



Reverence

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The October theme is Reverence.

In a northern California park, the cross-section of an old redwood tree trunk about ten feet in diameter has been balanced on its side so you can step right up and view its many rings.

When the tree fell 75 years ago, it was about 350 feet tall and 1,392 years old. It's a lifespan difficult to fathom, so park interpreters have provided cues to help. In the center of the trunk's cross-section, a small note says the tree sprouted in the year 544 CE when, on the other side of the globe, the Emperor Justinian ruled the Byzantine Empire. Nearby, another

note marks a ring of the tree that was growing when Mohammed was born, and a third points to the ring that grew when the Mayan civilization began in 680. Across the width of the trunk, you can touch your finger to the ring that grew during the Sung Dynasty in China or the Aztec civilization, or the year Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, at which time the tree was 948 years old – and still growing.

I am accustomed to feeling awestruck in the company of great, old trees that dwarf my stature, but standing next to that redwood's cross-section made me feel small – and fleeting – in time as well.

Reverence, it has been said, begins with an acknowledgement of human limitations in the presence of something greater, something more than we can ever be. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it, reverence is "the soul's salute," a tribute of humility paid to the intrinsic value of another without seeking gain from that value.

Praised by ancient cultures around the world as the "guardian of civilization," reverence has been lifted up as the virtue that sensitizes the conscience and helps humans find our proper place as neither immortal divine beings nor immoral monsters but somewhere in between. Reverence is as much about us remembering our common humanity – with all our wonder and our weaknesses alike – as it is about taking our shoes off to honor the holy ground on which we are standing.

One must first become small, May Sarton wrote in a poem about reverent listening. Nothing but a presence / Attentive as a nesting bird.

The opposite of reverence is hubris. In our supersized culture in our superpower nation, do we even know how to "become small" and "attentive as a nesting bird"?

Listening is a good place to start. And watching. Go outside on a clear, dark night where you can see the moon and stars. Listen to the wind rustling through the autumn leaves. Or wrap your finger in the soft, curled fist of a newborn child. Or step into the church sanctuary with its soaring ceiling and light-filled space. Look up. Look around you. Listen to the choir.

Notice, the feeling of reverence is not really about *becoming* small. It is about finding ourselves in a web of life and deep kinship so trustworthy we can safely admit we have always been small. In life's grand ecology of being, reverence is actually a matter of profound belonging.

After a windstorm, I once came upon the stump of a tree cut clean by a crew working overtime. I knelt down and ran my hand over its sappy surface, remembering its height and guessing which rings were growing when I was born.

We like to say that everything is holy now, but to experience reverence in a world brimming with holiness it helps to focus on just one thing. Listen to it. Let it remind you of your place in the world, small and mortal and passing – and beautifully tucked into a vast cosmos shining with grand miracles and mystery from one eternity to another.

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Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue, by Paul Woodruff, a humanist's thoughtful reflection on the virtue of reverence and its role in ancient Greece and China as well as our society today.

A Timbered Choir, by Wendell Berry, a collection of deeply reverent poems from Berry's Sunday morning practice of walking meditation.

Albert Schweitzer's writings, translated and collected in numerous books and anthologies.

The Color Purple, Alice Walker

MOVIES

The National Parks: America's Best Idea, a Ken Burns' documentary.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams, Werner Herzog's film shot inside the Chauvet caves of Southern France, capturing the oldest known pictorial creations of humankind.