

“THE YEAR OF REVERENCE”

Acts 10:34-43

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(Acts1039)**

New calendars are everywhere. Many were underneath our Christmas trees -- featuring cats, dogs, trivia, or crossword puzzles. Calendars now are available on a table outside the sanctuary, compliments of Torsonne Funeral Home in Highland or DiDinato Funeral Home in Marlboro.

Different items are highlighted on different calendars. It may not be noted on our ours, but 1.2 billion people are well aware that the Chinese New Year begins on the 28th of January.

The Chinese have zodiac signs that follow a 12-year cycle featuring a specific animal each year. January the 28th ushers in the Year of the Rooster. This is important to those who follow the Chinese calendar.

The *rooster* immediately prompts an image of crowing and the notion that it is time to wake up and begin the day -- get to work! The rooster is a reliable creature. Those who are born in the Year of the Rooster are perceived as being honest, intelligent, personable, independent and ambitious.

Those who monitor the teachings of the Year of the Rooster are given the following instruction regarding 2017:

*. . . avoid going to funerals, the sick and also avoid
doing any career move or repairs and renovations
at home and work. Travel to shrug off bad vibes.*

Outward appearance has its own significance:

*Manbuns bring luck but beards or moustaches bring
or attract poverty in face feng shui. So ladies beware:
Do not be involved with men with a beard or moustache.*

The Year of the Rooster informs one-seventh of the global population, but few of us pay attention to the Chinese calendar and traditions. We are informed, instead, by the common calendar of our nation. We just finished Christmas and New Years. Next weekend we will celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and in February we honor presidents Washington and Lincoln. All told, we have ten federal holidays, one of which is religious -- Christmas.

If we were to claim the church year as our primary calendar, we would find that our Christian year recently was reset with Advent. After Christmas, we are in the season of Epiphany. Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary Time will unfold and, before we know it, Advent once again will be upon us in quick order -- as well as Christmas 2017.

There is a bit of wistfulness that we, as Christians, could have cycle similar to the Chinese. Rather than have several seasons within a year, how nice it would be to have one theme upon which to focus throughout the year.

If we did have such a practice of attribution, imagine the impact on our lives if this were *The Year of Reverence*!

Living our lives reverently would not require a boycott of funerals and a quarantine of the sick. We would not have to banish men with beards or mustaches. If, however, we were to declare this as *The Year of Reverence*, some intentional patterns would be established. For most of us, our daily rituals and interpersonal relationships would change.

The Year of Reverence could begin with an acknowledgement of our smallness. We are not the greatest entity in the world. We are not the Sun. We are not the Moon. We are neither King nor Queen. We are not God. We simply are a unique soul created and claimed by God.

Because of our smallness, we live humbly in relationship with the One who is greater than we. As Christians, we claim the miracle of our existence to be the result of God's Creation. We live humbly in relationship with the One who is our Maker. We are humbled in the presence of God and, consequentially, by all that flows from God's creation.

If we adopt *The Year of Reverence*, we then will form a response to this feeling of humility. We have the freedom to fill in the particulars. Our reverence may include . . .

Prayer -- At the beginning of the day, pray.

Throughout the day, pray. At the conclusion of the day, pray.

Pray as one who marvels at and is perplexed by the unfolding of God's gift of life. Pray with gratitude. Pray with concern.

Pray with joy and sorrow. Pray with humility. Pray.

Our reverence may include . . .

Scripture -- Our Christian forebears instructed us to regularly pick up the Bible and read scripture with faith that it is "the very Word of God." (*The Larger Catechism*, A. 157) Reverence involves faithful attentiveness to God's Word in the Bible.

Our reverence may include . . .

Awe and Respect -- We know what it is to experience awe in the presence of something greater than our imagining or ability:

the Hudson River, Handel's *Messiah*, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the channeling of electricity, a computer that fits in the palm of our hand, a heart removed from one body and transplanted in another. When we are reverent, we respect that which creates this sense of awe.

Our reverence may include . . .

Discernment -- Paul Woodruff, a humanities professor at the University of Texas in Austin, suggests that there is a reverent response to that which is not transcendent. Paul Woodruff says there is a reverent response when we are "in the presence of something base."* There is that which is intolerable, that which must be rejected. For example, "the most reverent response to a tyrant . . . is to mock him." Reverence compels a response, even though the response may feel disconcerting.

Our reverence may include . . .

Shame and Outrage -- Let us not forget the helpful role of shame in our lives. Shame provides perspective. There are some things in life that are sacred and those remind us of conduct that is unacceptable. An added dimension to this is outrage. There are moments when outrage is reverent.

A father once shared with me his reaction when he entered a room and found his grade-school son being choked by his classmate. The father grabbed his houseguest and shook him and threatened his life. "Don't you ever touch my son again or I will kill you!"

The father's outrage was because of his reverence for his son's life.

There are myriad expressions of reverence:

- 1) *in prayer*
- 2) *through the reading of Scripture*
- 3) *with demonstrations of awe and respect*
- 4) *through discernment*
- 5) *by expressing shame and outrage.*

If we choose to designate 2017 as *The Year of Reverence*, we will determine what that means in our varied walks of life. We may become more disciplined at our Christian discipleship. We may take note of the splendor of life that otherwise would take for granted. We may give up road rage and find another way to expend our energy. We may own up to our regrets and be honest with our feelings.

Most of us are on a learning curve with regard to reverence. We miss opportunities to be reverent. Cal Marshall is only 17 and may be a little young to

understand when a moment calls for reverence. Cal is the son of Roger Marshall, who was sworn in on Wednesday as a Representative from Kansas.

Cal stood in the halls of Congress and held the Bible while his father took the oath of office from House Speaker Paul Ryan. Only 17 years old, Cal held the Bible in one hand and, with his free arm, he dabbed. The gesture has been made popular by Carolina Panther quarterback Cam Newton. Actually, Cal only did a half-dab.

The Tweet world went berserk. Irreverent! cried many. Fun! weighed in others.

We, like Cal Marshall, get to decide how we will conduct ourselves in any given situation.

There are a few beautiful souls who seem to have mastered the art of living reverently. They are reverent with their whole being. Sister Frances Ann Carr was one such person.

Sister Frances died this week at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village (in New Gloucester, Maine). One of the last three Shakers, she dedicated herself not only to a *year* of reverence but to a *life* of reverence. Every aspect of her day was dedicated to God -- making her bed in the morning, preparing meals, greeting guests at Shaker Village. She wanted the activities of her life to bring glory God.

Sister Frances loved receiving visitors at Sabbathday Lake who wanted to see how the Shakers conducted their lives. She was known to tell the tour groups, "It is so gratifying to look round this room and see it filled with so many people. You will alway, always find a place of love here."

So may it be for those who enter our church.

May it be so for those who enter our homes.

May this be, for us, *The Year of Reverence*.

Amen.

* "Mindful Virtue, Mindful Reverence," by Ursula Goodenough and Paul Woodruff, *Zygon*, 36 no 4 Dec 2001, p. 585-595.