

**SLD09.05.10 23rd Ordinary**  
**EPC**  
**Luke 21:29-36a**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Therese of Lisieux – The Little Way”**

Today we’re closing in on our *tenth* saint in this summer through September series on the lives of saints of the Christian tradition. We’ve noted that, as Protestants of the Reformed tradition, we do not worship saints, or pray through them, or ask for their intercessions. Nor do we regard them as any more “holy” than anybody else. But a lot of them sure are interesting. And because we’re exploring folks who’ve dedicated their lives to following Jesus, we’re always on the lookout for whatever ideas or experiences or lessons might enhance our own journeys of faith.

So far we’ve called on Julian of Norwich, Bill W., Mother Teresa, Hildegard of Bingen, Augustine of Hippo, Teresa of Avila, Caryl Houselander and Sojourner Truth. In contrast to the drama of all their lives, today we turn today to the simple, plain, brief life of Thérèse of Lisieux.

Where Augustine wrestled with ideas that impact western thought to this day, where Sojourner Truth battled oppression throughout our nation, Bill W. transformed the lives of millions, and Mother Teresa became a global symbol of compassion, the life of Thérèse of Lisieux was completely lacking in outward drama or accomplishment of any kind. Retiring quietly to an obscure convent at the age of 15, Thérèse died there at the tender age of 24, remembered for no particular ambition, opus, or intelligence. Indeed, among great figures of church history, Thérèse’s short life is virtually entirely unnoteworthy except for... her singular focus on her love of God.

Ever humble and self-effacing, Thérèse called her method of spirituality “The Little Way,” which, for her, meant performing everyday actions consciously and intentionally in

the presence of the love of God. Something, I suppose, like the Apostle Paul's idea of "praying without ceasing."

The ordinariness of Thérèse's life makes her somewhat more accessible than some of the saints we've explored, a little easier to relate to, perhaps, for those of us who live relatively ordinary lives for our own time. "Thérèse's 'little way' is a hard way, but a way that may be easily recognized by those of us who know that we are not among the great souls of history, and who are more accustomed to gray days than hours spent bathed in either (devastating darkness) or blazing spiritual light." Thérèse's little way appeals to us because it passes every reality check and offers us spiritual ideals that are within our grasp."<sup>1</sup>

For Thérèse's simple, quiet path to holiness consisted simply of consciously and continually dedicating each moment of life to the love of God.<sup>2</sup> That was it. Simply maintaining an ever-consistent, ever-alert mindfulness of the love of God in the small everyday acts and habits of living, It was that simple.

Just don't think for a minute it was easy.

You can't have missed the all little signs peppering this retreat center encouraging us to dedicate our ordinary moments, actions and events to the love of God. Hopefully you're taking them seriously enough to pause once in a while and follow their suggestions. Imagine how many signs, and how much time, it would take to keep each of us mindful of the love of God every single moment of every single day! Mercy! That'd be something, wouldn't it? But that's what Thérèse was going for.

---

<sup>1</sup> Simply Surrender, 30 Days with a Spiritual Teacher, Series editor, John Kirvan, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time, Robert Ellsberg. The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999. p. 427

Born in 1873 to a middle-class family in Lisieux, a small town in Normandy, France, Thérèse was four when her mother died. 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, Thérèse wanted to enter the local Carmelite convent but since 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 notable blip on the screen of Thérèse’s otherwise short and uneventful life. Yet despite her brief and retiring existence, upon her death the name of Thérèse 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 Thérèse’s autobiography, which, 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 Thérèse describes both her personal experience and her distinctive insights into the nature of her “Little Way.”

As might be expected from a very young 19<sup>th</sup> century female who wasn’t feeling very well, the original document of *The Story of a Soul* is often described as cloying and sentimental. Plow through the treacle, though, and what is revealed is a will of steel to follow what only seems at first an almost childlike path of sanctity. <sup>3</sup>

In practice, Thérèse’s “Little Way” requires a very disciplined consciousness, even a *warrior-like vigilance*, to stay alert, focused and open to the presence of God. But it was this consciousness, this attentiveness to the presence of God in the midst of everyday activities of life, that Thérèse believed had the power to transform a situation, **any** situation, into a profound arena for holiness. For Thérèse, each moment of a person’s life that is accepted and lived in a spirit of love is an opportunity to exercise faith and deepen one’s relationship with God.

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

Now Brother Lawrence was the cook for his order. Not that he was 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.”<sup>4</sup> So it was in the kitchen that Brother Lawrence worked out *his* scheme for perpetually practicing the presence 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 (to 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 at the beginning difficult to accustom myself to thinking of (God) all the time.”

This is how Brother Lawrence practiced what Thérèse called her ‘Little Way:’ by thinking about God all the time, dedicating to God his every moment, offering to God his little successes, asking forgiveness of God for his little errors, and generally engaging in ongoing conversation and relationship with God. No florid prayers, no esoteric practices, no scholarly tomes, no private altars or special times set apart for divine communion. In fact, whenever his fellow monks droned their daily offices, what Brother Lawrence was best known for was falling asleep. Which, upon awakening, he would, of course, gratefully dedicate to God. Like Thérèse, Brother Lawrence “didn’t think about death or sin, about

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.428.

