

Thomas Merton- A Modern Day Mystic

I'm here today as the guest preacher. Following our pastor Jill is no easy task. I enjoy her sermons just as much as the rest of you do. But preaching when the regular pastor is out of town is something most people in my position have to do occasionally. Many of my fellow seminary students are also guest preachers, either filling in at their regular church like I am or being sent by the school to fill a pulpit in need of a preacher. Most of them like me are sometimes a little intimidated by the process, so we ask our professors for advice. We have three professors at McAfee who teach preaching, plus professors in other disciplines who guest preach or pastor churches. We are even lucky enough to count John Claypool, who has been called one of the twenty greatest preachers in the English-speaking world, as one of our professors. So the men and women I go to for advice have delivered literally thousands of sermons and combined have over a hundred years of preaching experience. So I, or one of my fellow students ask, "what's the key to being an effective guest preacher?" The first answer from every one of them is always, "wrap up your sermon about two to three minutes sooner than the regular pastor." So while I make no promises that I'm a preacher on the same level as Jill, I will keep in mind the advice my seminary professors have given me about what's most important in a sermon like this.

I'm here today to continue Emory Church's summer look at the lives of saints. Three weeks ago we talked about St. Augustine, the 4th Century Bad Boy turned pillar of the faith. Two weeks ago it was Therese of Lisieux and Brother Lawrence, two people who modeled for us the virtue of recognizing that all we do in this life whether great or small can be done for the glory of God. Today I'm going to introduce you to someone

whom the Catholic church will most likely never canonize, but just the same is a personal saint in my life and the lives of millions of others. You've probably never heard of Thomas Merton. I hadn't either until about seven years ago. He's not talked about in my church history classes as a great theologian like St. Augustine, and he's not talked about in discussions on spiritual disciplines like Therese or Brother Lawrence, so I'd like to take you on my journey that led to me discovering Merton.

Have you ever had a moment in your life where your world got bigger and more complex but your faith did not? For me that moment of time in my life was, as it is for a lot of people, college. You see, when I started college I felt like I finally had a really good handle on my life and just who God was in that life. I had spent the last few years of high school attending a church that taught me to talk about God and my relationship with God in terms of absolute certainty. I was absolutely certain that I was going to heaven, I was absolutely certain that at age 17 God had called me to a life of full time vocational ministry. Early in my senior year of high school I was absolutely certain that God wanted me to attend Baylor University. So when I set foot on the campus in the fall of my freshmen year I was absolutely certain I was right where I needed to be at the exact time that God intended for me to be there.

But college was a bigger world than I was prepared for. Even at this Christian college I was attending I was exposed to a wide variety of ideas and beliefs that were different from mine. That wasn't a huge problem though. I was absolutely certain that God had called me as a missionary to this place to show all these people with different ideas all the error of their ways. But despite my most diligent efforts, I wasn't winning many converts. In fact, something truly sinful was happening, their ideas and beliefs

were beginning to cause me to question my own beliefs. I was slowly but surely being infected by that most sinful disease known as doubt. If there was one thing my Christian role models up to that point in my life had taught me, it was that doubt was something a truly devout Christian should never have.

Let's take a moment and talk about the history of doubt and how it relates to the faith tradition I was coming from at this point in my life. Before the Reformation doubt really wasn't allowed. One was expected to completely toe the line with all doctrine and dogma as the greater Catholic church dictated it. Occasionally there were disagreements about doctrine but those were settled in debates and votes and the losers were declared heretics. Three weeks ago Jill articulated one such debate between Augustine and Pelagius. As we all know St. Gus won that one. But with the Reformation along came Martin Luther who despite threat of censure or excommunication from the church said he could not recant his belief that certain Catholic church doctrines were wrong. Doubt became the weapon of the Protestants and their revolution. A young Catholic priest named Rene Descartes decided that he would combat these doubting Protestants on their own level. He locked himself away in his study, declaring he would not come out until he had found something he could not doubt. He was able to doubt everything but that the doubting subject existed. From this came the famous phrase, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes had now found something that was absolutely impossible to doubt. He could now be absolutely certain of something. Ironically, in Descartes time this was heavily criticized by most systematic theologians. But fast forward a few hundred years and Descartes' method of using doubt to find absolute certainty has reappeared in the form of Foundationalism.

Foundationalism is the belief that there are certain timeless truths that cannot be doubted and one can then build faith from there. If one can build an incorruptible foundation, then one can put one brick of absolute certainty upon another until one has built a complete, timeless, universal, unassailable faith. An example of one such foundational truth that still carries influence over the church today is the inerrancy of the Bible.

