

SLD07.17.11 5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sacred Communities – The 12th Century Beguines
Matthew 5:3-12
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Sisters Between”

In the 1930s, Cole Porter wrote a song called “Begin the Beguine,” about the sultry slow rumba-like dance from the island of Martinique. In the local Creole language, a beguine was a white woman. In Amsterdam in the 12th to 14th centuries the Beguines also were white women, although they would have been appalled to discover their name attached to such a sultry dance.¹

(I want to let you know that I tried to get Rose and Bob to begin today’s service by dancing the Beguine, and, just for the record, Rose was game. :-))

But the Beguines we’re talking about today hail not from the Caribbean but from a spontaneous movement of 12th century northern European uncloistered religious women who aimed to live a life of prayer and service to the needy.

Sounds pretty benign, right? A gaggle of Christian women living in community in order to pray and help the poor?

But the word to focus on in the cluster of adjectives describing these 12th century religious women is “uncloistered.” That is, unenclosed. Unrestrained. Unmanaged. Read: uncontrolled, at least by any medieval male cleric of the highly ordered Catholic church of the time. In an era when women were looked upon as objects worthy of pedestal worship only when they compared favorably to the virgin mother of Christ, but otherwise seen as sources of temptation who lured others toward a bottomless pit,² this

¹ <http://laurieofarabia.blogspot.com/2011/03/beguines.html>

² <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/xpax/beguines.html>, “The Beguines,” by Elizabeth T. Knuth December, 1992.

wouldn't do. Regarded as dangerously carnal and lustful creatures, far removed from the male realms of spirit and intellect (one cardinal of the era noted that "the wickedness of women is greater than all other wickedness of the world ...the poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less dangerous to men than the familiarity of women...."³) why, you just couldn't have random females out there living on their own, regardless of their pious purpose. Women were to be married, or sent to the convent. There simply weren't that many other options, at least on the on the "managed" front. It is true that some women of lower social classes might enter a trade and possibly remain single, but women of nobility had the choice of marriage or the convent; that was it. Problem was, due to local wars, feuds and the crusades, there weren't enough marriageable men to go around. Nor near enough convents, either, to accommodate all the unmarried women. Plus, convents were expensive and required a "dowry" to join. Now, this was the era of Julian of Norwich. Anybody remember the holy recluse and advisor, Julian of Norwich and her cat, whose abode was anchored to the side of a church for the greater part of her life? But being plastered into a 4' by 6' living space along a church wall just isn't for everybody. And anyway, there weren't even enough church walls to accommodate all the unmarried women who qualified for holy plastering.

Meanwhile, right around this time there's this major economic and social upheaval going on in medieval society. One author describes it this way: "Twelfth-century Europe was a bubbling cauldron of diverse and colliding energies, fired by an immense mixture of conflicting concerns. As feudalism declined, a new class of people

³ <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/91431peters.html>, SPIRITUALITY TODAY Spring 1991, Vol.43 No. 1, pp. 36-52
Marygrace Peters, O.P.: *The Beguines: Feminine Piety Derailed*

arose in urban communities: merchants and tradespeople, in response to the transition from a bartering economy, in which goods and services were exchanged, to a market economy, in which things were expected to have an assigned value.”⁴ Suddenly a lot of people start making a lot of money. Sort of like this country in the 80’s. And between the unimaginably rich nobility and the dismal poor squeezed a new middle class that reveled in the abundance of their new fortune. (You know how the nouveau riche are.) Malls hadn’t been invented yet but profligate consumption had, and many reveled in all the new opportunities for acquiring fortune and indulging consumption.

But others, especially among the faithful – you know how you always have your pious party poopers – were genuinely horrified by the extravagant and dissolute ways emerging all around them. And, repelled by the flagrant wealth surrounding them, many of these folks felt impelled to withdraw from public life and renounce all property, power and privilege.

This isn’t the first time we’ve seen Christians compelled to withdraw from the dominant trends of society. Remember the diaspora of the 4th century desert mothers and fathers when Christianity suddenly became the state religion? It’s never been uncommon for passionate Christians to live in tension with the mores of their day, or for some, to reject them altogether.

Certainly 12th century Europe saw persons from all walks of life attracted to the cult of voluntary poverty. Such craving for renunciation cut across all class distinctions. Even some peasants whose poverty was unavoidable sought a more extreme destitution which they understood as meritorious in the eyes of God.

⁴ Peters.

