

**SLD08.15.04 20<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**JKPC**  
**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Hildegard of Bingen – Pioneer of the Spirit”**

“If you know God, you know Hildegard.” That’s what one theologian and scholar had to say about 12<sup>th</sup> century German abbess and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen.<sup>1</sup> It wasn’t just that Hildegard was godly, or a spiritual seeker, or a sublime teacher; it was that she radiated a sort of universal quality of God’s truth and love, a quality often easily recognized by other seekers. So, if you know God, if, in your inmost heart you’ve encountered God and enjoyed divine communion, why, even if you have little else in common with Hildegard you’d recognize in her a spiritual friend, a companion and fellow journeyer on the serpentine path to divine union.

Born in the year 1098 in the German province of Rheinhessen, Hildegard was the tenth child of noble parents. And as the tenth child, she would become, as was the custom of her time, a ‘human tithe’ to the church. At the age of eight, Hildegard was given over to the care of a holy anchoress, a woman named Jutta, who lived a life of prayer and service in a cottage attached to a nearby Benedictine abbey. Jutta raised Hildegard and educated her until the age of eighteen, at which point Hildegard donned 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, the administrative and spiritual head, of Jutta’s nuns.<sup>2</sup>

So far this is all pretty much business as usual in the 12<sup>th</sup> century monastic world. What ultimately sets Hildegard apart, though, are the extraordinary visions she began

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Sirota, in Pioneers of the Spirit, a video by Vision Video, Worcester, Pa. 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 405.

having as a child. Nobody but Jutta knew about her 'visitations,' as she called them, because from the beginning Hildegard had felt confused and embarrassed by them. But after Jutta's death and her 'installation' as prioress, Hildegard's visions pressed more heavily and with greater urgency upon her, until she became quite ill with the secret of them. Finally, at the age of 43, Hildegard described them to her confessor, who then checked them out with the current church hierarchy, which confirmed the orthodoxy of the visions. [Apparently like modern day senses of call, private visions of the past have likewise required confirmation by a larger body of the church.]

In Hildegard's case, so convinced was the larger church of the depth and usefulness of her visions that she was provided with a secretary who made a record of her insights concerning the relation between God, humanity and the cosmos, as well as a team of illustrators to "illuminate" or draw her visions. One of those illuminated visions called simply 'The Soul,' is reproduced on the front of our bulletins today, although much of the power and beauty of it is lost in a black and white Xerox.

The most well-known of Hildegard's documents produced through the collaboration of medieval writers and illuminators is called Scivias, which means "Know Thy Ways." In Scivias or "Know Thy Ways," Hildegard's records her belief that each and every individual man, woman, and child, is equally important and valued in God's eyes; equally known, equally loved, equally treasured. The extraordinary paintings that accompany the text in Scivias present a picture of human beings and the cosmos as emanations from God's love, 'living sparks' or "rays of (God's) splendor, just as the rays of the sun proceed from the sun itself."

Thomas Merton, about whom Adam preached last week, had a similar vision; its is called his 'Walnut St. Epiphany.' About it he writes, "yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. ...I have the immense joy of being (human being), a member of a race in which God's Self became incarnate! ...And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people," writes Merton, "that they are all walking around shining like the sun."<sup>3</sup>

Human beings as emanations from God's love, 'living sparks' of (God's) splendor, like the rays of the sun proceeding from the sun itself." Have some of you perhaps experienced this yourselves? The almost blinding brightness of the light of Christ in the face of another? That's what Hildegard, and Merton, saw glimpses of, not from one person, but from the face of every human, every creature in God's creation.

But even as she envisioned God's light manifest in all creation, Hildegard also saw the effects of sin in rupturing creation. She saw living sparks going out, losing their heat, their light, their beauty, their fire, until they no longer burned at all. Until somehow, some way, in the drama of redemption that ultimately restores the world to its intended state, the Source of energy and life and love and possibility that is God, in a miracle of grace, in the mystery of grace, reignites the failed embers, with the light of eternity.<sup>4</sup>

All of this Hildegard saw in her visions and more. She saw further that each of us is a 'co-creator' with God, called in our unique way to fulfill God's intention for creation. She says, and this puts me in the mind of the membership of this particular church, she

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Spencer, <http://www.internetmonk.com/archives/2004/08/000091.html>

<sup>4</sup> Sirota, p. 405.

says, “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.”<sup>5</sup> Sounds like a pretty good mission statement, doesn’t it? “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 so that people will be inspired by your good example to praise and honor God.”

Now, Hildegard has some profound advice for how believers should go about the work of being co-creators with God. She says each of us should listen intently to our inner voice. That’s it – listen intently to our inner voice.

‘Course you got to get quiet to listen to your inner voice, and you got to get open and attentive. But Hildegard believed and experienced and taught that out of attentive listening would spring trust. And out of trust would spring “the creativity that only God can dream for us.”<sup>6</sup> That’s how she said it: “the creativity that only God can dream for us.” I love that. Listening. Trust. Creativity. The creativity that only God can dream for us.

Only there’s just one problem with this kind of inner-voice-driven creative thinking rooted in God’s dream for us, and that is, that it’s just about guaranteed to get a body in trouble. At least it did Hildegard. Again and again. For example, one day Hildegard receives this inner-voice dream-like suggestion that she should move her convent to a barren mountaintop nearby and build her own abbey.

