

SLD06.25.06 12th Ordinary
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“Teresa of Avila – A Passion for God”

So, one day Teresa of Avila was traveling down a dusty road in a donkey cart, standard mode of transportation in 16th century Spain, when her cart overturned, throwing her into a muddy river. When she complained to God about this ordeal, she heard a voice from within her saying, “This is how I treat my friends.” “Yes, my Lord.” she answered. “And that is why you have so few of them!” ¹

A peppery, passionate individual with a sense of humor, Teresa of Avila was renown for speaking her mind freely, to God or anyone else who happened to be listening. With her education, insight, beauty, natural gift of leadership, and extraordinary zest for life, Teresa was a remarkable woman for her own, or any, day. Borrowing the words Paul used in today’s text, Teresa was a servant of God who commended herself in every way, through great endurance in affliction, hardships and calamities, as well as by knowledge, truthful speech, genuine love and holiness of spirit. In short, she was one who opened wide her heart to God, and all the suffering and joy that followed.

Teresa of Avila was a mystic, a religious reformer, the foundress of seventeen convents, the author of four books, and one of the outstanding masters of Christian prayer. In this season of focus on the life and discipleship of followers of Jesus, I chose Teresa as the first of the saints to introduce to you because in her own time, in her own

¹ Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, N.Y. 1999, p.450

peculiar way, she was a unique model of the Christian life, one from whom we can still learn today.

Some of you will recall from last week's sermon that this summer we'll be examining in worship a variety of historical Christians whose lives reflect some special insight or revelation regarding living out the example of Jesus Christ. Some, though not all, of the individuals to whom we will turn have been canonized as saints by the Catholic Church, a practice to which we Protestants, convinced as we are of the fundamental and inescapable brokenness of all humanity, do not ascribe.

However, freed from the pressures and persecutions of the Reformation Era, we are no longer as wary of examining and learning from the lives of the spiritual greats of the history of the Christian Church. And Teresa of Avila was definitely one of those spiritual greats.

But because it's important to me for us to be clear about where the Reformed church, of which we Presbyterians are a part, stands with regard to canonized holy ones, I invite you to pick up a copy of last week's sermon on your way out to provide some context for this summer's sermon series.

Meanwhile, allow me to introduce you to Teresa of Avila. At turns charming, imperious, irreverent, and impossible, there is little doubt that Teresa's extraordinary courage and wisdom were rooted in a very special relationship with God.²

Of all her characteristics, Teresa's most captivating quality is what the Spanish call *duende*. "*Duende* – that raw, primitive, tempestuous energy...more frequently associated with gypsies, bullfighters and flamenco dancers than with saints. One commentator describes *duende* this way: "Fiery, wild, and utterly original, *duende*

² Ibid. p. 448.

annihilates nonessentials with contempt for neat, tidy categories, accepted styles, cramped forms, and human limitations of any kind.”³

You can see why Teresa was something of a wild card for her time; in fact, the subtitle of one of the books I researched called Teresa ‘the grand wild woman of Avila.’ Teresa was wild as a child, wild as she grew from an adolescent into a ravishing young woman, and wildest of all when she reached middle age and set out on her quixotic adventures throughout her native Spain. Vibrant, alive, dynamic, a natural leader and a flamboyant beauty, Teresa captivated everyone around her.

Born in the fortress city of Avila, Spain in 1515, Teresa initially belonged to a family of privilege and aristocracy. When she was fourteen her mother died, and her father arranged for her education in a local convent. By the time she was twenty she had decided to become a nun, a vocation motivated, she later recognized, more by the fear of purgatory than by the love of God. Her father opposed this plan, but Teresa, with characteristic willfulness, disobeyed his wishes and ran off to the Carmelite convent in Avila.

Within a year she had become so ill that her father had to come take her home. Teresa’s condition deteriorated to the point that she fell into a coma and was thought to be dead. For three years she was virtually paralyzed from the waist down. Eventually her body was well enough for her to return to her monastery, but Teresa’s spiritual life had grown tepid and superficial.