<sup>4</sup> The Practice of the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence, Translated by Robert J. Edmonson, Paraclete Press, Orleans, Ma. 1994. p. 37.

Heaven or Hell. He knew he was not capable of doing great things so his only thought was about doing *little* things for the love of God.<sup>5</sup> .

Contrast Thérèse's and Brother Lawrence's "Little Way," their constant, focused practice of the presence of God in everyday life, with our frenetic, stressed, over-stretched and over-anxious days. We hardworking, responsible, committed Christians 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, don't you find? – never mind on the love of God.

Between finishing school, finding a job, *keeping* a job or looking for a new one, preparing for marriage or doing our best to save the one we've got, between having babies and keeping teenagers safe, paying bills and drowning in deadlines, or even in our own self-absorption, when can we even mow the lawn, never mind pause to practice the presence of God? That's what I'd like to ask this simple-minded 16<sup>th</sup> century monk and his 19<sup>th</sup> century holy teenage counterpart.

But even as I ask that question, what I hear from Thérèse and Lawrence is a reminder that the soul's life is not about achievement but surrender. In every other aspect of our life, self-reliance, worthiness, control, become hallmarks of our growth. But not in our relationship with God. "In our relationship with God," Therese writes, "we are very small children. We always will be. There is no need to be anything else. On the contrary," she says, "it is essential that we never try to be anything else."<sup>6</sup>

So I tried it on the way to church one morning. I was running late for a called Session meeting, my hair was wet from the shower, as I sped through stop signs on Clifton, my tea spilled onto my lap, and I thought to myself, "Okay, God. Here it is: wet

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.69.

<sup>6</sup> *Simply Surrender*, p. 2.

hair, spilt tea, a slightly panicked, speeding preacher ...all dedicated...with love... to you..."

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 the pitiful offering I was making, and the silliness of trying to emulate a saint in my current, or any other, state. But I imagined God grinning, too, which sort of pleased me.

In her book *Everyday Sacred*, present day author Sue Bender speaks of her own journey to try to observe and appreciate the sacred in the small acts of her everyday life. Imagining herself each morning as a monk, going out with an empty begging bowl, she says, "I set out to see what each day offered. ...with fresh eyes."<sup>7</sup>

Remarks another author, "Simply to be there with open eyes, open ears, open heart. All else flows from that."<sup>8</sup>

Still, says Bender, "I was 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."<sup>9</sup>

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

---

<sup>7</sup> Everyday Sacred, A Woman's Journey Home, Sue Bender, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Whole Earth, Access to Tools, Ideas, and Practices, Fall, 2002. "Spirituality and Security," Joanna Macy, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Everyday Sacred, p. 158.

Remember the quote from Mother Teresa? “We do not do great things; only small things with great love.” What if we *did*? What if we actually made a stab at practicing the presence of God even just for the few days of this retreat?

I don’t know what that would be like. We’re not saints, you and I; we’re not even trying to be. But what would happen if we set the intention to be a just a hair more attentive during our day to the loving presence of God? Would we become holier? Happier? Or just slightly more annoying to be around?

The question brings us to another important aspect of Thérèse’s Little Way. Less interested in personal sanctity, or holiness, what Thérèse fervently believed is 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. Sounds sort of like a Course in Miracles, doesn’t it? That there exists a dynamic “principle of continuity” that somehow links our individual thoughts, acts, and reactions with *the rest of creation*.

While that may seem a pretty big leap for some of us, what more is it, really, than “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 Thérèse’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.”<sup>10</sup>

On a grand scale, it’s Mahatma Gandhi’s Satyagraha program that transformed the culture and economy of India by influencing individual buying choices. It’s Martin Luther King’s national program of small, personal acts of civil disobedience.

---

<sup>10</sup> Macy, p. 50.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world,”<sup>11</sup> remarked anthropologist Margaret Mead.

But honestly, Thérèse’s “Little Way” is not really about changing the world so much as it is about changing ourselves. If the smallest act grounded in the love of God has repercussions throughout the web of life,” it’s because the love of God is what holds that web together. “

So let’s try it for a couple days. Let the signs remind you to

dedicate your next breath to the love of God.

Or your next thought. Or your next meal.

Your walk in the woods or your swim in the lake;

the book you’re reading, or the puzzle you’re working,.

or the nap you’re taking.

Try offering to God your next shower. Or your next snack. Or your next game.

And see what happens.

“Look at all the trees,” says Jesus. “As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourself that summer is here. So also,” he says, “when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” So, just for kicks, let’s try it for a couple days – Thérèse’s ‘Little Way.’ Let’s just take a few moments each day - or heck, take every moment you can – let the signs remind you – to look around, and within, for the presence of God. And intentionally dedicate ourselves – or just a breath, or a blink, or a grin – to the love of God. Because Jesus says when we see these things taking place, we’ll know the kingdom of God is near. Which is all we really after, right?

To the glory of God. Amen.

---

<sup>11</sup> Whole Earth, Access to Tools, Ideas, and Practices, Fall, 1999. “The Margaret Mead 2001 Awards,” Nicole Parizeau, p.26.