

**SLD07.25.10 17<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Colossians 2: 6-14**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Teresa of Avila – Wild Woman of Avila”**

So one day in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, Teresa of Avila is traveling along a dusty road in a donkey cart. Suddenly the cart overturns and Teresa is thrown, splat, into a muddy river. Furious, filthy and drenching wet, Teresa complains to God about the ordeal, and hears a voice within saying, “This is how I treat my friends.”

“Yes,” she answers aloud. “And *that*, my Lord, is why you have so few of them!”<sup>1</sup>

Peppery, passionate, with a piety balanced by humor, Teresa of Avila was one for speaking her mind freely to God or anybody else who happened to be around. She was a pistol, that Teresa; smart, educated, energetic – at turns, charming, imperious, irreverent, or impossible. Yet her life evinced a courage and wisdom rooted in a special relationship with God,<sup>2</sup> a relationship grounded in intimate prayer and audacious action. It was out of that relationship with God that Teresa’s clear-minded and steadfast intention arose – to live her life in Christ, and enable *others* to live *their* lives in Christ, in *a form and practice and spirituality that answered the needs of her time*.

You’ll recall that we’re in the middle of a sermon series in which we’re looking at a variety of historical and modern day disciples whose lives may have something to teach us. We call it our “Summer Saints Series” though only some of the figures to whom we will turn have been officially canonized by the Catholic Church, a practice to which we Protestants, convinced as we are of the inescapable brokenness of all

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, N.Y. 1999, p.450

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 448.

humanity and the priesthood of all believers, do not ascribe. Yet during this stretch of Ordinary Time when we're meant to review and nurture our own lives of discipleship, we turn with openness and curiosity to the lives of spiritual notables.

And Lord have mercy, Teresa of Avila was definitely a spiritual notable! Vibrant, alive, dynamic, a natural leader, a colorful, flamboyant beauty with a zest for life, Teresa captivated everybody around her. Of all her characteristics, the most captivating quality of Teresa's is what the Spanish call *duende*.

Describes one author, "*duende* is raw, primitive, tempestuous energy, a vulnerability to inspiration burning in the bloodstream more frequently associated with gypsies and bullfighters and flamenco dancers than with saints. Fiery, wild, and utterly original, *duende* annihilates nonessentials with contempt for neat, tidy categories, accepted styles, cramped forms, and human limitations of any kind."<sup>3</sup>

Point is, Teresa was a wild card for her time and she still is; in fact, the subtitle of one of the books I researched called her "the grand wild woman of Avila." Teresa was wild as a child, wild as she grew from adolescence into a ravishing young woman, and wildest of all when she reached middle age and set out on her quixotic adventures throughout her native Spain.

Born in the fortress city of Avila in 1515, Teresa initially belonged to a family of privilege and aristocracy. When she was 14, her mother died and her father arranged for her education in a local convent. By the time she was twenty she had decided to become a nun. Teresa's father opposed her plan but with characteristic willfulness, she ran off to the Carmelite convent in Avila anyway.

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<sup>3</sup> Tessa Bielecki, Holy Daring, Element Publishing, Rockport, Mass., 1994, p. 11.

Only, in Teresa's day, the Carmelite community was a bit of a mess. Things had gotten sloppy in the order, undisciplined, misdirected, ineffectual. In fact, rather than a house of prayer, the convent in Avila had come to resemble more a boarding house for wealthy maidens, with nuns spending much of their time in the parlor entertaining visitors and gentlemen callers.

These lax conditions were by no means limited to the Carmelite Order. For the same reasons we talked about last week that made Julian of Norwich's world so chaotic – the Hundred Years War, fighting among competing popes, sequential outbreaks of bubonic plague – all European religious orders were struggling. Traditional institutions of all kinds, religious, civil, familial, were increasingly in a state of collapse.<sup>4</sup>

Only after a personal spiritual experience at the age of thirty-nine, Teresa intended to change all that. Weary of the mediocrity of her own spiritual life, she determined to devote herself more seriously to a life of prayer. And as she did, as she kept experienced the sensation of God's love transforming her from within, she began to feel increasingly that it was time, past time, for her and her fellow religious to return to the fundamentals of their order, only in a manner better suited to their own time, circumstance and culture.<sup>5</sup>

Moved by her renewed passion for her Maker, Teresa decided to establish a new reformed Carmelite community whose aim was returning to the spirit of the order's original rule of life. As a woman and a reformer who based her authority on direct contact with God, Teresa's activities sparked considerable resistance. It took some

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.oed.pcn.net/histo\\_1.htm](http://www.oed.pcn.net/histo_1.htm)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ccacarmels.org/CCAHomily2005.htm>

serious lobbying with the church hierarchy, but finally Teresa's new convent was founded in Avila in 1562.

Her community became known as the Discalced, or shoeless, Carmelites. In fact the nuns wore hemp sandals, but their name referred to the strict poverty that was a feature of Teresa's reform. Her nuns were to live entirely by alms and their own labor. Strict enclosure, or cloister, was to be maintained, along with a vegetarian diet and a rigorous schedule of prayer.

Despite opposition from within her Carmelite family, suspicion from members of the Catholic hierarchy, and eventually formal investigation by the dreaded Spanish Inquisition, Teresa succeeded in establishing sixteen more convents in Spain, somehow never letting up on the intensity of her life of prayer. In fact, among all the spiritual "greats" of Christian history, there are few to rival the variety and depth of Teresa's mystical experiences.

