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Emory Presbyterian Church
Galatians 2:20
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“Mother Teresa – Lover of Jesus, Lover of Humanity”

We Presbyterians don't believe that one person is holier than another, no matter who they are. Before God all are sinners – this is an essential tenet of our Reformed Tradition. But if there were ever one somebody who cracks the unshakeable shield of that tenet for me, it would be Mother Teresa. I even look at a *picture* of that woman and my heart melts. Maybe that's how contemporaries of all the saints felt about them – Mother Teresa just happens to be the saint for our time.

Here at Emory Church we're coming toward the end of our annual sermon series on saints – next week I'll be summarizing this year's tribe – and as always, I feel a need to emphasize the Protestant relationship with these Great Ones of the Christian tradition. We do not worship them, we do not light candles to them, or pray for their intercession, or imagine a special place for them in the hierarchy of heaven – for the simple reason that we do not believe in a hierarchy of heaven. What we believe is that before God, all people are equally sinful, and through Jesus Christ, all people equally redeemed and reconciled to God.

But Mother Teresa? I don't know – maybe she's a special case. In the presence of her petite, wrinkled and radiant figure, maybe even our ole' Calvin himself might crack a grin and make an exception.

In any case, today you and I will learn something about Mother Teresa and the testimony of her life and works; and maybe even something of what she has to say for

our own spiritual growth and journey. Because, always more interested in the individual than the crowd, the embodied truth over the abstract concept, the personal act over the systemic response, Mother Teresa remained to the end less enthusiastic about people following her particular path than about them following their own. What Mother Teresa wanted most was not to convince people to come to Calcutta to minister to the poor, but to witness to the powerful and particular and compelling call of Christ within each one of us. For what Mother Teresa firmly believed was that “when the heart is changed, alterations to systems and political situations will emerge naturally.”¹

Therefore, after a brief overview of Mother Teresa’s life, we’ll move in this sermon to hearing and praying over some of her personal words of insight and counsel, linked to some of the scripture she held dearest, so that you and I might listen and take heed of the responses of our own hearts to the testimony and example of this remarkable woman. (for this overview of Mother Teresa’s life, [Experiencing Jesus With Mother Teresa](#), by Jean Maalouf, pp. 6-20)

“The story of Mother Teresa – who has been called the most powerful woman in the world” – begins with her birth on August 27, 1910 as Agnes of a last name I have no idea how to pronounce, an ethnic Albanian in what is now Skopje, Macedonia. Her parents were devout Catholics, and the whole family, which included two siblings, was very close, especially after Agnes’ father died when she was nine.

At the age of twelve, Agnes began to feel a call to a religious and missionary life, and at eighteen, she joined the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto (commonly called the Irish Ladies), a group of nuns who worked in India. First Agnes went to Ireland to learn

¹ Jean Maalouf, [Experiencing Jesus with Mother Teresa](#), The Word Among Us Press, Ijamsville, Maryland, 2006, p. 81.

English, and then was shipped off to Darjeeling where, in 1929, she began her novitiate. After two more years of studying scriptures, the rules of the Loreto order, more English, and the Indian languages of Hindi and Bengali, Agnes was ready to take her vows. At that time she choose the name “Sister Teresa” after Saint Therese of Lisieux (remember? We met Therese of Lisieux last year. The Saint of the “Little Way?”) because she wanted to live like St. Therese did - a life of goodness, simplicity, and surrender to God’s will.

Sister Teresa’s first assignment was to teach geography and history in a convent school in Calcutta, in which work she totally delighted for twenty years, eventually becoming principal of the school.

But in 1946, Teresa experienced a “day of inspiration” during which she felt a convicting call to consecrate her life to the poorest of the poor. Once she obtained permission from Rome to pursue her new calling (which took about two years), she replace her religious habit with a white sari and left the convent to fulfill her new mission.

Unclear exactly what God wanted her to do, Sister Teresa decided first to spend a few months getting basic training in medical first aid and nursing care from the Medical Missionary Sisters. Then she just started wandering around by herself through some nearby slums, looking for little ways to help, with no specific plan about what to do.

Starting with what was familiar to her, she asked a few families if she could teach their children, which she did, under a tree. Then she started visiting her students’

families and helping them clean their homes and their clothes. Basically Teresa gave them what she had - her time, her energy, and most importantly, her great love.

It wasn't easy at first. Although many residents of the slum appreciated and supported her efforts, many others, felt suspicious of her motives, some even asking her to leave. Teresa persevered, however, and the number of her students began to increase. Volunteer teachers began to appear, as did donations allowing her to rent the two rooms that became her schoolrooms and medical clinic.

One by one, young girls joined her in her work. In 1950, Sister Teresa founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity and became its mother superior, thus arriving at the name by which we know her today, Mother Teresa. The new order expanded daily, despite, or perhaps because, of the fact that its nuns lived just as the poor they served, with no air conditioners, electric fans, washing machines, or other modern comforts. The word of the order also expanded to include homes for abandoned children, addicts, the mentally ill, the destitute and dying, as well as large networks of schools and dispensaries operating in over one hundred countries.

Deeply rooted in an intimate relationship with the incarnate Jesus, Mother Teresa's philosophy of life was based on the heart of God becoming "a heart of flesh" in Jesus, who was her source of inspiration and guidance. "Truly I tell you," said Jesus, "just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." And Mother Teresa took him at his word. In love with Jesus, her Lord, she saw him and adored him in every woman and man she met and served.

