

**SLD08.01.10 18<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Psalm 42**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Mother Teresa – At Work in the Darkness”**

I’ve said it over and over: we Presbyterians don’t believe that one person is any holier than another, no matter who they are. All human beings fall short of the glory of God – this is an essential tenet of our Reformed Tradition. So we don’t worship saints, light candles to them, 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. Just as through Christ Jesus all are equally redeemed and reconciled to God, before God, all are equally sinful.

Still, you gotta admit that some people’s response to God’s grace does strike us as more remarkable than others. If before God, nobody’s perfect, yet there are some disciples past and present before whom even we spiritually egalitarian Presbyterians can’t help but say, “Wow!”

For me, Mother Teresa is one of those. I even look at a *photograph* of that woman and my heart melts. So I don’t know; maybe she’s a special case. Maybe in the presence of Mother Teresa’s petite, wrinkled, radiant figure, even ole’ Calvin might crack an admiring grin.

I first preached on Mother Teresa in 2007, and you’ve chosen her as one of our “Top Ten Saints in 2010.” And when we explored Teresa’s life the first time, we focused primarily on what a gift her life was to others; her ministry, her faith and her wisdom, her consistency. Since then, however, some rather startling eye- and heart-opening

information has been made public about Mother Teresa that offers a very different side of her life of discipleship, a side filled with shadows and deep sadness.

My first sermon was entitled, “Mother Teresa – Lover of Jesus, Lover of Humanity,” and so she was. This sermon is called “Mother Teresa – At Work in the Darkness.” At work in the darkness of the world, of course – we all know about that – but also in the painful inner darkness with which Mother Teresa struggled virtually the whole of her adult life.

Reported *Time Magazine* in 2007, “Here one of the great human icons of our time, so routinely observed in silent and seemingly peaceful prayer... was living out a very different spiritual reality privately, an arid landscape from which the deity had disappeared.”<sup>1</sup> For all her extraordinary good works, we know now that Mother Teresa spent almost 50 years without sensing the presence of God. Or as she put it in 1978 in a letter to her spiritual advisor, “As for me, my (inner) silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, – listen and do not hear – the tongue moves in prayer, but does not speak.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas all the world imagined that Teresa enjoyed a deep and abiding relationship with God throughout her extraordinary ministry, all the world was wrong.

What a startling contrast to how many of us viewed her, never mind to our recent explorations of Bill W.’s singular clarity, Julian of Norwich’s quiet confidence, Teresa of Avila’s ecstatic spousal prayer. We might even be getting the impression that to qualify as a saint, even on Jill’s list, you and God pretty much have it all together. Not so with Mother Teresa.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>2</sup> *Time Magazine*, September 3, 2007, “Her Agony,” David Van Biema, pp. 37-43.

So what do you think? Does her internal struggle with God diminish her life's work and witness? Make of her less of a "saint?" Less of an icon for our age? Certainly bursts any romantic bubbles we might have about a life of faithful discipleship, doesn't it? Anything here for us to learn about our own spiritual journeys?

Let's go back to the beginning of Teresa's life.

"Called by some "the most powerful woman in the world," Mother Teresa was born on August 27, 1910 as Agnes of a last name I haven't a clue how to pronounce, in Skopje, (SKOP ya) Albania.<sup>3</sup> Her parents were devout Catholics, and the whole family, which included two siblings, was very close. At the age of twelve, Agnes began to feel called to the life of a missionary. At eighteen, she joined the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto (commonly called the Irish Ladies), whose work was in India.

First, though, young Agnes traveled from Albania to Ireland to learn English. Then, at the age of 19, she was shipped off to Darjeeling where she began her novitiate (or internship, if you will). After two years of studying scriptures, the rules of the order, more English, and the Indian languages of Hindi and Bengali, she was ready to take her vows. This is when she chose the name "Teresa" after Saint Therese of Lisieux, the Saint of the "Little Way," whom we'll be hearing from during our Labor Day Retreat. Agnes' aspiration was to live as Terese of Lisieux did – a life of goodness, simplicity, and surrender to God's will.

As Sister Teresa, her 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

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<sup>3</sup> Experiencing Jesus With Mother Teresa, by Jean Maalouf, pp. 6-20)

inspiration” during which she felt a convicting call to consecrate her life to the poorest of the poor. Obtaining permission from Rome to pursue her new calling (a process that took about two years), Teresa replaced her religious habit with a white sari and left the convent to fulfill her new mission.

Unclear exactly what God wanted her to do, she 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, just looking for little ways to help. Starting with what was familiar to her, she asked a few families if she could teach their children, which she did, under a nearby tree. Then she started visiting her students’ families and helping them clean their homes and their clothes. Basically Teresa gave 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, others felt suspicious of her motives. Some even asked 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 until, in 1950, Sister Teresa founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, becoming its mother superior and thus arriving at the name by which we know her, Mother Teresa.

Deeply rooted in those days in a sweet and intimate relationship with the incarnate Jesus, Mother Teresa based her faith and work on the heart of God becoming

in Jesus “a heart of flesh.” When taken seriously, Jesus’ teaching that “just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me,” Jesus’ heart of flesh became embodied in ours.

The nuns of Teresa’s new order lived just as the poor they served, with no air conditioners, electric fans, washing machines or other modern comforts. Their order expanded to include the creation of 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.

On September 5, 1997, after receiving an avalanche of awards, Mother Teresa died at the age of eighty-seven,. From India’s Order of the Lotus to an honorary doctorate from Cambridge; from the Soviet Peace Committee’s Gold Medal to The United States Congressional Gold Medal, and of course, the Nobel Peace prize in 1979, the world sought to honor the living peace and self-giving embodied by Mother Teresa. About herself, Mother Teresa said simply, “By blood and origin, I am Albanian. 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.”

