

“The Gates of Entry”

Sermon from 1st Corinthians 2:5-13, selected verses and

**Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle*, the First Dwelling Places
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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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“Your faith rests not on human wisdom, but on the power of God. There is a certain wisdom we express among the spiritually mature. It is not a wisdom of this age, however, nor of the rulers of this age... No, what we utter is God’s wisdom: a mysterious, hidden wisdom... Of God’s wisdom it is written: ‘eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on anyone what God has prepared for those who love God.’ Yet God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Holy Spirit. She searches out all things, even the deep things of God. After all, no one knows one’s thoughts, except one’s own inner spirit; by the same token, no one knows God’s thoughts except God’s Spirit. We haven’t received the spirit of the world but the Spirit of God, so that we can understand what God has freely given us. And this is precisely what we talk about - not using words taught us by human wisdom, but words taught by the Spirit.”

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I mentioned last week that this summer, we’re doing a little bit of armchair travel through time and space in order to explore our own souls. Teresa of Avila is our 16th-century Spanish guide, and we’re using the record of her visions titled *The Interior Castle* as our tourbook.

Teresa didn’t start off wanting to write about the soul. It wasn’t like she was bursting with ideas she couldn’t wait to get down on paper.

She was asked to write – her superiors thought the other nuns in her order needed to learn about prayer, and that those women might understand her better than them.

And Teresa – I don't know, maybe she didn't take orders well – but she isn't about to write what she doesn't know, or to make something up just to complete her assignment. She tells her sisters honestly: what I'm being asked to write about, I can't, not with any assurance. Because it's just, at root, unknowable. She confesses, "We always hear about what a good thing prayer is, and our constitutions oblige us to spend so many hours in prayer. Yet only what we ourselves can do in prayer is explained to us; little is explained about what the Lord does in a soul." We do this – she writes – and we do not understand it. Maybe we understand the words we say, the breath we focus on, the intentions we send out. But we do not know what becomes of them, we do not know what the response on the other end of this sacred communication looks like. We know our part, but not God's. What happens in prayer, through prayer, is beyond us.

But here's what we can know: we can know ourselves. And really, we cannot know anything else, we cannot even begin, until we know ourselves.

And what we can know about ourselves, she wants her readers to trust, is that we have souls. She has read this, been taught it, experienced it, believed it. She has known a part of herself that is bodily and more than that. It is unimaginably beautiful, she writes, and we would know, if only we could find ourselves some peace and quiet, and pay attention.

She tells her sisters five hundred years ago – and, so, by extension, all of us, today – that the soul is a diamond. It is a massive diamond, a home with doorways and hallways and rooms carved into it; it is a diamond castle, and the journey through it reflects both the beauty we might expect of a diamond castle and the danger that flashes in every facet of it. Within the diamond there are seven dwelling places. As we make our way on our spiritual journey, we stop in to each one – to look around, to explore, some to dwell in for a while. And in the very center of it all is God. In the very center of the diamond home that is our soul is God, is the place where God dwells, where God lives and moves and has being, in each one of us.

In saying this – whether she knew it or not – Teresa was echoing other women religious of her time. Catherine of Genoa, an Italian mystic who died five years before Teresa was born, spent many of

her hours at a hospital where victims of the plague lay dying, so she could be a presence of love and care for them, when no one else could or would go. And the story is told that during a visit with one of these patients, Catherine was gazing so deeply into the person's eyes that she felt she could see his soul – and what she saw, in that soul, was God. And then she saw the same in herself. And when she left that hospital room, she ran through the streets, crying out, “My deepest me is God!” In seeing all the pretense that once surrounded that patient stripped away, Catherine saw what remained – in him, and in herself – and she knew it was holy.

Joan Chittister, a contemplative teacher and a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania today, calls this an experience of “the me that is always there, in rawest form. The me of all my distant hopes and all my controlling feelings, the vessel of my most illuminating, most uncensored insights into my reason for being, my place in the universe, and the raw material of my relationship to the sacred.” The recognition of this deepest self, Chittister writes, this place where God dwells, is the beginning of our spiritual life.

