

SLD07.03.05 14th Ordinary
EPC
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Therese of Lisieux – The Little Way”

Today marks the third sermon in this summer’s series on the lives of the saints of the Christian tradition, and what we can learn from them. We’ve talked so far about the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and what have become known as ‘Catholic’ saints, those canonized by the Roman church. We’ve noted that as Protestants of the Reformed tradition, we do not worship saints, ask for their intercessions or pray through them as intermediaries. Nor, considering our doctrine of the total depravity of humanity, do we regard the saints of the Christian tradition as perfect people, fully sanctified in the eyes of God. The ‘holiness’ of saints is not our concern; it is their journey of faith that interests us. Their challenges, their choices, their insights; what their lives have to offer our lives today.

Our focus this summer is on the Christian life, and we turn to the saints to listen for the lessons of their lives in order to glean some guidance through the challenges of our own. For who can argue but that the life of an ardent Christian is a roller coaster ride, full of both the sweet comforts, and the disappointments, of faith. We Presbyterians believe that following Jesus to the cross and beyond is less about a moment of conversion than the challenge of a lifetime. So we’re looking this summer to past Christians noted for their passion, or determination, or endurance, or simply, their indomitable trust in God.

Last week we were introduced to St. Gus, 4th century Bad Boy, otherwise known as Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, whose brilliant mind and quest for truth collided

dramatically with his fundamental desire simply to party and have fun. The struggles of Augustine's colorful life as interpreted through the lens of his astute mind and personal experience of God yielded sophisticated insights about many important doctrines of the church including the fundamentally broken nature of humanity that so deeply informed our own (humorless but wise) founding father, John Calvin.

Today we switch gears considerably to look at another faithful Christian, as different from Augustine as oatmeal is from truffles, Therese of Lisieux. Where 4th century Augustine of Africa was handsome, brilliant and in-your-face dramatic, 19th century Therese of Lisieux of France was simple, plain and self-effacing. Where Augustine spent his life wrestling himself, popular philosophies, and God in a broadly published quest for truth that would continue to impact western thought for at least another seventeen centuries, Therese of Lisieux retired quietly to the cloister of an obscure convent at the age of 15 and died there, equally quietly, at the tender age of 24.

When contrasted to the struggle and brilliance and output of the life of St. Augustine, the life of Therese of Lisieux was completely lacking in outward drama of any kind. Among persons religious of her day, she was unremarkable in ambition or intelligence. Indeed, among great figures of church history, Therese's short life is unnoteworthy, except...except for her singular focus on whatever was about life. Which, for Therese, was everything. What became renown about Therese was only this: her determination for dedicating every ordinary moment of her short, unremarkable life to the love of God.

In some ways, the ordinariness of Therese's life makes her more accessible than many of the saints, and perhaps even more relevant to those of us who also live relatively ordinary lives for our time. Like Therese, most of us, apart from Lillian, rarely make the front page of magazines. Few of us find ourselves revered for our holiness, or even noticed much, really, for the kinds of decisions we make that are based, somehow, on our faith. So perhaps there's something to be learned, or maybe just something to be reminded about from Therese's simple, quiet path to holiness in everyday life.

Ever humble and self-effacing, Therese called her method of spirituality "The Little Way." And 'The Little Way' for her meant simply performing everyday actions consciously, intentionally, in the presence of love of God.¹ That was it. Just being mindful of God in her small acts and habits of living. I suppose it was something like the Apostle Paul's idea of 'praying without ceasing' wherever one was, whatever one was doing. For Therese never left her convent or did anything, really, to alter her routine. She merely dedicated her routine to God, in her own 'little way.'

Born in 1873 to a middle-class family in Lisieux, a small town in Normandy, France, Therese's mother died when she was four. She and her four older sisters were left in the care of their father, a watchmaker and a man of marked piety. At the age of 15, Therese wanted to enter the local Carmelite convent but as she was underage to be a novice, she had to, it was said, 'storm heaven' in order to win acceptance into the order. And that brief burst of energy seems to be pretty much the only blip on the screen of Therese's otherwise short and uneventful life.

¹ All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time, Robert Ellsberg. The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999. p. 427

Yet despite her brief and retiring existence, upon her death the name of Therese of Lisieux quickly circled the world. And this was before the Internet. What sparked such global interest in this otherwise unremarkable young woman was the posthumous publication of Therese's autobiography, an account that, when she was ill, her superiors had commanded her to write. The title of the manuscript is The Story of a Soul, and in it Therese describes both her personal experience and her distinctive insights into the nature of spiritual life. As might be expected from a somewhat immature 19th century female who wasn't feeling very well, the original document of The Story of a Soul is often described as cloying and sentimental. But plow through the treacle and what is revealed is a will of steel to follow what seems at first an almost childlike path of sanctity.² A childlike path, yes; simple, clear, consistent - hidden things from the wise yet revealed to infants (Mt. 11:25) yet any who imagine it an easy path has only to try it.

