

SLD07.02.06 13th Ordinary
EPC
Ephesians 1:3-14
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“St. John of the Cross – The Dark Night of the Soul”

Our focus during worship this summer here at Emory Church is the Christian life: how to live it, how to enjoy it, how to endure it. To that end we’re looking together at the lives of some of the spiritual greats of Christian history to see what they have to teach us. Last week we were introduced to St. Teresa, the 16th century, Spanish, “Grand Wild Woman of Avila,” whose lively passion for God combined with a talent for practical administration led her to reform the increasingly lax Carmelite order, found seventeen convents, author four books, and become one of the outstanding masters of Christian prayer.

But Teresa did not accomplish all these things by herself. Early on in her own campaign for reform of her lax Carmelite order, Teresa had been on the lookout for a man to initiate her reform on the guys’ side of the order. When, at the age of 52, Teresa met John, aged 25, newly ordained, and seeking a simpler, more disciplined spiritual life, he seemed the perfect candidate. And so he was. Their gifts complementing one another, Teresa and John became lifelong spiritual partners. Teresa led John politically in the reformation of their order, and John became Teresa’s confessor and the spiritual director of her first convent.¹

Now, you may recall from last week that, as a reformer, Teresa was under considerable attack by both the Spanish Inquisition and her own resistant Carmelite order. Well, the same went for John, only he didn’t get off with mere court cases and excommunications. In 1577 John was kidnapped by members of his own order and

¹ All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, The Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, 1999, p.544-546.

imprisoned for nine months in an unreformed Carmelite monastery in Toledo, Spain. There he was sustained only on bread and water and taken out regularly to be beaten and abused. Those Carmelites **seriously** didn't want to change. At a point when John was close to death, he managed somehow to escape his tormenters by the dark of night. Unfortunately, however, even after his escape John's life did not substantially improve. Apparently John managed to annoy people wherever he went. Back in his own Discalced (shoeless) Carmelite community, he found himself in the midst of petty divisions and eventually stripped of any official leadership whatsoever in the order. After a long illness, John died, alone and virtually ignored in the congregation he had helped to found.

If, during his lifetime, John's gifts were never recognized or valued, yet throughout his harsh ordeals and sufferings, John produced an extraordinary legacy of spiritual works of enduring insight and wisdom on the nature of a Christian disciple's experience of both the presence and the absence of God. Indeed, his writings on both the loving, experiential awareness of God (remember our definition of mysticism – “the loving experiential awareness of God”) *and* the universal human experience of despair, have, like Teresa's, been continually in print for almost 500 years.

Mystical poetry is John's *métier*, and its focus, invariably, is the path by which the soul is united in love with God. Well, for John, as in any great love affair, it is natural that one's relationship with the Beloved is marked by periods both of joy as well as of desolation. Those periods when God appears hidden and the soul endures the seemingly interminable suffering of dryness and abandonment, John describes variously as “the night of sense,” “the night of spirit,” or “the dark night of the soul.”

Often times these periods are painful, occasionally even devastating. But this is not why the night is called “dark.” The darkness of the spiritual night implies nothing

sinister, only that God's liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding,...mysteriously...in secret, deep in our souls, "and beyond our conscious control."²

Still, if Teresa exemplifies the ecstatic "felt" presence of God in the journey of faith, John reveals the role of God's "absence." If through Teresa we observe a lyrical delight in the embrace of God as our Beloved One, through John is revealed the desert path of the spiritual journey, the wilderness route, the dry meanderings through debilitating doubt and apparent divine disinterest in the sufferings of our lives.

I wonder if John's teachings don't actually ring more familiar to many of us. For all the magnetism of Teresa's path of ecstatic union with God, who of us has enjoyed such uncommon delights? On the other hand, who of us has **not** felt the absence of God and spend days, weeks, months, even years hiking the dry spiritual landscape of which John speaks?³

This may not actually be the best message for new believers, for those of us caught up in the initial romance of faith, happy with God, in love with Jesus and high on the Holy Spirit. A great phase, mind you; one definitely to enjoy while it lasts, and when it comes again. But the insight of John of the Cross is aimed more at those of us who been on a faith journey for awhile, who have both loved, and lost, God, and whose faith, at one time or another, has fled. John's wisdom speaks to those of us who have traveled, stumbled, and perhaps fallen along the Christian path, and maybe even stayed down for a time. Maybe you're still down. If so, you may recognize the truth and

² Ibid, pp. 3-4.

³ In truth, both saints share vast revelations on the entire spectrum of spiritual experience, arriving at many of their insights in the company of one another. But as you and I are casting but Sunday morning glances in their directions, I am structuring their teachings in somewhat artificial opposition.

meaning in what can be described as “God’s work on the soul – not through joy and light, but through sorrow and darkness.”⁴

Or, if you’re on the other side of such a wilderness experience, maybe you can appreciate John’s argument for its relevance to the maturation and transformation of Christian discipleship. Because from John’s perspective, as an “ongoing spiritual process in which we are liberated from attachments and compulsion and empowered to love God and one another more freely,” the “dark night of the soul” is an integral part of any journey of faith.

Now some of you may not agree with that. Perhaps you prefer to stay on the sunny side of the Christian street. Perhaps for you Christianity is about being good and nice and respectable, responsible, prosperous, and upbeat. But John didn’t see it that way. Feeling a deep connection between darkness and spiritual growth, John believed that “a pervasive sense of God’s absence is actually the beginning of a deeper union with Christ.