Before you get to thinking that because this castle is diamond-studded, it is luxurious, let me tell you: Teresa's vision is not all sparkle and flash. It is hard work just to get in.

Teresa pauses a moment here and says – ok. I know this probably sounds silly, to tell you it's important to enter into your own self, your own soul. Why, how, could you tell a person to enter a room they're already in? But listen, she writes – there are lots of ways you might be in your own home. And one is with your guard up. Never really relaxing into it. Never letting yourself feel safe, vulnerable, like never exploring all the closets you've just been throwing stuff to the back of for years, never digging in the drawers, never really letting yourself know, or remember, what's there. That's all such hard work. But before any of that, she writes, you have to get in. And the gate to this house, the way to open our souls, is through prayer and meditation.

We don't know what God does in prayer, she's already admitted. But we know what we do. We slow down. We quiet our spirits. Maybe we are restless, but we make an attempt at rest. Maybe we are distracted, but we make an attempt at focus. We turn our attention away from our own power and ability, and we admit that whatever we are is not all that is. That's the beginning. That confession is

where our spiritual journey begins – that noticing, and that acknowledgment, of the other – is how we enter in.

And then she writes this affirmation, for any of us who might find just this beginning part exhausting: she writes, “There are those that are very involved in the world, they have good desires and sometimes, though only once in a while, they entrust themselves to our Lord and reflect on who they are, although in a rather hurried fashion. They will sometimes pray, but their minds are filled with business matters that ordinarily occupy them. Sometimes they do put all these things aside, and finally they enter the first, the lower rooms. It can be hard for them to calm down. But they have done quite a bit just by having entered.”

Does it feel the same way to you, to hear that, as it did for me to read it? Like a gold star sticker on your worksheet? Like, oh, see, this was not a small thing – and someone noticed! Prayer and meditation, Teresa advises, to enter into our own souls. And we will have done quite a bit just by entering.

And it doesn't get any easier once we're there. The first room we come to, what she calls the first dwelling place, is the room of self-

knowledge. And for most of us, if we're honest, it is a complicated, difficult place to be.

The room of self-knowledge is where all those questions of who we are, who we have been, and who we might be start to rear their heads. It is where we're forced to confront the truths we have set aside for our own convenience, the lies we have let ourselves believe, about ourselves and about others. It is where we are asked to reckon with the ways we have not cared for ourselves, or one another, the ways we have neglected those we love and those we may never know, but whom our everyday actions impact. It is where we recognize our roles in the systems that shape the world, for good or for ill. It is a difficult place to be. We have to enter through prayer and meditation because if we do not quiet ourselves we will only find ourselves fighting in this room. We will not trust that it's necessary to be here before we can be anywhere else.

And maybe we need to stay in this room for a while. Maybe there's some lamenting, some confessing, some reckoning we need to do here. Or maybe there's a promise we've never quite let ourselves believe, that we need to embrace here in this room. Teresa writes about this journey through the castle and tells us God dwells in the very heart of it, at the very center. And so we will wind our way

there. But it is also true that there is no place we can be that God is not already and always there. The God we seek is the God within us. Chittister writes, “From the very center of ourselves, God spends all our lives calling us on – beyond the smallness of ourselves – to life bathed in the brightness of God.”

I mentioned last week that we’ll spend some time each week during this series journaling, a way of reflecting on these ideas for ourselves and tracking our own journey through this diamond home, this soul where God lives both in and through us. So I’d invite you now to grab your pen and paper, and to consider the invitation and the challenge in this bit of Teresa’s work that we’ve looked at today.

Journal prompt: How might you enter the room of self-knowledge? What do you imagine awaits you there? What would you hope to find – or to avoid – upon entering? While Keiko plays, take a few minutes to draw or sketch a response, or a prayer, or a question, or several, about the room of self-knowledge.