In practice Therese's 'Little Way' requires a very disciplined consciousness, even a warrior-like vigilance, to stay alert and focused and open to the presence of God during every activity of daily life. But it was this consciousness, this attentiveness to the presence of God, as well as the effort it demanded, that Therese believed had the power to transform any situation, **any** situation, into a profound arena for holiness. That is, each moment of a person's life, accepted and lived in a spirit of love, is an opportunity to exercise faith and deepen one's relationship with God.

Preceding Therese by several centuries was another Carmelite who followed a similar path, a 16th monk known simply as Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence had different name for the 'Little Way;' he called it 'the practice of the presence of God.'

² Ibid, p.428.

Now Brother Lawrence was the cook for his order. Actually wasn't all that interested or gifted in cooking but he wanted, and I quote, 'to enclose myself in the place which obedience had marked out for me – which was the kitchen.'³ And so it was in the kitchen that Brother Lawrence worked out *his* scheme for doing all things for the love of God. He wrote,

“At the beginning of my duties, I said to God with a son-like trust, ‘My God, since You are with me, and since it is Your will that I should apply my mind to these outward things, I pray that You will give me the grace to remain with You and keep company with You. But so that my work may be better, Lord, work with me; receive my work and possess all my affection.’ ...during my work, he wrote, I continued to speak with (God) in a familiar way, offering (God) my little services, and asking for (God's) grace. And then, at the end of my work, I examined how I had done it, and if I found any good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed errors, I asked (God's) forgiveness for them, and without becoming discouraged, I resolved to change and began anew to remain with God as if I had never strayed. So, by picking myself up after my falls, and by doing many little acts of faith and love, I came to a state in which it would be as difficult for me *not* to think of God as it had been difficult to accustom myself to thinking of (God) at the beginning.”

That was how Brother Lawrence practiced Therese's 'Little Way,' by simply thinking about God all the time, requesting God's company, offering to God his successes, asking forgiveness of God for his errors, and generally engaging God in ongoing conversation and relationship. That was it. Same with Therese. No florid prayers, no esoteric practices, no scholarly tomes, no private altars or even special times set apart for divine communion. In fact, whenever his fellow monks droned their daily offices, Brother Lawrence was renown for falling asleep. Which sleep he'd gratefully dedicate to God.

The same could be said of Theresa that was said of Brother Lawrence: he “did not think either about death or his sins, or about Heaven or Hell. Since he was not capable of doing great things, his only thought was about doing *little* things for the love

³ The Practice of the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence, Translated by Robert J. Edmonson, Paraclete

of God. Whatever happened to him then would be according to God's will, so he was not at all worried about it.⁴ That's the kind of trust in God I want; don't you?

Contrast the 'Little Way,' that constant, focused practice of the presence of God in everyday life, with the way you and I live out our frenetic, stretched, stressed and over-anxious days. No question but that as hardworking, responsible and determined Christians are eager to be and do the 'right' thing. It's just that many of us have so *much* to do, and so *many* responsibilities; so *many* needs and wants and worries and possibilities that demand our attention, that it's hard to focus on *any* one thing for any period of time, never mind on the love of God.

I mean, where, between finding a job never mind keeping it, preparing for marriage and saving the one we've got, having babies and raising them, paying the bills and dealing with unexpected expenses, drowning in deadlines while maintaining a certain quality of output, keeping teenagers safe, parents safe, and dogs, cats and gerbils safe, and mowing the damn lawn, where in the world are we supposed to fit God? That's what I to ask this 16th simple-minded monk and his 19th century holy teenage counterpart!

But when I ask that question, what I hear from the life and teaching of Therese of Lisieux is a reminder not about dedicating the accomplishments and successes of our lives to God, but of the importance of the orientation and effort, of dedicating our lives to God *such as they are*, warts and worries and all.

So I tried it on the way to church this morning. I was running late for a called Session meeting, my hair was wet, my tea spilled in the car as I was speeding through

Press, Orleans, Ma. 1994. p. 37.

⁴ Ibid. p.69.

stop signs on Clifton Rd. braking only for annoying joggers and small animals, and I thought to myself, 'Okay, God. Here it is: wet hair, spilt tea, a slightly panicked preacher speeding along in her very cool new hybrid car...all of it dedicated to you...with love.'