On September 5, 1997, Mother Teresa died at the age of eighty-seven. As she was so renowned, few of us are unaware of the avalanche of awards she received

during her lifetime. Who would have thought that a genuine and humble nun would be showered with such honors and recognition? Yet, from the Order of the Lotus from India, to an honorary doctorate from Cambridge; from the Soviet Peace Committee Gold Medal to The United States Congressional Gold Medal, and of course, the Nobel Peace prize, the world sought to honor the example of living peace that Mother Teresa embodied.

But for all her accomplishment and attention, Mother Teresa remained simply and consistently...who she was. "By blood and origin, I am Albanian," she told a journalist upon winning the Nobel Prize in Oslo in 1979. "My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus."

Simple, direct, and clear in her calling, Mother Teresa was not a big fan of preaching. Her life and actions were her best speech, forever reminding others, as they did, of the enfleshed presence of Christ. And since she expected no less of you and me, let me now stop talking *about* Mother Teresa, and let us hear directly *from* her, that we might listen with the ears of our hearts for Christ's life and call within each one of *us*.

Jesus said, "I came to the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:37)

Mother Teresa said, "we do not try to impose our faith on others. We try to act in such a way that Christ will make his light and his life shine forth in us, and through us, in the world. A man, a follower of the Hindu religion, came to our Home for the Dying in Kalighar at a time when I was busy curing the wounds of a sick person. He watched me

for a while in silence. Then he said, ‘since it gives you the strength to do what you do, I have no doubt that your religion has to be true.’” (p.40)

Let us pray: *Pause* Dear God, help me to be a genuine truth seeker and an ardent discerner of truth from untruth, right from wrong, and reality from illusion. Not only do I want to find the truth, but with your grace, I also want to live it. Amen.
Pause

“I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

Mother Teresa said, “God loves me. I’m not here just to fill a place, just to be a number. God has chosen me for a purpose. I know it. God will fulfill it, too, if I don’t put an obstacle in God’s way.” (p.46)

***Pause* Dear God, I know you have a special and particular plan for me. Open my mind and heart to listen to your voice, to discern your plan for my life, and to follow your call wherever it might lead. Amen.**
Pause

Jesus said, “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive (Mt. 21:22) and, “God knows what you need before you ask.” (Mt. 6:7-8)

Mother Teresa said, “One thing Jesus asks of me: that I lean on him; that in him and only in him I put complete trust; that I surrender to him unreservedly.” (p. 105) “For this, prayer is as necessary as the air, as the blood in our body, as anything to keep us alive – alive to the grace of God.” (p. 51) “Trust in the good God who loves you,” she said, the One who cares for you, who sees all, knows all, and can do all things for your good and the good of souls.” (p. 103)

***Pause:* Lord, teach me to pray so that I may grow closer to you and my life will be transformed in you. You are my surest guide on this path of life. Teach me, and help me, to pray. Amen.**
Pause

Be still and know that I am God! (Psalm 46)

Mother Teresa said, “There is no life of prayer without silence.” We need silence in order to let God be God in us, and through us to others. For the important thing is not what we say to God, but what God says to us, and we must be silent to hear. She told this little story:

“There is a very important theologian, a very holy priest,... whom I know very well. One day I said to him, ‘Father, you talk all day about God. How close you must be to God!’ He said, ‘Well, I may be talking much **about** God, but I may be talking very little **to** God. I rattle off so many words and say many good things, but deep down I have not got the time to listen.’” (p. 58)

Pause **Holy One, in the midst of all the noise, traffic, voices advocating different values and policies, and bombardment of high-tech information, help me discern and recognize *your* voice. Teach me to still all that is not coming from you, so I might hear your word in the silence of my heart. Amen.**

Pause

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (I John 4:16)

Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

“You know,” said Mother Teresa, “You may be exhausted with work, even kill yourself, but unless your work is interwoven with love, it is useless. ...Don’t bother pursuing spectacular deeds. What matters is the gift of your self, the degree of love you put into each one of your actions. We have been created to love and be loved. ...For we can do no great things – only small things with great love.” (p.67)

Pause **Loving God, help me to live fully in your love, to open my own heart to receive your love, and to keep it open so I can share it with others. Amen.**

Pause

You show me the path of life.

**In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:11**

The secret of real joy is rooted in the belief that our own existence is part of a larger existence, and that a certain spiritual path and philosophy of life are necessary to give our life a purpose. It is in the pursuit of that purpose that our life becomes joyful.

Mother Teresa said, "Joy is prayer; joy is strength; joy is love. ...A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love. ...Joy must be one of the pivots of our life!"

(p. 97)

***Pause* Holy God, come and make your dwelling in me so that I can be fully alive and live life to the fullest, with the greatest joy. Let my joy be my prayer of gratitude to you. Amen.**

Pause

It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Gal. 2:20)

Mother Teresa said, "Keep the light of Christ always burning in your heart – for Christ alone is the Way to walk. Christ is the Life to live. Christ is the Love to love."

***Pause* Dear Lord, grant me the grace, day by day, to be free from whatever prevents me from seeing you in my life. Help me to live out your truth and your way and your life, that I might find my true identity, and reach out to others in your name. Amen.**

Pause

Mother Teresa lived in God's presence as much as a human being can, showing by her words, and especially by her example, that holiness is available to, possible for, and even imperative to everyone. If saints are proof that the gospel can be lived, Mother Teresa is, indeed, a saint. But in *her* eyes, so are you and I.

To the glory of God. Amen.