

“Think Little, Love Much”

Sermon from 1st John 4:11, 12, 17-21

Given for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and God's love becomes complete in us—perfect love!

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry about any judgment—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Deep love banishes fear. A fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. God loved us first.

So if anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating their sibling, thinking nothing of it, they are lying. If they won't love the person they can see, how can they love the God they can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

–

Teresa of Avila has a headache. I mean, she wants to be praying, she wants to be meditating, she's totally committed to that, but this is bad. In the chapter of *The Interior Castle* that describes the Fourth Dwelling Places – the place in the house we arrive at this morning – she's in so much pain she can hardly describe it to us.

“While writing this,” she tells us, “I'm thinking about what's going on in my head – the great noise I mentioned at the beginning. It makes it almost

impossible for me to write what I was ordered to. It seems as if there are in my head many rushing rivers and that these waters are hurtling downward, and that there are many little birds, and whistling sounds, not in the ears but in the upper part of my head...”

So she sets the work aside, she tells us. We just have it as a finished product, as this treatise on the soul that she describes as a house, carved from a diamond, with many rooms, and winding hallways, and doors beckoning us on; we just have the complete version of that; we don't know how long it is between her setting the work aside and picking it back up again, but when she does, she tells us – or rather, she tells her sisters, the ones in the 16th-century Spanish convent that she's writing to – she tells them about distraction.

On the one hand, she tells them, the deeper we journey into the soul, the more those old distractions fall by the wayside. Like – good news for Steve and Dave and Russell – here in the Fourth Dwelling Places, there are no more snakes! The poisonous creatures that she warns nip at our ankles early on in this soul work have pretty much disappeared if we stick with it this long... or, at least, if they come around now, they aren't vicious. They just want to see what we're up to – but they aren't after us anymore. The more comfortable we get with our own souls – the more time we spend tending to them, the more we acknowledge that they need

our tending – the more these creatures, these outside afflictions, tend to stay away.

The difficulties we encounter as we go deeper in this work are not external. They arise from within us now. In the Fourth Dwelling Place, Teresa writes, our physical and our emotional selves are all stirred up. She's got these headaches. She mentions to her sisters that she knows some of them are sick – nosebleeds, tears they can't explain the cause of, other pains. We might have the same, or find that we can't sleep, or that our minds are a mess. We might feel ourselves pulled in a hundred different directions. We might sense that we're making progress towards a goal just to lose it all again, so fast – we might find that the ground it took us years to gain is swept out from under us in just moments.

In earlier stages, there was a kind of wildness outside of us, tugging at us from every angle, and our aim was to try to quiet that, to find some space and time away from that, to nurture our own spirits. Here, as we enter the Fourth Dwelling Place, Teresa tells us that we can endure whatever wildness is outside if we can cultivate stillness inside. And as it turns out, that can be even more difficult.

We come back to some of what we learned in the earlier rooms – that we don't really know ourselves, that there are truths about ourselves that we

just don't face. But instead of accusations like that coming at us from the outside, here they arise from within us... and they feel like doubt, they sound like disapproval, they taste like fear. We think that if we can't even know ourselves, how can we know God, or each other? How can we love God, or each other, like the scriptures for today instruct, when we're so distracted we can't even sit still long enough to pray?

But listen: if we really believe in the indwelling of God – if we believe that the presence of God permeates our world – and not just our world as a big abstraction, but everything around us, specifically, and each one of us, individually – if we believe that the sacred moves in our muscles and breathes in our being – then it makes sense that we don't fully know ourselves. And that not knowing is something not to fear but to wonder at, something not to run from but to be curious about, to draw close to...

If God is closer than our own skin, taking up residence in our souls, it makes sense that in real ways, the deepest part of who we are remains a mystery, even to ourselves. It makes sense that we might not fully know ourselves – but not that we might not fully trust ourselves. And this is where Teresa is trying to get us to in this Fourth Dwelling Place: she's telling us, let it be. "Leave the soul in God's hands," she tells us as we enter this room, "let God do what God will with it."

Because when we don't, she warns us – when we try too hard to control all the steps of our spiritual journeys, we end up fighting in ways that turn us into all head and no heart. “Let the intellect go,” she tells us, when we come to a place where we feel like our best efforts aren't enough. “Let the intellect go and surrender into the arms of love, and God will teach the soul what it must do at that point.”