And suddenly I felt....very...silly. And I laughed at myself (which is never a bad thing for a pastor to do.) I laughed at what a pitiful offering I was making, and the silliness of trying to emulate a saint in my current state. Or any other state I'm ever in, for that matter. But I kind of imagined God grinning, too, which sort of pleased me. And I thought, well, this 'Little Way' thing isn't very easy or natural to me, but maybe it's worth a try.

Present day author, Sue Bender, thought it was worth a try. In her book, Everyday Sacred, Bender speaks of her own journey to try to learn to observe and appreciate the sacred in the small acts of her everyday life. Imagining herself as a monk each day, going out with an empty begging bowl, she says, "I set out to see what each day offered. ...I wanted to see with fresh eyes."⁵

Hear the orientation? The alertness? The expectation? "Simply to be there with open eyes, open ears, open heart. All else flows from that," remarks one author.⁶

Bender remarks, 'I was still hoping for a big miracle, one that would change my life dramatically. But what I found instead is the extreme importance of small things; how small miracles can make every day sacred.'⁷

And how do small things become small miracles that make every day sacred? Therese of Lisieux would say, when we do them for the love of God. Imagine banging

⁵ Everyday Sacred, A Woman's Journey Home, Sue Bender, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. p. 6.

⁶ Whole Earth, Access to Tools, Ideas, and Practices, Fall, 2002. "Spirituality and Security," Joanna Macy, p. 49.

⁷ Everyday Scared, p. 158.

on your computer keys...for the love of God. Sweeping the front porch...for the love of God. Returning sneakers to Target...for the love of God. Enjoying a rock concert...for the love of God.

Remember the famous quote from Mother Teresa? “We do not do great things; only small things with great love.” And what if we did? What if made such an orientation of the practice of the presence of God a part of our everyday lives? I don’t know. I don’t know what that would be like. But who would argue the extraordinary impact and scope of influence that Mother Teresa exercised, still exercises, with her little acts of compassion? We’re not saints, you and I, we’re not even trying to be. But what would happen if we tried to be a little more attentive to the practice of the presence of God in our everyday lives?

The question brings us to another important aspect of Therese’s Little Way; it’s about personal sanctity, or holiness, but not just for its own sake. What Therese believed was – now see if this sounds familiar - that there exists a ‘principle of continuity’ between our personal response to everyday situations, and the transformation of the world toward the kingdom of God. A ‘principle of continuity’ that somehow links our individual thoughts, acts, and reactions with *the rest of creation!*

Now that’s a pretty big leap, but certainly not a unique one. In effect, it’s just ‘systems theory’ applied to spirituality. What it’s *not* about, I’d like to make clear, is any narcissistic New Age wisdom that asserts that we create our own reality. While there’s enough truth in that to make it dangerous, what Therese’s ‘principle of continuity’ teaches is not so much our centrality to creation as the idea that “we are so

interconnected and inter-existing that even our smallest act with clear intention has repercussions throughout the web of life.”⁸

It’s tempting to go right to the simple world-changing acts of the great ones, so tempting I can’t resist: It’s Gandhi’s Satyagraha program that transformed the culture and economy of India by influencing individual buying choices. “What you do may seem insignificant,” preached Gandhi over and over and over to his people, “but it is very important that you do it.”

It’s Martin Luther King and his national program of civil disobedience based entirely on small, personal acts. Said King,

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage....

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world,”⁹ remarked famous anthropologist Margaret Mead.

It’s tempting to point all that out because it proves that small intentional acts of faith *can* alter the course of our lives and of the world. It’s tempting but not altogether relevant. Because Therese of Lisieux’s ‘Little Way’ is not so much about changing the world as it is about changing ourselves. If the smallest act with clear intention has repercussions throughout the web of life,¹⁰ it’s because small intentional acts grounded in the love of God interweave the web of our lives with the thread of the kingdom of God. And *that’s* what *God* is after.

⁸ Macy, p. 50.

So let's try it.

Try taking out the garbage for the love of God.
Or, for the love of God, having your toenails be polished.
Try dedicating your abdominal crunches or leg lifts to the love of God.
Or offer to God the sitcom you just watched,
the gossip you just heard,
the magazine you just read,
the sale you just closed.
Try carpooling the kids for the love of God
or taking a shower
or weeding the garden.

You get the idea.

The practice of the presence of God, Therese's "Little Way"...maybe it's worth a try...even for a single day, a single act.... After all, Jesus says his yoke is easy, and his burden, light.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁹ Whole Earth, Access to Tools, Ideas, and Practices, Fall, 1999. "The Margaret Mead 2001 Awards," Nicole Parizeau, p.26.

¹⁰ Macy, p. 50.