

SLD08.08.10 19th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Ephesians 5: 8-14
John 12:35-40, 44-46
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Hildegard of Bingen – O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

“If you know God, you know Hildegard.” That’s what one theologian and scholar by the name of Victoria Sirota says about 12th century German abbess and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, today’s “saint of the week.”¹ It wasn’t just that Hildegard was godly, or a spiritual seeker, or a sublime teacher, though she was all of those things; it was more that *she radiated a sort of universal quality of God’s truth and love, a quality often easily recognized by other seekers.* So much so that, Sirota suggests, if you’ve ever yourself encountered God, if you’ve ever enjoyed an intimate moment of divine communion yourself, you would recognize in Hildegard a spiritual friend, a fellow disciple, a steadfast companion on the journey toward the heart of God.

If you know God, says Sirota, you know Hildegard.

Abbess and founder of a Benedictine religious community; author, theologian; prophet, preacher; musician, composer; poet, artist, pharmacist, healer...by any standard, Hildegard of Bingen is one of the remarkable figures of her age. though for eight hundred years she remained in relative obscurity, in recent decades Hildegard has emerged not only as an outstanding woman in history, but as a visionary whose ecological and holistic spirituality speaks prophetically to our time.²

Born in the year 1098 in the German province of Rheinhessen, Hildegard was the tenth child of noble parents. As such she would become a “human tithe,” following

¹ Victoria Sirota, in *Pioneers of the Spirit*, a video by Vision Video, Worcester, Pa. 1998.

² Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints, Daily Reflections On Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999, p. 405.

the custom in 12th century Europe that the tenth child be tithed to the church. At eight years of age, Hildegard was given into the care of a holy anchoress whose name was Jutta, a woman who lived a life of prayer and service in a cottage attached to a nearby Benedictine abbey.

Jutta raised the child and educated her until the age of eighteen, when Hildegard put on the habit of a Benedictine nun. By this time a monastic community had gathered around Jutta, and when the old woman died in 1136, Hildegard became the prioress, or the spiritual and administrative head, of the convent.³

So far this is all pretty much business as usual in the 12th century monastic world. What set Hildegard apart, though, were the extraordinary visions she began having as a child. Because these “visitations,” as Hildegard called them, tended both to confuse and embarrass her, nobody but Jutta knew about them. But upon Hildegard’s “installation” as prioress, her visions began to press upon her with even greater urgency to the point that she actually became ill with the secret of them. Finally, at the age of 43, Hildegard described her visions to her confessor, who in turn checked them out with church authorities, who confirmed their orthodoxy.

Looks like private visions and senses of call have always required confirmation by a larger body of the church. But in Hildegard’s case, so convinced were the church authorities of the relevance, depth and usefulness of Hildegard’s visions that it provided a secretary to keep an ongoing record of her insights, along with a team of illustrators to illuminate, or illustrate, them.

The most well-known document produced by this collaborative manner is called *Scivias*, which means “Know Thy Ways.” A main thrust of *Scivias* is that before God, all

³ Ibid, p. 405.

are is equally valuable, equally known, equally loved; every man, woman and child equally treasured. This is an insight we recognize from 14th century Julian of Norwich's hazelnut revelation two centuries later – the exquisite, all encompassing and dependable love of God for every person, every created thing. To appreciate how radical a notion this is, think of England's class system, think of our racism, even today. And then put yourself back into a medieval cosmology that ranks all beings, all created order from the rudest plant to the highest angel, in a rigid hierarchy of power, goodness and importance.

In direct contrast to such careful parsing of worth, the illustrations accompanying Hildegard's *Scivias* present the image of human beings and the cosmos as spontaneous emanations of God's love, "living sparks," unique, precious and dynamic expressions of God's magnanimous delight, "rays of (God's) splendor, just as the rays of the sun proceed from the sun itself."

