

December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve
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Living with a 1st grader is a lot of fun—most days. ☺ At the beginning of the school year his teacher told all the parents, “You’ll be amazed at how much your child will learn this year. It’s the year of learning the basics of math, reading and writing.

The homework Peder enjoys most is creating words from a group of letters. Each Tuesday he brings home an envelope with 8-10 letters in it and with these letters he creates as many words as possible. So once he gets a word, like tin, then he can easily put other letters at the beginning and discover words like fin, pin, sin and yes, gin.

He’s learning that some words sound the same, but are spelled differently (a homophone)—like mail (a Christmas card that’s delivered to your home) and male (boy or man). And some words are spelled the same but sound different (a homonym)—like bow (a ribbon used on Christmas packages) and bow (what people do when greeting royalty).

We had a lot of fun with the word bow (bo), or should I say bow (bau)? Yes, a bow is something pretty to put in a girls’ hair or on a gift. But a bow is also the small part of eyeglasses, or is used to shoot an arrow. And then there is also bow, the rear of a ship; or b.o.u.g.h., the branch of a tree, or Richard Bough, a member of our church.

Those are all nouns (yep we’re learning about those too), but bow as a verb is what I want us to think about on this Holy Night. You can bow out of the game, take a bow after a performance, bow your head in prayer or bow toward someone to show respect or honor. During the flu season, some churches have started bowing to one another during the sharing of the peace instead of shaking hands in an effort to not spread germs.

Bowing in church is something that took me a while to get used to doing. It wasn’t until I came to Holy Trinity that I learned a new appreciation for bowing as a ritual, prayerful action. At first it seemed uncomfortable, unnecessary and just one more thing I had to remember to do during worship. But through the years, I’ve grown to appreciate the practice of bowing toward the cross and the altar, reverently bending my body lower to show respect, humility and adoration for the symbols that represent Christ’s presence among us. And I love that as part of our liturgy we—pastor and people—bow to one another.

Bowing is an ancient practice observed by most spiritual traditions. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians all practice some form of bowing toward the holy whether it be scripture, symbols or people. Some of us are familiar with the bow used in yoga classes: we put our hands toward our heart and say, “Namaste,” meaning “the divine in me greets the divine in you.”

The Benedictine handbook for postulants and novices says, “Our practice of bowing is an expression of our true nature as creatures. We bow as an expression of gratitude for the utter giftedness of life itself in the very moment. We bow to the ground, the earth, the mother earth of which we are a part, but in doing so we are also bowing to the ground of all that is, God, Source and Sustainer of all that is. . .thus our bowing is a gesture of communion with all that lives within the mystery of God. . . we bow in acknowledgement of this central, ongoing mystery. In some mysterious way the bow contains our whole life.”

Bowing, whether in yoga or as a part of our worship, is an intimate and holy practice. More than a handshake and a hello, a bending of one’s body toward another is a holy act that invites the other into a sacred conversation, even if there aren’t any words. In this simple action we show respect, honor and adoration toward another.

On this holy night we bow to the manger—to Christ the newborn king—with awe, reverence and joy. It’s not what the people in that ancient time and place expected in a king. No royal crown, no lofty throne, royal army or kingdom. Instead this king of kings, this prince of peace, is born in a lowly manger and the farm animals bow to greet him. The shepherds and angels bow to honor him. The mother and father bend low to hold him and adore him. Even the stars in the sky bend their voices as this manger stall becomes a shrine for the holy one of God.

We think of bowing as a reverent act, but sometimes life itself makes us bow in sorrow. We've known sadness, worry, illness and sorrow in our lives, maybe in this year that soon draws to a close. So in our bowing on this night we experience an odd mixture of reverence and need.

We bow to his Holy One because we also hear his story this night—that he comes to us. God bows down to us and comes to earth in this baby: to save us, to dwell not only in a manger, but in our hearts, in one another, in this meal, and in all our celebrating today and in the days ahead. That is certainly worth bowing about.