Central to the identity of these voluntary poor was the return to the *vita apostolica*, the apostolic life, the hallmarks of which were poverty, humility, charity, a simple life lived in community and in accordance with the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12). The desire to embrace voluntary poverty became urgent for many, leading to a sort of "evangelical awakening" that captured the imagination of men and women alike. Mendicant orders arose, whose male membership led lived lives in conformity to the ideals we've named. Vast numbers of (male) laity joined or affiliated with the Dominicans and Franciscans. Opportunities for communal apostolic life began to abound, at least for men.

Only, here you have these teeming unmarried women wandering around with few options for next steps (think of the unemployment rate among young people today), stewing in this fomenting cauldron of increased economic activity peppered by communal religious resistance. Give it a stir and what've ya got? The first spontaneous women's movement in Christian history!

On their own women began banding together for mutual support, security and protection, forming groups like the Beguines. They were odd, these groups, because they were self-initiated and neither conformed to the uniform rigidity of female monastics, nor reported to any of the holy old guys in charge. Tolerated at first by the religious establishment, these groups were sometimes described as "semi-religious."

In the case of the Beguines, in the beginning they mostly lived on their own or in their parents' homes. Eventually disciplined associations or groups began to form, sometimes presided over by a grand mistress. Some groups of Beguines of means (remember, they held on to their property if they had any) acquired or built infirmaries,

and settled near them. This was often a natural development as community members grew older, or poorer members needed care.⁵

And some groups, at the height of their movement, evolved into what became known as a beguinage, a city within a city. "The full-blown beguinage comprised a church, cemetery, hospital, public square, and streets and walks lined with convents for the younger sisters and pupils, and individual houses for the older and well-to-do inhabitants. Indeed, in the Great Beguinage at Ghent, Belgium with its walls and moats, there were, at the beginning of the fourteenth century two churches, eighteen convents, over a hundred houses, an infirmary and a brewery." Those Beguines knew how to have a good time.

But when they weren't quaffing the fruits of their brewery, to the glory of God, of course, in most cases members of the Beguine communities went about earning their own living. They made lace, gardened, taught, nursed, or even managed shelters for women and children employed by the cloth industry, and otherwise engaged themselves in socially useful tasks.

You can see, can't you, what a novel and attractive alternative to the traditional cloistered existence Beguine life afforded women who chose not to be married?

The earliest Beguines weren't regulated by vow or rule (remember a "rule" is a charter or covenant for a way of life.) And while chastity was always upheld as a value, they didn't necessarily renounce the possibility of marriage. Some, by mutual agreement, lived apart from their husbands so that they could devote themselves totally to the apostolic life. Others separated from a husband for a time and rejoined him upon his return from a crusade or when they themselves wished to resume their former lives.

⁵ Ibid.

Some were single or widowed. Still others, when they simply got over life in a Beguinage, ventured out with the blessing of the community to find a mate.

You'll note a certain unusual, perhaps even avant garde, "lightness of being" among the Beguine communities not generally found in medieval society. From their watchwords of "poverty" and "liberty" I get a sense of a kind of flexibility and joy of living out their discipleship in freedom, service and communal relationship. However, it should come as no surprise that ecclesiastical and secular authorities began to feel threatened by these ragtag groups of "semi-religious" women, often seeing them as indictments against the greed, simony, corruption and wealth of the Church,⁶ which, of course, they were.

Besides a commitment to poverty, Beguine spiritual heritage emphasized intense devotion to both the humanity and the passion of Christ. They took their mandate from the Beatitudes, seeking to embody the humanity of their Beloved Jesus by blessing the poor in spirit, feeding the hungry and comforting the miserable. The Eucharist, or communion, as we more commonly call it, was especially important to the Beguines because they regarded the reception of communion as the culmination of a mystical marriage between the soul of the Beguine and Christ, the heavenly bridegroom – the kind of spousal encounter hinted at in our first reading today from the Song of Solomon.

In an era when communion even once yearly had to be mandated, when members of religious orders *might* receive communion three times a year, the Beguines wanted weekly or even more frequent communion.⁷

⁶ <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/xpax/beguines.html>, "The Beguines," by Elizabeth T. Knuth December, 1992.

⁷ Knuth.

This also made the Church nervous, perhaps, at least in part, because mystical or ecstatic experience enables a person to transcend the normal boundaries of her existence (such as femaleness) and claim direct inspiration from God. And direct contact can lead annoyingly to prophecy, warning against evil, predicting the future, counseling, advising, and worse, *criticizing leaders*.⁸ In a society that undervalued female perceptions and accorded women little authority, this power was, at the very least, not welcome...and is one of the things that got the Beguines in trouble.