This is how Hildegard, how Julian, how 20th century monk Thomas Merton, saw humanity at its essence. In his "Walnut St. Epiphany" quoted in this morning's Words of Preparation, Merton writes: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."⁴

There's no way of telling you that you're all walking around shining like the sun.

Not everybody has eyes to see this. Do you? Ever caught a glimpse of humanity's radiance? Ever regarded human beings as emanations of God's love? Ever glimpsed the light of Christ in another's face? Try it sometime; it can take your breath away.

⁴ Michael Spencer, <http://www.internetmonk.com/archives/2004/08/000091.html>

Of course, like Julian, like Merton, like all friends of God with the eyes to see, Hildegard also saw those human sparks going out, dimming their light, losing their heat, their beauty, their fire, until they were extinguished altogether. This she described as the effect of sin on creation. But her vision didn't stop there – for then she saw the mystery of grace, the drama of redemption, reigniting those failed embers, purifying them of their infirmities, restoring the world to its intended state, reconciling it to the divine energy of its origins.⁵

Nor did Hildegard regard humanity as passive objects of God, only to be acted upon. Rather she regarded each human being as a “co-creator” with God, each called in his or her unique way to fulfill God's intention for creation. She writes in *Scivias*, “God loves you exceedingly, for you are *God's* creatures, and God gives you the best of treasures, *a vivid intelligence*, and hence you must think every hour how to make so great a gift as useful to others as to yourself, so that it will reflect the splendor of sanctity from you, and people will be inspired by your good example to praise and honor God.”⁶

Sounds like a pretty good mission statement doesn't it? “Think always of how to make so great a gift as your self useful to others so that you will reflect God's splendor and people will be moved by you to praise and honor God.”

As to just how we believers ought to go about being co-creators of God, Hildegard advises that we each listen to our inner voice. Grand advise, I suppose, if you're able to find time to quiet yourself enough to listen to your inner voice. Or if you happen to enjoy one clear inner voice instead of the choir of strident, competing voices most of us are put up with.

⁵ Sirota, p. 504.

⁶ video, [Pioneers of the Spirit](#).

Still, Hildegard teaches that it is a disciple's job to make the time to get quiet and listen, to sort through the inner cacophony and discern God's voice, and to strive to be open and attentive to it. For out of attentive listening, she argued, would spring trust; and out of trust would spring what Hildegard called "the creativity that only God can dream for us."⁷ Out of attentive faithful listening springs trust; and out of trust, springs "the creativity that only God can dream for us."

The problem with the "listen, trust, create" paradigm, though, is that it can flat get a body in trouble. At least, it did Hildegard.

For example, one day Hildegard listened and trusted an inner directive to make a creative move, to relocate her convent to a nearby mountaintop nearby and build her own abbey. Now, this is 12th century Germany, okay? And women in general, never mind *cloistered* women, aren't supposed to make such independent decisions, God-driven or otherwise. There was a reason all religious women were perpetually under the "protection" of a group of male Monks-In-Charge. We'll call 'em "MICs" for short.

Well, the MICs "protecting" Hildegard and company are not keen at all on her new divine directive. For one thing, by now she's become something of a regional celebrity, her abbey morphing into a "destination place" of pilgrimage, translating directly into considerable prestige and revenue for the umbrella MIC.com. Plus, the MICs are loathe to give up the dowries of all those noblewomen turned "bride of Christ" who keep joining Hildegard's convent. And imagine the impact on the local economy?! Not only the MICs but the townspeople themselves adamantly opposed Hildegard's relocation plan.

⁷ Ibid.

But, you know how God is. Never mind a headstrong woman. Once she sees the tide turning against her, Hildegard does what apparently has worked on a number of occasions when her (or God's) will was crossed: she gets deathly ill. And, you know how it goes – folks started fretting and sending cards and soups and honey baked hams, and ole' Hildegard milks it for all it's worth. Funny, though, how her mortal "indisposal" doesn't slow her down from roping in the nobles, raising funds, purchasing the land (also scandalous as women were not allowed to own property), and ultimately moving her whole operation, lock, stock and barrel, to the mountaintop.