Unfortunately, Teresa’s spiritual state was not helped by the lax conditions of the convent. The strictness of the original Carmelite rule had become so watered down over the years that, more than a house of prayer, the convent in Avila had come to

³ Tessa Bielecki, Holy Daring, Element Publishing, Rockport, Mass., 1994, p. 11.

resemble a boarding house for wealthy maidens. In fact, the nuns spent more of their time in the parlor entertaining visitors and gentlemen callers than they did in prayer. And in this atmosphere of social traffic, Teresa's natural charm and extroverted personality brought her much attention.

But one day, at the age of thirty-nine, Teresa had an experience of conversion. It was sparked when she happened to glance at an image of the suffering Christ on the cross. Instantly she found herself filled with loathing for the mediocrity of her spiritual life, and determined to devote herself more seriously to a life of prayer. As she did, she increasingly experienced a sensation of God's love transforming her from within.

Moved by her renewed passion for her Maker, Teresa decided to establish a new reformed Carmelite house that would return to the spirit of the original primitive rule of Carmel. Lobbying strenuously with the powers that be, she finally won permission to found her new convent in 1562.

Teresa's new community was known as the Discalced or, shoeless, Carmelites. In fact the nuns wore hemp sandals, but their name referred to the strict poverty that was a feature of Teresa's reform. Her nuns were to live entirely by alms and their own labor. A strict enclosure was to be maintained at all times, along with a vegetarian diet and a rigorous schedule of prayer.

Despite opposition from within her Carmelite family, suspicion from members of the Catholic hierarchy, and eventually formal investigation by the dreaded Spanish Inquisition, Teresa went on to establish sixteen other convents in Spain. You see, as a woman and a reformer who based her authority on private visions, Teresa's activities entailed considerable risk. For along with the exultant and aggressive Catholicism of Teresa's day came a fanatical suspicion of anything that smacked of Protestantism.

More remarkable even than Teresa's public accomplishments was the intensity of her life of prayer, which, is actually my primary focus today. Among all the saints, few rival the variety and depth of Teresa's mystical experiences.

I want to pause a moment here to make what for me is a key point about mysticism, which term we'll come across often as we explore the lives of Christian saints. In the Protestant tradition we hold a healthy suspicion of mysticism due to its privatistic nature. Like many Protestants, we Presbyterians generally prefer community discernment to personal vision. Theology, for us, is never done in a vacuum. Revelation, ordination, the sacraments, even everyday decision-making in the life of the church – they're all community events.

But one modern day interpreter of Teresa and St. John of the Cross, Teresa's pal on whom we'll be calling next week, defines mysticism in a way to which I believe we can all relate. Mysticism, says Tessa Bielecki, is "loving, experiential awareness of God." (repeat)⁴

For me, that's a definition that demystifies mysticism, opening it to a yearning common to us all: Loving, experiential awareness of God. Personal, intimate communion with God. "Not ideas about God in our head, or words about God on our lips, but personal, living experience." I believe the human yearning for loving communion with God is as universal as God's yearning for us. And if that's so, then at heart, we're all mystics.

I'd go so far as to say that this yearning for a personal, living experience of God lies beneath many a motivation to worship in the first place. For that matter, once we get past our personal wish lists, it may be the deeper reason some of us pray. Indeed,

⁴ Passion for God, a tape series by Tessa Bielecki

so important, so central, so urgent is *some* sense of a loving experiential awareness of God that in its absence, many fall away from traditional worship, or even from faith altogether.

So essential to Teresa became her own “loving experiential awareness of God” that she came to feel that her very heart had been irrevocably pierced by God’s love. In her autobiography and volumes on prayer and mystical spirituality she describes frequent ecstasies and other transporting experiences that came to be known, and experienced, by others, male and female alike, as “bridal prayer.” And despite being graced with an extraordinary richness of communion with God, Teresa remained fully able to speak in common terms:

“Prayer,” she says, “is nothing but friendly discourse, and frequent solitary converse, with the One Whom we know loves us.”⁵ But for that friendship, we must beg God, which requires, in Teresa’s words, a “holy daring.” For to Teresa, God is not remotely “nice” or “pleasant” or cooperative; not a buddy or an uncle or a mascot. To Teresa, God is an *earthquake!*⁶

But how do you make friends with an earthquake?