What a surprise, then, to learn, 10 years after her death, that Mother Teresa spent virtually the whole of her adult life in a crisis of faith! The recently published book, Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light by Jean Maalouf, consisting primarily of correspondence between Teresa and her confessors and superiors over a period of 66 years, reveals that “for the last half-century of her life, (Mother Teresa) felt no presence of God whatsoever.”<sup>4</sup>

Maybe some of you saw the front page article of the September, 2007 issue of *Time Magazine*, (which, Bill, you probably left on my windshield) entitled “Her Agony.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.2.

(show article) which stated baldly that, despite the remarkable nature of her deeds, Mother Teresa was, in fact, living out a very different inner spiritual reality described as “an arid landscape from which the deity had disappeared.”<sup>5</sup> (Time, p. 38) In fact, apparently, that “day of inspiration” and communion with Jesus Mother Teresa experienced back in 1946 was the last contact she had with God. After that, as the *Time* article puts it, “Jesus took himself away again.” (T, p. 39)

Indeed, the book Come Be My Light chronicles a perennial state of spiritual darkness for Mother Teresa that began almost precisely the time she started tending the poor and dying in Calcutta. Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of her private letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain.

In 1959, she wrote to her confessor, “Tell me, Father, why is there so much pain and darkness in my soul?” And in another letter addressed to Jesus: “God – please forgive me – When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. ...I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?”<sup>6</sup> As late as 1995, in a letter to her confessor, Teresa discusses her “spiritual dryness.”

Darkness. Dryness. Loneliness. Spiritual torment. Hardly what the world expected. What are we to make of this?

One self-avowed atheist concluded simply that (Teresa) “was no more exempt than any other person from the realization that religion is (entirely) a human fabrication.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Time Magazine*, September 3, 2007, “Her Agony,” David Van Biema, pp. 37-43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

But we believers, what are we to do with the disappointing news that Mother Teresa and Jesus were hardly on speaking terms, never mind good friends?

“Well,” suggests James Martin, editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, perhaps we might regard this dimension of Teresa’s interior life as a *ministry* to those who have experienced some doubt, some dryness, some absence of God in their lives.

And you know who that is?” asks Martin.

“Everybody,” he says. “Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, *everyone*.”

Can anybody here argue with that? Any of the more mature among us been able to avoid the experience of flagging faith, spiritual indifference, a haunting speculation as to whether God really exists? Anybody here ever experience at some point in your lives the *absence* of God?

Job did. King David did. Many of the psalmists did. *Jesus* did. (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?!”) And as the scriptures, the psalmist, the gospel writers all attest, invariably the experience of the absence of God is a traumatic, even devastating, experience.

But perhaps it’s relevant that psychoanalysts describe two distinct human responses to trauma: one can hold onto it in all its vividness and remain its captive, or...without necessarily conquering it...gradually integrate it into the day by day. I hear that to mean that pain, darkness, disappointment, loss, can become the organizing principle of our life, or *non-life*. Or it can become an acknowledge companion, never absent perhaps, but not necessarily in charge all the time, either.

We all know people who have remained captive to their trauma, just as we know people who have somehow learned to live despite it. Nobody escapes hard times;

nobody escapes suffering. But some fortunate ones are able, as Teresa did, to live with their pain, to confront it, wrestle with it, make room for it (since it's not going away), even to integrate their pain – not let it go – for it'll never let *you* go - but to fold it in somehow, to give it its place, maybe even a ruling place, but not the *whole* place.

In the late 1950's, after more than a decade of open-wound spiritual agony, Teresa turned with her darkness to the man who became her spiritual advisor, the Rev. Joseph Neuner . Neuner told Teresa three things that apparently brought her enough relief to carry on:

First, that there was no human remedy for what she felt.

Second, that *feeling* (God's presence) is not the only proof of God's presence. Equally convincing of a sign of God's hidden presence was Teresa's very craving for God.

And finally, that Teresa's experience of the absence of God was, in fact, a key and purposeful dimension of the "spiritual side" of her work for Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently this counsel afforded Teresa a tremendous sense of release. Not that the darkness did not continue to torment her; she continued to describe her soul as "a block of ice." But somehow she was able – she would say with the grace of God – to integrate her pain in a way that enabled her to make it the organizing center of her personality and ongoing spiritual life. For Teresa there was no escaping the darkness, but there *was* trusting God in and through it. And there *was* persevering in the work to which she was called.

James Martin suggests that perhaps Mother Teresa's perseverance *despite her inner desolation* to serve God and humanity should, in fact, be regarded as her most

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.42

spiritually heroic act, as important as her ministry to the poor.<sup>8</sup> Given the challenges of any life of discipleship, I couldn't agree more. I even find comfort in knowing that the greatest "saint" of our day was immune neither to doubts about God nor to a profound and perpetual sense of God's absence. That she trusted that God was at work in her life even when she could no longer perceive God's presence.

Some of you may have seen the Emily Dickinson quote Libba sent out last week – Dickinson wrote, "We both believe, and disbelieve, a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble." Which keeps believing nimble. Which keeps believing quick, alert, responsive, flexible, on its toes. Dependent not on one's own understanding or feeling or creed so much as on a God who can be trusted no matter what life throws at you.

In 1962 Teresa wrote, "if I ever become a Saint...I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven," she said, "...to light the light of those in darkness on earth."

Mother Teresa, ever at work in the darkness - the darkness of the world, the darkness of her own heart, ever determined to light God's Way.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 28.