Needless to say, the MICs are miffed, but you know how it goes: if God is for you.... Anyhow, the score of that skirmish ended up Hildegard 1, MICs zip.

Now, right about the time Hildegard transports her abbey, she gets word that some weedy heretics are springing up around the 'hood, scaring people with God's wrath and vengeance. Alarmed by the wrong thinking being promulgated, she determines to take to the road and straighten people out. Never mind that women of Hildegard's era aren't supposed to travel, in part because of the ubiquitous dangers of the road. And also, cloistered women, well, they're just flat supposed to stay cloistered.

Doesn't slow ole' Hildegard down – and I'm talking she was 70 years old by the time she starts her circuit-riding (which, in a day when people rarely lived past forty, was really ancient.) Nevertheless, she takes to the road to preach, and not just in abbeys and monasteries but, scandalously, in public squares and meeting places, determined to correct people's understanding of her loving, forgiving and insistently re-creating God.

Hildegard was also renown for her healing powers. It was even rumored that she could see into the human body, though her greater passion was the healing of heart and

soul. Having written a trilogy about self-healing as well as a book about healing herbs, people began to come to Hildegard for healing.

One day this particularly notorious nobleman comes to her for help and during the course of caring for him, Hildegard becomes convinced of his genuine repentance and reconciliation with the church. So when he dies, she gives permission for him to be buried on the grounds of her abbey.

Once again, this doesn't suit the chief MIC overseeing the convent because he's recently excommunicated the fellow. So he orders the man's body disinterred and moved someplace else, command with which Hildegard flatly refuses to comply. As punishment, the bishop places the convent under an interdict, a kind of sanction, which in this case meant the nuns are forbidden either to sing or to participate in communion.

Now, this was mean. Not only is the practice of communion the very life blood of any holy order, but I've gotten awfully far into this sermon without mentioning one of the most important spiritual practices to Hildegard and her community, which is music. To Hildegard and her nuns, music is a "primal and redemptive gift of God, ...an expression of heavenly joy...an incarnation of the Holy Spirit,"⁸ the most intimate access to the heart of God. Having personally written all the music for her order's daily prayers, Hildegard found genuine mystical communion in the beauty of the sung word; how her community grieved the ban of song and melody in worship. Eventually the interdict was lifted, but Hildegard died only a few months later at the age of 81.

Surely you can surely how much I admire Hildegard – her passion, her intellect, her activism, her deep love for humanity, her feisty independence from all authority

⁸ Lecture by William Flynn of Leeds, "Singing with the Angels: Hildegard von Bingen's Practical Theology of Music." Date? Emory University.

except God's. There is far more to know about her than I could learn in preparation for this sermon – but then again, as Sirota said, if we know God, we know Hildegard.

Yet for all her extraordinary accomplishments, what more is Hildegard, really, than a disciple who sought communion with God, and then attempted to live out of that communion. Perhaps this is the aspect of Hildegard to which I am most drawn.

Throughout the disappointments and complexities of her life: her removal from her family, her assaulting visions, her frequent sicknesses, her studies, her teachings, her spirited service, her alternating support and rejection from the church, she manages to maintain an active, vital relationship with God. And her relationship with God enables her to imagine a different path for herself,

As a co-creator with God, Hildegard followed her own advice to listen intently to her inner voice, the voice that said, "God loves you exceedingly, for you are God's creature, and God gives you the best of treasures, *a vivid intelligence*. So think every hour how to make so great a gift as your self useful to others, and reflective of the splendor of sanctity of God."

And out of that listening, sprang her deep and abiding trust in God. And out of that abiding trust, sprang "a creativity that only God could have dreamed for Hildegard."

To what inner voice is God calling you to listen? How best might we living sparks of God's splendor witness to the light of which we are comprised? What creativity do you suppose God is dreaming for us. Or, another way of asking ourselves the same question: when people get to know us, do they get to know God?

To the glory of God. Amen.