I want to pause here a minute to talk about mysticism, a term we'll come across often as we explore the lives of Christian saints. Due to its privatistic nature, we in the Protestant tradition hold a healthy suspicion of mysticism, generally preferring community discernment to personal vision. For us, theology is never done in a vacuum. Revelation, ordination, the sacraments, even every day decision-making in the life of the church like our Session meeting this morning – are all community events.

But consider this definition of mysticism: "loving, experiential awareness of God."<sup>6</sup> Mysticism as loving, experiential awareness of God. An awareness in your heart, in your mind, through your senses, of the loving presence of God. Now that's not so foreign to many of us, is it?

For me, “loving, experiential awareness of God’ is a definition that demystifies mysticism, pointing to a yearning that many of us have for – not ideas about God in our head, or words about God on our lips, but personal, living, refreshing communion with God.

This isn’t something we talk a lot about in reformed worship, focused as we are on the corporate, communal experience of God. Yet the desire for a loving experience of God may well be the motivation for many of us to come to worship in the first place. Or perhaps even to pray.

We may know, at least in our minds, that our triune God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, is never far from us. But when we know it in our hearts, when we experience it in our bones...well...the yearning for that kind of loving communion with God is, in my view, universal; as universal as God’s yearning for that kind of loving communion with us. Which, the way I see it, makes all of us mystics at heart.

In any case, as Teresa advanced in her own life, her own “loving experiential awareness of God” evolved into periodic ecstasies in which it seemed that her very heart was pierced by the love of God. But for someone graced with such richness of communion with God, yet Teresa remained fully anchored in the basics of her faith, all of which circled around prayer..

“Prayer,” says Teresa, “is nothing but friendly discourse, frequent solitary conversation with the One Whom we know loves us.”<sup>7</sup> Only thing is, to be friends with God, you gotta ask for what Teresa calls a “holy daring.” Because to Teresa, God is

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<sup>6</sup> Passion for God, a tape series by Tessa Bieleci

<sup>7</sup> Ellsberg. pp 448-450 for much of above.

not “nice” or pleasant or accommodating, not a buddy or an uncle or a doting grandfather in the sky. To Teresa, God is an earthquake!<sup>8</sup>

And how does one make friends with an earthquake?

To Teresa the key to authentic prayer is openness.

Openness to an earthquake? You can see the necessity of holy daring!

She advises those who pray to let go of expectations, to cultivate a spirit of expectancy, of vulnerability, of open-endedness. And then, she says, (and here I think she must have us Presbyterians in mind), then in contemplative prayer, the mind must sink into the heart, *and* the heart must catch on fire. “And so,” she says, “should the belly!”<sup>9</sup>

What do you supposed she means by that – that the belly, too, must catch fire? Certainly Teresa was not content with passive prayer. “Prayer is not just spending time with the Lord,” she asserts. It is partly that – but if it ends there, it’s fruitless.

No, prayer is dynamic! Authentic prayer changes us – unmask us – strips us – indicates where growth is needed. Authentic prayer never leads to complacency, but needles us – makes us uneasy at times – leads us to self-knowledge, to humility, and to action.

So, just in case you’re starting to think that Teresa was some kind of 16<sup>th</sup> century numbnut who never paid her water bills, I just want to highlight the fact that due to her practical nature and sound business practices, she was often called The Saint of Common Sense. She just had a problem with what she calls “excessive rationality.” Sure, our lives must be ordered and deliberate, she argues, but don’t imagine an

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<sup>8</sup> Holy Daring, p. 59

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.75

ordered life is in itself an end, a goal, a stopping point. On the contrary, she says, “I would like for us to use reason to make us dissatisfied with being so reasonable!

Because the important thing is not to think much, but to love much!

In fact, as far as Teresa was concerned, the whole purpose of human existence, of all human striving, is a love affair with God. And key to the juice of that affair is prayer, mystical prayer; loving, open, authentic, experiential, awareness of God.

16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, religious reformer, foundress of seventeen convents, author of four books, and the only woman in the history of the Church ever to have reformed a religious order of men, Teresa of Avila died in 1582. Forty years later she was canonized by the Catholic Church. In 1970 she was the first woman to be named by the pope a Doctor of the Church.

For one last glimpse of the affair between this peppery, passionate disciple and her loving, demanding God, of how Teresa went about living her life in Christ, and enabling *others* to live *their* lives in Christ, I’d like to close with a Teresian Prayer for Contemporary Lives:<sup>10</sup>

Give me wealth or want,  
Delight or distress,  
Happiness or gloominess,  
Heaven or hell,  
Sweet life, sun unveiled,  
To You I give all  
*What do you want of me?*

Give me, if You will, prayer;  
or let me know dryness,  
An abundance of devotion,  
Or if not, then barrenness,  
In you alone, Sovereign Majesty,  
I find my peace,  
*What do you want of me?*

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<sup>10</sup> Embracing God, Praying with Teresa of Avila, Dwight, Judy, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996. p.136.

Give me then wisdom.  
Or for love, ignorance,  
Years of abundance,  
Or hunger and famine.  
Darkness or sunlight,  
Move me here or there;  
*What do you want of me?*

If you want me to rest,  
I desire it for love;  
If to labor,  
I will die working:  
Sweet Love say  
Where, how and when.  
*What do you want of me?*

Calvary or Tabor give me,  
Desert or fruitful land;  
As Job in suffering  
Or John at Your breasts;  
Barren fruited vine,  
Whatever be Your will:  
*What do you want of me?*

*For yours I am,  
for You I was born:  
What do you want of me?*<sup>11</sup>

If we want to live our lives in Christ, in a form and practice and spirituality that speaks to our time, maybe we should be asking God the same question.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> from "In the Hands of God" (Vol. 3, 378-79) The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila.