

**“Showing Off and Taking Offense”**  
**Sermon from Matthew 6:1-6 & 16-18 & The Third Dwelling**  
**Places, *The Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila**  
**Given Sunday, July 5, 2020**  
**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**  
**Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor**

*Beware of practicing your piety before others to attract their attention; if you do this, you will have no reward from your Abba God in heaven. When you do acts of charity, for example, don't have it trumpeted before you; that is what hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. The truth is, they're already received their reward in full. But when you do acts of charity, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; your good deeds must be done in secret, and your Abba God - who sees all that is done in secret - will repay you. And when you pray, don't behave like the hypocrites; they love to pray standing up in the synagogues and on street corners for people to see them. The truth is, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to God who is in that secret place, and your Abba God - who sees all that is done in secret - will reward you. And when you fast, don't look depressed, like the hypocrites. They deliberately neglect their appearance to let everyone know that they are fasting. The truth is, they have already received their reward. But when you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Don't let anyone know you're fasting except your Abba God, who sees all that is done in secret. And Abba God - who sees everything that is done in secret - will reward you.*

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I don't know how much time you're spending on Zoom these days, but if you're like me, it's... a lot? And I don't know if you ever have these moments, like I do, when you look at your own screen and realize that pile of papers on your desk looks massive staring back at you, or that overflowing laundry basket that you'd thought was out of the shot is actually, clearly visible, lurking in the corner for

everyone on the call to see. It is true, for some, that these days quarantined at home have meant massive organization projects, and garages and home offices and gardens have never looked better. And, for some, moving an entire life home has meant that maybe not everything has a place right now, and there's a lot of scrambling and scatteredness that define these days.

Teresa of Avila is used to living among women who appear to have it all together. She is an older nun at her convent in Spain, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, one that the younger sisters look up to – which is why she's been asked to write this book about the soul that some 500 years later we're examining. In it – in this book she ends up calling *The Interior Castle* – she uses a home as a metaphor for the soul, but not just any home – a home consisting of many rooms, lots of winding hallways and doorways propped open and seven dwelling places, some of them consisting of several rooms, and in the center of it all – that's where God dwells in each of us. That's where we're always trying to get to.

So two weeks ago we spent some time in the first dwelling place: the room of self-knowledge. We can't get anywhere without stopping here first, she tells us, but truth be told, we could stay in that first room a long, long time. There is so much we do not know, are not

willing to consider, about ourselves. So that's where we start. Our quiet unlocks the door. This first room is beautiful and terrible, and it is necessary.

When we finally move on from there, we come to a place of testing. There are snakes and trials of all sorts in the second dwelling place, and we have to practice protecting our souls here. This is where we learn perseverance, the place on our spiritual journey where the soul learns that it can suffer and it can survive.

And today we come to the third dwelling place. It's another where Teresa says we could spend a long time. It's the room where we learn humility. And we stay here until we learn it – our whole lives, if it takes that, and it might, depending on how attached to outward appearances we are. And we learn humility – or, at least, she tells her sisters that they learn it – by looking at how well-ordered their lives are... and then letting that order be upset once in a while.

She tells them to beware the thought that since they have put on the nun's habit, and forsaken the things of the world, that they have arrived. She says she knows there's a temptation to think, "Well, surely, this is it. My choices – and these outward signs of them – speak for themselves. This black robe, this schedule of singing and

praying, this signing over my life to a convent, all of that, of course, must prove my humility.” Teresa is not impressed – like Jesus in our scripture is not impressed – with all the faithfulness that lies above the surface, all the stuff that can be seen. She knows – because she’s dressed herself in all those trappings, too – that what’s visibly righteous can make a whole lot else invisible... but not to God. Not to what lies deepest within us.

It makes me think about the space I clean up just before a Zoom call, the way I try to make sure my stacks of papers and piles of laundry are out of sight. They’re not gone, but I try to cultivate the impression that they never existed... and why? So my life looks like I’ve got it under control? Because I fear you might judge my mess? Because I make judgments about other messes I see?

There are people you can hire, you know, to help you get your lighting, and your angles, and your backdrop just right, so that those who see you see the very best – if by best we mean most flattering, most refined – version of you and your room. I don’t know what they charge. But what they’re selling is tempting, if it’s true that a carefully crafted Zoom square correlates to more esteem in the minds of the others who see you in it.

But Teresa's not falling for it. She thinks our messes are revelatory. They tell important things about us. Here in the Third Dwelling Place, she invites us, take a good, long look at the clutter. Be honest about it. This is the beginning of humility.

As she's settling in here, to stay a while, she asks her sisters – and so all of us – to consider what it would mean to let everything be. To see what comes – particularly what we might consider to be other people's messes – and to notice our reactions, and then instead of using those reactions as a basis for judgment about what we see, to use them as prompts to go a little deeper into ourselves.

