

Everyone Worships Something
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
May 28, 2017

Reading – “The Truly Great” by Stephen Spender

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.
What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.
Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

Sermon

As you may recall, the first four of the Ten Commandments from Exodus are not moral commandments, but what we might more accurately call spiritual commandments.

All the commandments are of course presented as the word of God, and the first commandment is quite simple: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

The second is more or less an extension of the first: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image... and bow down to them or serve them...”

The third: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...”

The fourth enjoins us to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

Well, it might seem easy enough to understand these commandments, particularly the first three, in political terms, as a way of strengthening the unity of the community by means of unity of worship of one God rather than the many forms of worship of many gods characteristic of the so-called pagans.

But there is more depth here than that, and one doesn't have to "believe in God" in order to understand that depth.

Put in terms of a question, we could consider ourselves challenged by these "commandments" to consider just what it is that we do (or ought to) worship. To put it another way, what do we think is most important in what we might call a hierarchy of values? (Recalling that we can choose to understand "worship" not as bowing down to some supreme being, but, following one of the derivations of the word, as a practice of lifting up or honoring things of worth.)

With this in mind, then, hear these lines about worship, lines attributed to Emerson (a portion of which is printed at the top of your order of worship), which affirm that...:

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

Whether or not Emerson wrote these words, to me they have the ring of truth. Emerson's younger friend, Henry David Thoreau, also frequently wrote along similar lines. In an essay titled "Life Without Principle" Thoreau lamented:

We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards, – because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth, – because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end.

But means to what end? Thoreau hinted at an answer to this question in this passage from *Walden*:

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numerous incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced.

Okay then, what is it "to adventure on life now"? As Thoreau further clarifies in various ways in *Walden* and elsewhere, "to adventure on life" is to seek the higher, the purer, the better.

Which, given a little thought, is what those first few of the ten commandments are, if understood in the broadest terms, inviting us to do.

Returning, then, to the question raised here for each of us: What is most important to us, to what or whom do we give most of our attention, perhaps even worship? Remembering that it is perfectly appropriate to give a certain amount of necessary attention to "trade and commerce" and to obtaining "those things which are necessary to life..." but then realizing that these do not amount to the whole of life, but rather are means to other ends.

There was a profile piece in the “Boston Globe” this week about one of the Boston Celtics players, a young man named Avery Bradley (now, after the loss to Cleveland, himself on vacation from toil on the basketball court...).

We are told in the profile that Bradley’s mother died near the beginning of the Celtics’ 2013 season. A “youthful and vibrant” woman of only 46, she had had a massive stroke during a Zumba class and died just days later with Bradley at her side.

Well, as anyone who has suffered a difficult loss can imagine, the ensuing months were very hard for Bradley as he strived in the midst of grief to do his best on the basketball court and to do his best for his young family. But as we learn in the article, it is clear that Bradley well knows – or certainly came to know – that basketball is not the whole purpose of life or of his life, and that he also knows that he can – and ought – extend his caring and compassion beyond his family, even as family remains at the heart of his life.

For the Globe profile concludes by noting such things as the charity basketball camps Bradley has put on for poor kids in Granada and Trinidad, as well as his determination to do something to improve the lives of people in Haiti.

His wife, Ashley, says, “The way Avery views life is that the basketball game is only two hours. Then what? What did you do to make anyone’s life better?”

Avery Bradley says that he gained this view from his mother: “She still drives me to want to be a better father, a better husband, a better basketball player, a better person.”

To repeat, then, the questions: What do we worship? Where do we put our attention? Where do we decide to put our energy once we have obtained the necessities of life?

Though Avery Bradley may or may not have articulated his life challenges in such words, it seems to me that the loss of his mother along with the birth of his children posed these universal questions for him. For many of us, it is just so: a major life event – whether a birth or the loss of a dear one, or loss of a livelihood, disaster or tragedy of some sort – can trigger such re-orienting questions. And though such questions may sound abstract, they are anything but. For they have to do with how we might honor through our words and deeds, through our living – each day – that which we feel to be of greatest worth.

But how are we meant to find answers to such apparently huge questions? Not with a Google search. Rather – here’s one way anyway – by taking time out from the daily rush of our days.

It is no accident that all the wisdom traditions teach us to take time away from the daily getting and spending that necessarily take up so many hours of our days.

Recall again that the fourth commandment enjoins us to remember the Sabbath, to make it holy. Yes, this recognizes the human need for physical rest, but we are reminded in the full text of the commandment that in the Genesis story God rested on the seventh day. Well, God, being God, didn’t need to rest up physically after the hard work of the first six days! So there must be – and is – more to the Sabbath than physical rest.

Put in the most general terms, a Sabbath day is meant to be a day during which we consider the larger context of our lives, however we might name that context: God, Love, Nature, Universe, Cosmos. And first, we are meant simply to take the time to appreciate and enjoy the mystery and miracle of it all. Then, from that place of gratitude we can reflect on how we might better serve within this larger context, to serve whatever is of

highest value to us (for many of us as Unitarian Universalists well articulated in our seven UU Principles, affirming the worth of every person, the quest for truth and for a world of justice and peace, and affirming our place in the interdependent web of life).

In the tradition of Islam we have entered the month of Ramadan – an entire month during which Muslims are meant during the daylight hours not to eat or drink or engage in sexual contact; and instead turn more attention in the direction of Allah, God, and to manifest that attention through the giving of charity. It is like a month of Sabbaths.

Not that food, drink, or sex are bad, or that pleasure is bad – but that they are not the whole of life.

So Ramadan, like the weekly Sabbath, or like any time spent in meditation or prayer – Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and so on – is meant to remind us that a full human life includes matters larger than obtaining our daily bread. A little like Avery Bradley realizing that a basketball game, which he surely loves, is only two hours of a day.

Finally this morning, a secular holiday such as Memorial Day can also offer occasion for similar sorts of reflection.

That reading of the poem by Stephen Spender perhaps says it all. Just as a purely personal loss can lead us to reflect on what matters more and what matters actually not so much, so on Memorial Day, we together can consider how we might, in Spender's words...

Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit...

Through remembering and reflecting upon...

The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.

In this spirit, on Memorial Day I remember, as I've shared with you other years, my Uncle Bob. Bob fought for life and then gave his life helping to rescue his sergeant during World War II's Battle of the Bulge. A year earlier he had written this from his training camp to a Catholic friend back home:

What I'm getting at Mac, is, and I know you agree with me, that what I want to fight for now, and later – I might even wish myself on the ministry, you know – is not for the right for me to be a Presbyterian if I wish, but for everybody to worship God as they believe they should. And more than that, to respect the other guy's feelings and beliefs. Tolerance is the word. The way I see it, if we achieve tolerance we achieve world brotherhood. If we achieve world brotherhood, we achieve the eternal peace we seek.

Sounds like my Uncle Bob, only twenty-years old, had his hierarchy of values pretty well organized, knew something about what was worthy of worship.

We are, sadly, still a considerable distance from achieving what Bob called “world brotherhood,” much less “eternal peace.” Yet I can only wonder, if Bob were alive today, as our troops bravely fight in our longest, seemingly unending wars, whether Bob might by now agree with the peace activist A.J. Muste, that there is no way to peace, peace is the way.

In any case, Memorial Day, a day on which we remember those who gave their lives as they “fought for life,” ought it seems to me also be a day when we at least ask such a question, along with all those big questions about worth and value, about what matters most and what matters not so much as we may once have thought.

To conclude pretty simply (I don’t think this is brain or rocket science):

Yes, we quite naturally put our attention on all sorts of things – from ice cream on a hot summer’s day to embracing someone we love, from achieving some goal in our work-life to enjoying a concert or night at Fenway Park.

But at the same time, as Emerson, Thoreau, and all the wisdom traditions remind us, a complete human life is one in which we have an increasingly clear sense – I’ll repeat myself – as to what is most important and what less important, as to what is merely means to higher ends, and what those ends are.

In short, the wisdom of the ages enjoins us to notice what we worship, for what we worship does indeed shape what sort of human being we are becoming.

So may it be.