But enough church history, let's get back to me and my big world and small faith. I found myself doubting the all the things that I had been taught in the church as I grew up. The specifics of what I was doubting are a lot less important than what this doubting was doing to my faith. I prayed and prayed, but still the doubts did not go away. My foundations were getting a good shake, and sure enough my faith of absolute certainty was crumbling all around me. I could no longer say with absolute certainty that I was going to heaven. I could no longer say with absolute certainty that me being at Baylor was God's exact will for my life. I could no longer say with absolute certainty that I was going into the ministry after I graduated. I was terrified to talk to anybody about this because I knew that my faith would be questioned. Thankfully, I had one mentor with whom I could be totally honest. I shared my problems and one person he recommended to me was Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton was a 20th century Trappist monk who up to this point I had never heard of before. He was born in Paris in 1915 and raised in England after his mother died while Merton was still a young boy. As a young man Merton was much like our 4th century bad boy Augustine because he went out and experienced all the pleasures that the world had to offer. He studied at Oxford and then came to America

to continue his post-graduate studies at Columbia University. Merton loved New York and here discovered a passion for social justice. This led him to work with Catholic parishes around his neighborhood in Manhattan. Merton's call to life as a monk was not dramatic but gradual. One day while sitting in the back of a church during Mass, Merton felt so drawn to God as expressed in the Catholic faith that he could no longer deny its pull than he could deny his own identity. He studied for commitment to the Catholic faith and was confirmed into it as a young man. His journey of faith would lead him to seek a life of solitude and contemplation that would ultimately draw him to the monastic order. The Trappist order of monks was well known for their devotion to solitude and contemplation, so at the age of 35 Merton entered Our Lady of Gethsemane outside of Louisville, Kentucky. He was accepted into the Trappist order and took the name Father Louis.

Merton found his early years in the monastery to be harsh. A new monk promises a vow of complete obedience, which Merton often found tough to do. However, Merton did enjoy the solitude and contemplation. He would later write that in his silence and contemplation he found the love of God that would drive him back out into the world to interact with the rest of his fellow human beings. Finally, Merton's greatest release came when his superiors granted him permission to write.

In writing, Merton found his own passions meshed most perfectly with service to God. His autobiography, the *Seven Storey Mountain*, has sold millions of copies and been translated into countless languages. I think the reason people love Merton's writing so much is because compared to other theologians Merton is very accessible. For instance, we've talked about Augustine, who is well known for his autobiography,

Confessions. *Confessions* is lengthy to say the least. My Church History professor often jokes that for him *Confessions* is a great cure for insomnia and for his wife *Confessions* makes a great booster seat for their toddler. In the Reformed tradition there is of course the *Institutes*, Calvin's multivolume opus on all things theological. I'm the first to say that the *Institutes* are the work of a brilliant mind and that one cannot study theology without going through the *Institutes*, but it is still not something I can hope to read through and completely understand in my lifetime. But Merton is different. I was able to comprehend some of Merton's ideas after a quick first read, but I also find myself learning new things from him each time I return to a familiar passage. Merton is also a theologian who worked in the world after WWII and atrocities like the Holocaust. He understood what it was like to believe in God in a time when many people found God hard to believe in because of the immense evil in the world.

And what did Merton often write about? He wrote about doubt. As I just mentioned, Merton worked in a world still trying to make sense of unspeakable horror. You see, before World War II, many early twentieth century theologians believed that man was getting better and better and growing closer and closer to God. The goodness of man was something many were, dare I say, absolutely certain of. Many of these theologians were German. World War II had blown their ideas about the goodness of man right out of the water. It was a time in history when absolute certainty needed to be doubted. Merton would write to those who believed in the enlightened state of humankind, "We stumble and fall constantly even when we are the most enlightened." To those who sought a system of thinking that would eliminate all contradictions, Merton would say, "The very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to

me.” Merton understood that the foundations we build our lives upon were tenuous at best, but for him that was no reason not to have faith. For Merton this doubt was not cynical, but rather a freeing humility. We know Merton never doubted so much that he was no longer faithful. He was faithful to his monastic vows until his untimely death in an accident in 1968.

Merton’s world of faithful practice of beliefs in the midst of doubting his own certainty of beliefs was best expressed in a prayer he is widely known for. Merton wrote-

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

I hear the same humility in our Corinthians passage today. Paul, the first great theologian, placed this passage at the end of the famous love passage in chapter 13. Love, Paul was saying, was the greatest of all the spiritual gifts. Prophecy would come to an end, tongues would cease, and knowledge would end. What I hear Paul doing

here is offering a warning to all those absolutely certain of their gifts. Had Paul known Merton, he may have quoted him here. "The tighter you hold onto something, the less of it you are able to hold in your hand." Paul understood that this side of the equation, no matter how glorious, is only a foretaste of all that is to come. I hope we find ourselves freed by that idea. I hope we find humility in knowing that all we are doing now is dimly gazing into a mirror. We don't have to be absolutely certain of anything.

I hope that as we go from this place the humility in the doubting of Thomas Merton frees you from the myth of absolute certainty. Merton doubted, but was faithful to God in the best way he knew how. What Merton understood, what Paul understood, what we must understand, is that our hold on things is so tenuous. Who among us knows what life changing experience God may have around the corner for us tomorrow? Who knows what events the future holds that could total change our worldview. Who knows what new way God may be revealed to Emory Church. Who knows what radical way Emory Church may be asked to follow Christ? Let us hold on to our beliefs loosely, but practice our beliefs faithfully, always ready for the new thing God may have in store for us.

To the Glory of God. Amen.