The continued ambiguity of the status of the Beguines also continued to be a point of tension with the church. They were “sisters between,” their lives something of a middle way between monastic and secular existence. In 1274, the Franciscan, Gilbert of Tourni, remarked that “he could not decide whether to call (the Beguines) “nuns” or “seculars. They did not fit the mold; they were women *in* the world by not *of* it. Too, he noted, sometimes their devotional ardor surpassed that of nuns causing at least some to complain that they were “*too pious*.” And we all know how annoying *that* can be.

Another issue pressing on the unpopularity of the Beguines was their industry, which began to threaten the tradesmen with whom they competed for business. While they often engaged in the pursuits of teaching and nursing, they also supported themselves by work associated with the cloth industry. In some instances, this made them competitors in their growing market economy of the strongly established guilds of the towns. Guilds often begrudged the Beguines the economic privileges afforded them, like those that enabled them to buy and sell freely and to avoid any term of apprenticeship.

⁸ <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguine1.htm> “Sisters Between” Gender and the Medieval Beguines by Abby Stoner

But the biggest problem with the Beguines, especially in the beginning, was the fact that they were not directly responsible to any duly constituted ecclesial power. The matter was simply one of control.

The Beguines never did become an approved religious order, although they were granted some privileges and exemptions customary for approved orders. Their status in Rome fluctuated for a time, but the tide turned against them in the fourteenth century.

Finally, at the ecumenical Council of Vienne in 1311, exactly 700 years ago, Pope Clement V declared that

We have been told that certain women commonly called Beguines, afflicted by a kind of madness discuss the Holy Trinity and the divine essence, and express opinions on matters of faith and sacraments contrary to the catholic faith. Since these women promise no obedience to anyone and do not renounce their property or profess an approved Rule, they are certainly not “religious” although they wear a habit and are associated with such religious orders as they find congenial We have therefore decided and decreed with the approval of the Council that their way of life is to be permanently forbidden and altogether excluded from the Church of God.⁹

Profoundly uncomfortable with the freedom and practices of the Beguines, the church authorities declared them heretics and dissolved their associations.

To be sure, this particular configuration of feminine piety was ultimately quelled by pressures inside and out. But for a couple centuries there, Beguine communities supplied a genuine religious excitement for their era, a fresh and faithful alternative for women who wished to live out their discipleship in community.

12th century Cistercian monk, Caesarius of Heisterbach, said about the Beguines: "In the midst of worldly people they were spiritual; in the midst of pleasure seekers they were pure; and in the midst of noise and confusion they led a serene, eremetical life."

⁹ Peters.

The point, however, is not so much that the Beguine movement of late 12th to 14th century Europe was above reproach; that they somehow nailed the apostolic life, that they got it all “right.” Communal life, trying to “get along” in close quarters and intimate circumstances, is invariably difficult. No doubt in any given Beguinage, you had your good Beguines and your bad Beguines and your fussy Beguines who yelled at everybody when anybody moved their cheese.

But what we’re celebrating in this sermon series is not so much those who nail the apostolic life as the variety of committed and engaging efforts over the ages to live it out. You know how, in years past I’ve often quoted Robert Ellsberg as saying that “saints are proof that the gospel can be lived.” Well, the “sacred communities” we’re exploring this summer are proof that the gospel can be lived... in community.

Imperfectly, perhaps. Incompletely, but faithfully, authentically, creatively. And fresh efforts to mediate the values of the Gospel to the contemporary world should be taken seriously whenever and wherever they emerge.

Those of us in the book group are reading Bishop Spong’s book, Why Christianity Must Change or Die.¹⁰ Some of Spong’s propositions, especially that of a non-theistic God, jab at the very heart of traditional Christian language and practice. At Presbytery yesterday, a young Korean pastor, the Rev. Hardy Kim, preached a sermon that pointed unflinchingly at the seismic, and often uncomfortable, changes in church today. In the PC(USA), to be sure, especially as related to our recent new polity, but also in the broader church: changes in theology, in worship style, in liturgical language, even in some of our most central symbology and practices.

His sermon was also about our stubborn resistance to those changes.

¹⁰

In a dramatic gesture at the end of his sermon, people came forward to lay obscuring cloths over the pulpit, the table, the font, even...and this rather took my breath away... even over the cross.

At first I thought there was nothing left of our familiar chancel landscape. But later the Rev. Kim pointed out the candle – the one candle – still lit, still in the center of worship. “This is the light of Christ,” he said, “and it is all that is needed.”

To the glory of God. Amen.