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<sup>5</sup> video, [Pioneers of the Spirit](#).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Remember now, this is 12<sup>th</sup> century Germany and women, never mind cloistered women, aren't supposed to own property, never mind make those kinds of independent decisions, God-driven or otherwise. No matter how powerful an abbess is, she and her community are always under the "protection" of a group of male monks-in-charge. We'll call them 'MICs' for short.

Well, the MICs 'protecting' Hildegard and company made a lot of money off of Hildegard's visions, you know. In fact, she had become a sort of regional celebrity, her abbey becoming a place of pilgrimage, which, of course, translated into a certain prestige and revenue for the umbrella MICs. Noblewomen all over Europe had heard of Hildegard and wanted to come join her convent. You join a convent, you become a bride of Christ. And you know what brides bring...dowries. And since Christ wasn't around to collect, enter the MICs. Oh yes, both the MICs and the townspeople who benefited from the traffic of the pilgrims were adamantly opposed Hildegard's plan.

But, you know how God is. Never mind a stubborn woman. Hildegard up and does what apparently she's inclined to do whenever her/God's will is crossed – she gets deathly ill. Hard to explain how her indisposal doesn't stop her from enlisting the help of noble people, gathering the money to buy the land and moving her nuns to the mountaintop, lock, stock and barrel. Needless to say the MICs were miffed but you know how it is: if God is for you.... In this case anyway, it was God, 1, MICs, zip.

About the time H. transports her abbey to its new location, word gets to her about the rise of heretics springing up around the region. Alarmed by all the wrong thinking out there in the world, Hildegard decides to take to the road and straighten people out. Now here, too, her inner voice isn't making anybody happy. Because of the ubiquitous

dangers of the road, women of Hildegard's era simply didn't travel. And cloistered women, well, they were supposed to stay cloistered. But that doesn't stop old Hildegard – and I'm talking she was 70 years old when she starts her circuit-riding, which was really ancient in her day – from taking to the road and preaching not only in abbeys and monasteries but out in the public squares of surrounding towns to warn people and correct their understanding of her loving, forgiving and insistently re-creating God.

Eventually Hildegard comes on home, only to get in trouble all over again. You see, having written a trilogy about self-healing and a book about healing herbs, Hildegard was also renown for her healing powers. It was even rumored she could see into the human body, though her greater passion was the healing of heart and soul.

Well, one day a particularly notorious nobleman comes to Hildegard for help and while she was caring for him, she becomes convinced about his genuine repentance and reconciliation with the church. So when he dies, she allows him to be buried at her mountaintop abbey.

Well, this didn't suit the chief MIC, the bishop, of the convent at all since he had already excommunicated the fellow. So he orders the body be disinterred and moved some place else. This, of course, Hildegard refuses to do. And here's where the MICs get mean. No doubt remembering previous insurrections on Hildegard's part, the bishop decides to place the convent under an interdict, forbidding the nuns either to sing or to participate in communion. Now really, this was *very* harsh. The daily celebration of the body and blood of Christ was the spiritual life blood of the community. And to forbid song and melody in worship was to eliminate a most intimate access to the heart of God. Having personally written all the music for the daily prayers of the nuns, Hildegard

found genuine mystical communion in the beauty of the sung word. In some notes Elise gave me from a lecture she heard once, Hildegard is quoted as describing music as a ‘primal and redemptive gift of God, ...an expression of heavenly joy...an incarnation of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>7</sup> Imagine what it was like for her during those years she and her nuns were forbidden to sing. Eventually the interdict was lifted, but Hildegard died on only a few months later at the age of 81.

By any standard, Hildegard of Bingen was one of the most remarkable figures of her age: abbess and founder of a Benedictine community; theologian; prophet, preacher; author, musician, composer; poet, artist, pharmacist, healer...the list goes on. And 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.<sup>8</sup>

You can tell I admire her – her passion, her intellect, her activism, her existential independence from all authority except God’s, her deep love for humanity, her wisdom in service. There is so much to know about her – far more than I learned in preparation for this sermon – but then again, as it is said, if you know God, you know Hildegard.

And for all her extraordinary accomplishments, Hildegard is like persons of every age who seek communion with God and attempt to live out of that communion. Throughout the disappointments and complexities of her life: her removal from her family, her assaulting visions, her frequent sicknesses, her studies, her teachings, her losses, her service, her alternating support and rejection from the church, Hildegard

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<sup>7</sup> Lecture by William Flynn of Leeds, “Singing with the Angels: Hildegard von Bingen’s Practical Theology of Music.” date? Emory University.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, Daily Reflections On Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999, p. 405.

maintains an active and vital relationship with God. And it is this relationship with God that helps her imagine a different path for herself, that roots her in a stabilizing self-confidence, that beckons her toward discovering and cultivating her natural gifts and using them in the service of humanity.

Through faith, Hildegard transcended whatever obstacles lay before her. Through faith she weathered the resistance of those who disagreed with her. Through faith she persevered even when her own church withheld her spiritual lifeblood.

As a co-creator with God, she followed her own advice and listened intently to her inner voice, for that mustard seed of insight that God would grow into a tree of service, for that yeast of discontent that would leaven her radical actions, for that hidden treasure that she gave everything she had and was to obtain. And out of that inner voice sprang a deep and unshakable trust in God. And out of that trust, sprang “the creativity that only God could have dreamed for her.”

And so I ask you, what do you suppose you and I here at Emory Church have to learn from Hildegard?

To the glory of God. Amen.

### **Charge**

Each of us is a co-creator' with God, called in a unique way to fulfill God's intention for creation. Let us listen to our inner voice, wait on trust, and discover for ourselves “the creativity that only God can dream for us.”