She writes to the other nuns, “Let us look at our own faults and leave aside those of others, for it is very characteristic of persons with such well-ordered lives to be shocked by everything. Perhaps we could truly learn from the one who shocks us what is most important...”

I mean, I kind of love this old nun telling all her younger sisters at the convent, “Yes, aren't we prim and proper? Stop being so proud of that. Stop being so offended by everyone else. We close ourselves off when our first move is to judgment. Consider instead what your shock, what your taking offense, might teach you.”

Since reading this, I've tried to think about what people have taken offense at recently, and when we've practiced this kind of stepping back from judgment long enough to get to know the story.

Do you remember when Colin Kapernick first kneeled for the national anthem? It was nearly four years ago now, and the then-quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers took a knee as the song began, and people around the country flipped out. The offense was everywhere. Sports leaders and government leaders and football fans around the country attacked him for disrespecting the flag and, so they said, all who fought and died for it.

That wasn't the story, of course. From the beginning, Kapernick told the story: that he kneeled as a way of drawing attention to the oppression people of color face in this country. He said: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." He knew it was risky to say it. But he said, "If they take football away, [if they take] my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right." And essentially, they did. And he

kept declaring his patriotism: “I love America,” he said. “I love people. That’s why I’m doing this. I want to help make America better.”

There’s a real challenge there that goes unheard if our first reaction is to be offended. There’s a real invitation that goes unanswered if we never let ourselves get beyond that. I know those of you listening today may have been on Kaepernick’s side from the beginning – that his voice, and his action, may have resonated with you. What is it for you, though? What do you find yourself offended by? What backstory are you just not sure you’re interested in hearing, because your mind is pretty well made up?

I told the Bible Study group on Friday that the story that makes me cringe – the story I am just automatically offended by, and had never bothered to look into further – is Lady Gaga’s meat dress. And if you don’t remember, it is what it sounds like: the pop superstar Lady Gaga appeared, gosh, ten years ago now, at the Video Music Awards – and came on stage, to accept her award – wearing a dress, and a hat, and shoes, and carrying a purse – all made out of raw prime rib. She had some flashy jewels around her neck and a pair of fishnet hose to complete the outfit. And (as a thirty-year-vegetarian and somebody who grew up with the PETA magazine on our living room

table) I was appalled. I mean, I didn't know what it was about, but I was appalled. So as part of my exercise of coming to these Third Dwelling Places, I thought, well, maybe there's a story here. Actually, probably, there's a story here. There's always a story.

And I looked it up. And while the dress itself – and the matching accessories – are now on display at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and have been preserved as a kind of styled beef jerky, that whole outfit was meant not just to shock, but to refer back to a speech she had made earlier. She'd gone to Maine and delivered a 17-minute address as part of a lobbying effort asking the government to repeal the “Don't Ask Don't Tell” military policy. In that speech, she'd said that equality was the prime rib of America, the best thing this country has to offer, but for too long, that right had been denied to gay and lesbian people serving in the military. She said all this wearing a white button-up shirt, and a dark suitjacket, if that matters. Dressing herself in meat was a follow-up to that speech, meant to keep people talking about the analogy she'd made, meant to not let them forget her challenge to the institutions that loom so large in America.

And, you know, I still don't know if the analogy really works for me. But there was a story there. And now I know it. And so now my



challenge is to sit with questions like, “Will I say that some stunts are too much when the aim is equality?” “Will I continue to be offended by the tactics when I know that the goal is one I’d support?” And maybe the most humbling question in all of it, “Does my opinion even matter here? Where is my energy going?”

Teresa of Avila tells her sisters, who are so easily shocked and offended, “It’s true that we may surpass [the one who offends us] in external composure and our way of dealing with others. Although good, these things are not what is most important, nor is there any reason to desire that everyone follow at once our own path... It is better [for us] to carry out what our rule says, to strive to always live in silence and in hope, for the Lord will take care of [the rest].”

So let it go, she tells them. What we’re shocked by is what our reason tells us is ridiculous, or what our heart tells us to be afraid of. Let all that judgment go.

And trust that you can let your judgment of yourself go, too. Don’t try to hide your mess. Everybody’s got one. And more than a mess, everybody’s got a story. Teresa tells her sisters, “Abandon your reason and your fears into God’s hands.” Our reason and our fears help us cultivate these camera-ready scenes, help us weave these

tightly controlled narratives. But they're not honest, and they don't make us more free. Honesty is humbling, Teresa warns, but we're stuck where we are until we learn it.

I'd invite you to spend some time now with these ideas, and what they might mean for your life and practice. Grab some paper and something to write or draw or doodle with. During these next couple of minutes, you might make some notes about what offends you, and pledge to dig into that story. You might think about the messes you try to hide, and what it would mean to let someone see that part of your life. You might consider: What would it mean for you to "abandon your reason and your fears into God's hands," as Teresa suggests? What would you be giving up in an act like that? What might you gain? Take some time with those questions now...