“Many of us, however, do not experience a felt sense of God’s absence that way. When the biblical desert opens up within us, we worry that something is going wrong in our relationship with God.”⁵ But John felt that the spiritual life has nothing to do with getting closer to God...for the simple reason that *our union with God already exists*. John believed that everyone always has been and always will be in union with God. The problem for most of us is that we don’t *realize* how united we are with God. So the spiritual life really (becomes) a journey of *consciousness*, a deepening of our *realization* of the intimacy and union with God that already exists in each one of us.⁶

⁴ Devotional Classics, Ed. by Richard Foster and Jame B. Smith., HarperSanFrancisco, 1989, p.33.

⁵ Thomas Keating, Invitation to Love, The Continuum Publishing Company, NY, NY, 1999, p. 84.

⁶ Gerald G. May, M.D. The Dark Night of the Soul, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., NY, NY, 2005. pp.42, 44, 46.

Also helpful to understanding John's perspective is to know that he did not believe that an experience of the spiritual desert, or of suffering of any kind, is the result of some divine scheme to build our character or deepen our spiritual insight. "Suffering arises from the simple circumstances of life itself. Sometimes human suffering is dramatic and horrifying. More often it is ordinary, humble and quiet. But neither way is it 'God's will.' The divine presence does not intend us to suffer, but is instead *with us* (ever united with us) in all experiences of life, in both suffering and joy. And that presence is always inviting us toward greater freedom and love."⁷ It is toward that greater freedom and love, John of the Cross would argue, that seekers are invited to journey through their spiritual desert.

At the same time, a dark night of the soul can shake "the ground on which one feels secure and open one to new ways of seeing reality,"⁸ which can be both humbling and disorienting. After enduring some of his own seasons of "dark nights," physician and theologian Gerald May remarks, "At the outset I must confess that I am no longer very good at telling the difference between good things and bad things. Of course there are many events in human history that can only be labeled as evil, but from the standpoint of inner individual experience, the distinction has become blurred for me. Some things start out looking great but wind up terribly, while other things seem bad in the beginning but turn out to be blessings in disguise.

"I was diagnosed with cancer in 1995," says Mays, "which I thought was a bad thing. But the experience brought me closer to God and to my loved ones than I'd ever been, and that was wonderfully good. The chemotherapy felt awful, but it resulted in a complete cure, which I decided was good. I later found out it may also have caused the

⁷ Ibid., p.9.

⁸ Keating, p. 86.

heart disease that now has me waiting for a heart transplant. At some point I gave up trying to decide what's ultimately good or bad. I truly do not know.

“Although not knowing may itself seem like a bad thing,” he says, “I am convinced it is one of the great gifts of the dark night of the soul. To be immersed in mystery can be very distressing at first, but over time I have found immense relief in it. I no longer have to worry myself to death about what I did right or wrong to cause a good or a bad experience – because there really is no way of knowing. I don't have to look for spiritual lessons in every trouble that comes along. There have been many spiritual lessons to be sure, but they've been *given* to me in the course of life; I haven't had to figure out a single one.

“Another gift of the dark night,” says Mays, “is the realization that I'm not as much in control of life as I'd like to be. This is not an easy learning, especially for take-charge people like me, people who think they can, and more importantly, should, be in control of things. ...But each experience of the dark night gives its gifts, leaving us freer than we were before, more available, more responsive, and more grateful. (Just as) not knowing and lack of control are abiding characteristics of the dark night, so are freedom and gratitude. But they don't arrive until the darkness passes. (Freedom and gratitude) come,” says May, only “with the dawn.”⁹

Writes John of the Cross in one of his famous poems:

O dark of night, my guide!
night dearer than anything all your dawns discover!
O night drawing side to side
the beloved and the lover –
the one that the lover loves, lost in the lover!¹⁰
This is the mystery.¹¹

⁹ May, pp. 1-3.

¹⁰ Classic Catholic Poetry, compiled and edited by Thomas P. McDonnell, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Div., Huntington, Indiana, 1988. “The Dark Night,” p. 22.

In the end, “for Teresa and John both, the dark night of the soul – indeed all of life – is nothing but the story of a love affair: a romance between God and the human soul that liberates us to love one another.” Says May, if you are firmly convinced there is no God, (Teresa and John’s) story will be a romantic fantasy, one that has generated some exquisite poetry. At the other extreme, if you are firmly convinced about who or what God is, you may have trouble with both their story and their poetry. For Teresa and John, the Beloved is endless Mystery, always beyond our capacity to comprehend. Therefore, if we have a choice, says May, it is best for all of us to hold both our beliefs and disbeliefs lightly. Listen to the truth of your own life experience in the light of Teresa and John’s (wisdom);” that is where to begin.¹²

For as Paul asserts in his letter to the Ephesian church, through “all the wisdom and insight God has made known to us” through Jesus, through John, through the saints, through one another, and our own life experience, God reveals the mystery of God’s loving will which is, in the fullness of time, to gather up all things in heaven and on earth - all our joy and trust and faith, to be sure, but all our suffering, doubts and dark nights as well - to redeem them, and make them whole through Christ Jesus. (Eph. 1: 8b-14) This is God’s promise to all marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, and God’s pledge for the redemption of all God’s creation.

To the glory of God. Amen.

¹¹ Ibid, quote from Pope John Paul, p. 117.

¹² Ibid., pp. 12-13.