

“Consider the Precious Things”
Sermon from John 14:1-6a
Given Sunday, June 14, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God’s house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am, there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going.” Thomas replied, “But we don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I myself am the Way - I am Truth, and I am Life.”

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The year was 1531, the place was Avila, Spain, Europe was still in the throes of the Protestant Reformation, and Teresa was 16 years old, and boy-crazy. She snuck books from her mother, romance novels, and her father didn’t know it but he disapproved of her mother reading them so we can imagine he wouldn’t be thrilled if he found out his little girl was caught up in those same fantasies. And it didn’t matter that he didn’t find out about books: He saw the way she looked at boys who passed by; he heard the way she flirted with them when she talked; he was upset that cared more for fashion than any more respectable subject. He decided she was out of control. He took her to a convent. She resisted – and then relented,

when it turned out the convent was less strict than her father had been.

Teresa's father wasn't the only one with that idea. In the 1500s, many women ended up in convents because they had no place else to go – because their families were poor, because they didn't have suitors waiting for their hand in marriage, or because their fathers were like Teresa's, and decided they didn't want their daughters exploring a world of men. Convents were the places for girls who were boy-crazy.

And the boys knew it, too. The boys knew it, and they came to visit, and the new nuns arranged their veils prettily, and they wore jewelry, and they entertained suitors in the parlor. This was Teresa's life – this, and, other, new strange phenomena – inexplicable weeping, and lots of nosebleeds, and... spiritual visions, some say God-given, some say self-induced. Teresa and her friends were like teenage girls anywhere, gossiping about their love lives, the complicated homes they'd left behind, and also... their visitations from another realm.

That's how one biographer tells it. Another says her father didn't want her to go – that she was a favorite daughter, and he fought for

her to stay home, but the pull of the religious life was too great, and since he wouldn't give his blessing, Teresa ran away to the convent. It was only then, after she'd left home to join up with them, that her dad realized how important this path was to her, and he let her continue on.

Where the stories come together is here: all the versions agree that a little while into her time at the convent, Teresa fell ill with malaria, and suffered such a bad seizure that when she woke up four days after the attack she learned they had already dug her a grave. For some religious people, experiences like this birth in them a new dedication, a deep insight, a strengthened commitment – but not for Teresa. The opposite happened. She stopped praying, for decades.

When she was in her forties, a priest convinced her to try again. She tried. She hated it. She couldn't focus. She wrote about how hard it was to concentrate, what terrible headaches she had, how she kept looking ahead to when the end of her prayer time would be instead of just letting herself stay in it. Prayer was too much a reminder, she said, of all that was wrong with her.

But she began to experience visions, and to write them down, and her writing caught the attention of religious leaders of her day. Her experiences of the divine were extraordinary. And strange. She went to spiritual directors for guidance and they told her she was out of her mind, or possessed by the devil.

But however much the authorities questioned her, the nuns who lived with her loved her, and listened to her. Her visions led to reforms in the monasteries. Her teaching inspired her sisters to draw near to Christ, to pray in more ways than the men in authority had said they were allowed to, to explore and deepen their own spiritual lives, outside the bounds of what they'd been taught. She traveled around starting new religious communities all over her country, or bringing new life to old ones. She was elected to positions of leadership. Nasty pamphlets circulated about her, denouncing her and accusing her of ridiculous crimes, but those who loved her clung to her.

So, here's the thing about Teresa of Avila – she is mocked and celebrated, chastised and praised, punished and glorified, all by the same people. Church leadership in her day both resented and needed her. They wanted to encourage her to speak but also police what she said. They need her to educate the other women in the

convents, she had the voice those women would listen to; the church leadership was also afraid, of course, of that very same thing.

And Teresa knows this, and so her writing is peppered with self-deprecation, with apology and dismissal. And at the same time, the device she uses to do that elevates her work beyond question, beyond any human authority. She says in the same sentence that she doesn't know anything, that she doesn't have any ideas, that she cannot possibly write what she's been asked to – and that everything from here on out comes from God, that she's just like a parrot who can only repeat what's been said to it, she, too, can only repeat the teachings that come straight from God. She makes herself as humble as the men in charge need to believe she is – and then she claims this unimpeachable authority for her words, by saying it's really God talking here.

