awe-inspiring. Go and look again.

And that is the role of the teacher.

We have blessed and celebrated our Christian Educators this morning with the understanding that teaching people about God, and about God's relationship with the world, is the fundamental task of the church. It's the first thing mentioned, "they devote themselves to teaching," and this fills others with awe. Teaching is fundamental to our faith not only because we have wisdom to share, but because Jesus Christ, God in the world, is of course, a teacher. A rabbi. Jesus is called the Teacher in each and every Gospel, and that's certainly how the apostles saw him during much of his ministry. They knew he was not really a prophet like John the Baptist, or a leader like Moses, but instead he was their Divine Teacher.

Jesus was teaching all the time, and he had a full course load and a dense syllabus. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches five courses if you will, one course generally called the Sermon on the Mount, one on the end times, and in this opening to chapter 13 of Matthew that we heard today, this is the opening lecture in a seven part series on the Kingdom of God.

Now most of the time, as a teacher, Jesus does that thing that all good teachers do, which is provide the lesson and then sit back and say, well what do you think? It's a tactic that teachers love and one that frustrates students everywhere. Like, I don't know why a black painting is interesting, you tell me, you're the teacher. But this parable is unique in one of Jesus's classes, because Jesus actually tells his students, the disciples, and us, exactly what he means. He shares this parable, and then the disciples ask him point blank: "Why do you speak like this? What are you talking about?"

And so Jesus takes pity on his students and explains exactly what he means. He says, God is a sower, and the Word of God is the seed, and you are the ground. And God plants seeds into all manner of ground, and sometimes it yields a harvest, and sometimes it doesn't because of distractions and evils. But when God's word finds good

¹ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79982>

soil, it yields a bountiful harvest of blessings, although there's no telling how small or large that harvest will be. That's what I mean.

And, you know, it's sort of nice when the teacher gives you the answer, but like we all know from our classes, when you get the answer given to you, it lacks a little something. And I sort of feel that way with this passage. It doesn't take a lot of interpretation, he lays it out for us very clearly. But it's not exactly awe-inspiring on its face. We're kind of left with the feeling of, OK, well, I passed the class but I don't know what to do now. I guess I just hope that I'm the good soil. I mean, I sure do hope I am one of the people who hears the word of God and understands it and good things come forth from me, not the kind of person who doesn't have any roots or doesn't believe what I'm supposed to or gets distracted by the cares of the world. Guess we better just hope that we can be like the good soil, and that the Word of God isn't wasted on us.

But this is where, I think, my role as a teaching elder comes into focus, because I don't think this passage is just a black painting on a wall. Go and take closer look.

Because I don't think this scripture is saying that some people will get the Word of God, and some just won't. I think it's proclaiming much better news than that. I think it's teaching us about the Good News of Jesus Christ which says, God does not only plant seed in ground that we know will grow. God does not walk among us, looking at each of us or each part of us and think to Godself, hmmm...this is a good place to plant, but this place is not. No, God does the exact opposite.

A teacher of mine, Ted Wardlaw, who the president emeritus of Austin Seminary says, "Ultimately...this parable is not so much about the good soil as it is about a good sower. This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances of growth are best. No, this sower [takes risks], relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all the soil – as if it were all potentially good soil: on the rocks, amid the thorns, and on the well-worn path...which leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root."² The seeds of God's love are thrown on the good, the hard, the weak, the distracted. Every one of us, every part of us, every brokenness, every hurt, every fear, every sorrow, has a chance to grow and yield the abundant harvest of God's love. And God's love...well, it is vast, and something that we have to work really hard to understand. And it fills us with awe.

² Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, p. 241

This is the awe-inspiring work of teaching. The seemingly simple experience of not knowing something and having someone explain it to you, teach it to you – it is, I think, ultimately this experience that fills us with awe, that made others who saw the disciples at work in the early church, be filled with awe as well. We see something in the world, or have an experience that we simply don't understand. We see a black painting, but we don't get why it's special. We hear the words of God in Jesus, but we don't understand what he's trying to say. And someone who knows something more than we do comes along and says, take another look.

So if you are one of the people who has a hard time being filled with awe, or figuring out where to look for awe, maybe it's not that there isn't any. Maybe you just need to seek out a good teacher. Maybe we just need each other to remind us to take a closer look.