To Teresa the key is openness. Openness to an earthquake? Yes. As far as Teresa is concerned, you pray to God, you take your chances. You might not get what you want. Or worse, you might. In either case, you mess with an earthquake and the earthquake wins. When seekers pray to God, besides gathering courage, Teresa advises us to let go of expectations and cultivate a spirit of expectancy, of vulnerability, of open-endedness. And then, (for this I think she had us Presbyterians in mind), then,

⁵ Ellsberg. pp 448-450 for much of above.

⁶ Holy Daring, p. 59

Teresa says, the mind must sink into the heart, and the heart must catch on fire. And so should the belly!⁷

Are you or I ready for that? You know what? I think we're more than ready for it. I think we're desperate for that kind of passionate relationship with God. I know I am.

Now just in case you're thinking Teresa were some kind of mystical numbnut who never paid her water bills, I just want to highlight the fact that due to her practical nature and sound business practices, she was often called The Saint of Common Sense. At the same time, though, Teresa staunchly criticized what she called excessive rationality, arguing that "Our lives must indeed be ordered and deliberate, but if we make an ordered life the final step and regard it as an end in itself, well, then, I grieve for you," she says. Because in Teresa's ideal, in the end, or "at the end of the day" as so many people are fond of saying these days (and someone must tell me why) love has more power than reason. Infinitely more. Teresa says, "I would like for us to use reason to make us dissatisfied with being so reasonable!" Why? Because the important thing is not to think much, but to love much!

As far as Teresa is concerned, the real goal of all human striving is this love affair with God. And the key to a lively, juicy, life-giving love affair with God is intimate prayer – open, authentic, experiential, awareness of God.

'Course it doesn't end there, not for this productive, peppery saint. "Prayer is not just spending time with the Lord," Teresa asserts. It is partly that – but if it ends there, it is fruitless. No, prayer is dynamic! Authentic prayer changes us – unmask us – strips us – needles us – indicating where growth is needed. Authentic prayer often makes us

⁷ Ibid. p.75

uneasy because it leads us to self-knowledge, which in turn can only lead first to humility, and then to action.

Teresa of Avila died in 1582. Forty years later she was canonized by the Catholic church. In 1970 she was the first woman to be named by the pope a Doctor of the Church, which, among the Catholics, is a really big deal. Teresa also stands out as the only woman in the history of the Church ever to reform a religious order of men. Finally, she is my favorite female saint. For a glimpse of why besides what I've already told you, let me close with what one author calls a Teresian Prayer for Contemporary Lives⁸ :

⁸ Embracing God, Praying with Teresa of Avila, Judy, Dwight, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996. p. 136.

Give me wealth or want,
delight or distress,
happiness or gloominess,
heaven or hell,
sweet life, sun unveiled,
to You I give all.
What do you want of me?

Give me, if You will, prayer;
or let me know dryness,
an abundance of devotion,
or if not, then barrenness.
In you alone, Sovereign Majesty,
I find my peace.
What do you want of me?

Give me then wisdom.
or for love, ignorance.
Years of abundance,
or hunger and famine.
Darkness or sunlight,
move me here or there.
What do you want of me?

If you want me to rest,
I desire it for love.
If to labor,
I will die working.
Sweet Love say
where, how and when.
What do you want of me?

Calvary or Tabor give me,
desert or fruitful land.
As Job in suffering
or John at Your breasts;
barren or fruited vine,
whatever be Your will:
What do you want of me?

*Yours I am, Teresa writes to God. For You I was born:
What do you want of me?*

from "In the Hands of God" (Vol. 3, 378-79)
The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila

To the glory of God. Amen.