Here's a bit from the prologue to *The Interior Castle* – after she's said that she doesn't want to write her visions, she isn't inspired, and she has a headache, she writes: “In all that I say I submit to the opinion of the ones who ordered me to write, for they are persons of great learning. If I should say something that isn't in accordance with what the holy Roman Catholic Church holds, it will be through ignorance and not through malice... The one who ordered me to

write told me that the nuns in these monasteries of our Lady of Mount Carmel need someone to answer their questions about prayer and that he thought they would better understand the language used between women. I thus understood that it was important for me to manage to say something. So, I shall be speaking to them while I write; it's nonsense to think that what I say could matter to anyone else."

And yet, for 500 years, it has.

She ends this section, "And I should be very clear that should I manage, somehow, to say something well, the sisters understand that this does not come from me – the Lord gave it to me."

It's a trope that's almost laughable, the extent she goes to to dismiss her own voice, discredit her own authority – and yet we see still today which voices get privileged, which voices have to fight for airtime, how easily some voices are disregarded. It is a spiritual practice, perhaps, to seek to uncover those voices, to pass a microphone, to tune our ears to hear a new pitch.

We're taking up this work, actually – we're going on this imaginative journey to 16th-century Spain for the summer – because it has

something to say to us, here and now – especially since we’re spending so much time at home these days. Teresa’s work, *The Interior Castle*, uses the idea of home as a metaphor for the soul. There are many dwelling places – like the scripture we read for today – many dwelling places in the soul, like in a home, each accessible by different hallways and doorways, each exposed to or protected from different parts, each existing for its own purpose, all discoverable on a life’s spiritual journey. Commentator Wes Howard-Brook says that to understand this scripture passage in an individualistic way – like everybody’s got a separate, shiny mansion waiting for them in heaven – is to misunderstand both the language of the day and Jesus’ intent.

He tells us the word translated “dwelling places,” *monai*, comes from a secular Greek word for a resting place for a traveler. It was a safe place to go at night, a place of comfort in the dark, a place where a person would find communal welcome and a warm meal. It’s far from the idea of a private mansion; it’s maybe more like a bustling, friendly hostel. The one who enters in isn’t separate from everyone else, closed off. They become part of an organic whole.

This is the image Teresa starts with, this layered, living dwelling place – but that’s even too far for us to go today. Today, we’re just

going to receive the invitation. Today, we're just going to hear a lament and a call from Teresa, and let her invite us to enter in. As she begins to detail her vision of the soul and its dwelling places, she first says:

“It is unfortunate that we don't understand ourselves or know who we are... We do not strive to know who we are, but limit ourselves to considering only roughly these bodies. Because we have heard, and because faith tells us so, we know we have souls. But we seldom consider the precious things that can be found in this soul, or who dwells within it, or its high value. Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty.”

We seldom consider the precious things.

Is that true, for you?

In all that's happening in these days – as you listen to the virus counts, as you debate your trip to grocery store, as you don your mask again – how is it with your soul? As you follow the news, as you sign petitions and call legislators, as you show up in the streets to demand justice – how is it with your soul? As you figure out how best to arrange your workspace from home, or you design a rotation

with coworkers to return to the office, or you buckle down with your kids for one last week of homeschooling – how is it with your soul?

Do you consider the precious things? Do you believe that deep within you is something precious? Do you trust that there's something worth exploring there – something that might open itself to you, should you knock? It's a call we don't hear often these days – a reminder that we are more than what we do, or make, or accomplish – that inside each of us there is a life, a yearning, that we don't fully know or understand, but that is waiting for us, that is God-given and unique and might just be our gift to the world.

Friends we begin this summer with that invitation from Teresa, that challenge: to consider the precious things. In the weeks to come, we will journey through these dwelling places together, pausing to explore and to take some care of ourselves, so that even as we discover our souls we might also discover how to live more fully from them. I'm excited to journey with you.