It's the language of a lover – so many of these cloistered women imagined intimacy with God in these terms – and it's also really freeing. She says it will just happen sometimes, this inward turning – she says it's like a hedgehog, curling up, or like a turtle, drawing into its shell – she calls this the prayer of recollection. We don't make it happen, we just notice when it does, when it begins inside of us, and once it does, all we have to do is pay attention... both to what God does in the soul then, and to the distractions that come. Because they will.

I don't know if there's been a room so far that has resonated with you – if you've heard the description of the entryway, where we begin to understand that our soul is issuing us an invitation, or the first room, the room of self-knowledge, where we begin to quiet ourselves; or the second room, where we have to be on guard to protect our souls; or the third room, where we're asked to stop being so offended, and learn some humility, and understand that everybody's got their own path...

I don't know if you heard any of those rooms and thought, "yeah, that's where I am in my spiritual journey right now" or if maybe we still haven't made it to where you'd locate yourself. With each new room I read I think, "Oh, maybe this is where I am. I am still learning myself, for sure. Or I am definitely being asked to learn some humility," like maybe I'm cycling through these first few rooms, but this fourth one – this one where the distractions come – this really feels like home right now.

And so I try to manage my distraction. To control my environment. To focus my attention. To set alarms to draw my mind back to the project at hand in case I drift away, because of course I will drift away. To make lists with circles I can put checkmarks in when the task is complete. This week I started to think of things I needed to do, and went to get a piece of paper and pen to make my list, and by the time I was holding those things in my hand I'd forgotten what it was I'd needed to write down. I know I'm not the only one who's done this.

And some of this is understandable. Even if our lives have slowed down, we're overtaxed. In addition to whatever our ordinary activity has been, we're all also managing what it means to live inside a global pandemic. We're trying to process news that things sound like they'll get worse before they get better. We're trying to keep connected to loved ones that

we cannot hug or share food with. We're trying to figure out what school and work and community will look like in the months ahead. We're trying to give ourselves the care we need, and to give the world around us the care it needs, and to begin to make right the world for those communities that have so long been denied any care, or any recognition of need. There are thousands of places for our minds to go besides prayer, thousands of places our faith also calls us to respond.

And Teresa says, "So let it go." She says we can't control our wandering minds with our minds, and we don't need to try to. Because focus, and stillness, and quiet, aren't all that is holy. They aren't the only gifts of God, the sole ways God calls to us. Distraction, and restlessness, and noise, are also ways that the Spirit works. Teresa writes, "I only wish to inform you that in order to profit by this path and ascend to the dwelling places we desire, the important thing is not to think much but to love much, and so do that which best stirs you to love... Don't think the matter lies in thinking of nothing else. Don't think that, if you become distracted, all is lost."

She tells us if we're praying, and our minds wander, follow the wandering. That's God's nudging; that's God prompting us. She tells us if we pass a person on the street on our way to prayer, and as we are praying, we find ourselves distracted by thoughts of that person – who

was she? What is her story? Is she in need right now? – Teresa says, leave the prayer, and go find her. Your distraction isn't pulling you out of prayer, or away from God. It's moving you towards love.

You want quiet but there's noise in the street?

Go listen.

You want stillness but your body is restless?

Go move.

You want solitude but your kid comes knocking?

Pull him in for a hug.

You want to shut out the news, but your phone dings with an update?

Make that breaking story your prayer.

You have a headache, like Teresa's?

Just stop. Show yourself some love. Let yourself be.

Not always, maybe. But sometimes, when we think we're being pulled away from our spirits, we're really being called to cultivate them. This movement to follow our distractions is not abandoning our spiritual work. It's about recognizing the many ways God's Spirit moves in the world, the many, many ways our own spirits are called to respond in love.

This Fourth Dwelling Place is a place of freedom. It's an invitation to let go of our expectations of what the spiritual life should look like, and to

embrace that truth that the spiritual life looks like our own everyday, messy, distracted existence. That the complicated world we live in is God's world. And our invitation is to love it all, like God loves the complicated people we are.

I'd invite you this morning to think back over a time when you've felt distracted. When you've wanted to be moving in a certain direction, but felt yourself pulled elsewhere. Could that have been a call to love? With your pen and paper, for the next few minutes, write or sketch your response to Teresa's idea that dwelling in God doesn't mean "thinking of nothing else, without distraction, but doing that which best stirs us to love." I'd invite you to reflect on that idea, or more broadly, on the questions: have you ever been "stirred to love"? What was that like? How did you respond? This journal time is just for you, to let your soul speak for a moment, or to listen to listen to the ways it's being spoken to.