

“Mysteries of Humanity”
Sermon from Philippians 4:5-14 & the Sixth Dwelling Places
of Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle*
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Sunday, August 9, 2020
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Let everyone see your gentle spirit. Our Savior is near. Dismiss all anxiety from your minds; instead, present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances. Then God’s own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, my siblings, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, decent, admirable, virtuous, or worthy of praise. Live according to what you have learned and accepted, what you have heard me say and seen me do. Then will the God of peace be with you.

It gave me great joy in our God that your concern for me bore fruit once more. You had been concerned all along, of course, but lacked the opportunity to show it. I don’t say this because I am in need, for whatever the situation I find myself in, I have learned to be self-sufficient. I know what it is to be brought low, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret: whether on a full stomach or an empty one, in poverty or in plenty, I can do all things through the One who gives me strength. Still, it was kind of you to want to share in my hardships.

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Many of you are gardeners, right? I wonder if you can tell me – tell us – why, in just a word or two. Like, what is it that you find in your garden? Is it peace? Is it nurture? Is it joy? Would you name it, in the comments here, so we can get a sense for that, for why people spend time in their gardens – for why you do in yours?

If you were to wake up in the morning, and make yourself a cup of coffee, and bring it outside, maybe still with a blanket wrapped around you, to sit on your porch and breathe some fresh air as you begin to stir, and you looked over at your garden and saw a man you didn't know there, hunched over and heaving silent sobs, how would you respond?

Maybe that's not quite right. Maybe that's too intrusive, too personal. Imagine this instead – you're at the International Test Rose Garden in Portland. Or the Japanese Garden. But those are too fancy – you need to be somewhere that doesn't charge admission – maybe you're at Lower City Park, walking home from the library. Or maybe you're at the community garden here in McMinnville, just off Burnett Road, where tucked inside a circle of arbor vitae there's a labyrinth that's open to everyone. That's probably about right. Imagine you're there – you've come to walk the labyrinth, or maybe to see if the tomatoes are red enough to pick yet – and you nearly trip over a woman lying at the entrance gate.

Do you ask if she's ok? If she tells you she's really not, what do you say next? Do you ask if she has any friends, anybody you can call? If she tells you they've abandoned her, she's all alone, what do you do

next? Do you ask if she has a home to go to? If she says no, what happens next?

Teresa of Avila says, imagine this. Teresa, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic we've been following all summer on this journey towards the center of our soul says, think about this. We're getting so close to that center – in her vision, our souls are like castles, with a blueprint like a house with seven rooms and the seventh, the one at the very center, being where God dwells. Here, in what she calls the sixth dwelling place, she tells us to work on listening to our souls, spend time meditating on Jesus in the garden. If you are cultivating your own spirit, she says, don't spend all your time thinking about spiritual things, whatever those might be. Spend your time thinking about human things. Like that story of Jesus, near the very end of his life, in that garden where the public would come to walk among the olive trees, scared and alone, crying out and praying, and with nowhere else to go.

She says you can't think about that garden without thinking about Jesus' humanity. And thinking about Jesus' humanity – meditating on it, which is what she calls this remembering – is a kind of sincere prayer. She says if we begin there, it takes us elsewhere – she says “the mere sight of the Lord fallen to the ground in the garden with

that frightful sweat is enough to last the intellect not only an hour but many days, while it looks with a simple gaze at who he is..." And she says even if we don't feel good about it, we will feel something. Like even if this imagining doesn't, say, make us fall in love with Jesus, it will move us to act in some way. It will remind us of the humanity all around us – and remind us that humanity is a condition of need, and struggle – and so even if it is hard to think about, it is important that we do.

There is so much mystery, she writes, in the person of Jesus. There is mystery in humanity and there is mystery in divinity. And the mysteries of humanity – we share in those. We are also creatures of need and struggle. What's complicated and beautiful and difficult about Jesus' life is also complicated and beautiful and difficult in our own lives.

She says there are certain spiritual teachers who will say the way to grow closer to God – using her imagery, the way to advance through these rooms of the castle that is your soul – is to remain in a state of joy always. Our Scripture for this morning says it – "dismiss all anxiety; give thanks for all circumstances." And she takes on the apostle Paul here. She says, Listen closely: "do not trust anyone who tells you that the important thing is to remain always in a state of

delight.” She says, “Life is long, and there are in it many trials. I would be suspicious of anyone who tells you otherwise.”

And our scriptures for today get there. Those qualities that Paul listed later – that part of today’s reading that’s urging us to think about whatever’s true, honest, admirable, worthy of praise – the very beginning of that, whatever is true – in those words, I think Paul is urging his readers in the same way Teresa is. A commentary I read long ago suggests we read “true” as “real.” Like, what has actually happened? What is the shape of the situation right in this moment? What do we know for certain?

For Paul and his readers, this text comes from a sort of Jesus-in-the-garden moment. Paul is in jail. He was awaiting his own trial, by the Romans, and a guilty charge would likely find him executed. His readers are facing persecution. What’s real, undoubtedly, is their own fear. What’s real is that they live under a harsh regime who protected its own power at all costs. What’s real is that Rome was always at war, somewhere on its borders. What’s real is that individual citizens and whole population bore the brunt of Rome’s aggression.

What's also real is that Paul clung to a narrative of resurrection, a story that told him there were forces more powerful than the violence he was up against. What's also real is that he was writing this letter to his friends. Did you hear that in it? He tells them, "I know you have cared about me all along. I know it's been hard to share that. But thank you for wanting to come alongside me, even when things are so hard." What's real is that even when they're prevented from caring for him in the ways they once did, he understands that their hearts are with him, and knowing that sustains him through the toughest times.

Teresa's version of Paul's scripture here is basically: think on things like how hard this all is, and, if you can, at the very same time, think about the depth of the hope that you have, and the reach of the love God has for you. Let all of that fill your mind, just briefly. And what comes in briefly will stay with you, it will work on you, it will shape who you are, if you let it.

At Bible Study Friday we were asking about what it means to be human. About what it means that we are human, what characterizes us: we're not the only creatures who use language, who developed tools, who express creativity, or emotional capacity, or reason. I was trying to suggest that these verses call us toward the best of what's

possible for humanity – gentleness and gratitude and connection. We asked about what it means, really, that Jesus is human, and about the uniquely human situations we sometimes face. And someone said, “You know, like, Jesus sometimes ran out of money.”

And I thought, “What?” But of course that would be true. Have you ever run out of money? To be human, at least for the vast majority of us, is to sometimes run out of money. Jesus was a traveling teacher. He was reliant on strangers, who were sometimes more hostile than hospitable to him. I thought about Jesus, hungry, reaching into his pocket, pulling out only a few coins, pouting and mumbling because he’s unable to afford a sandwich. I kept thinking about that.

I mean, the idea really fascinated me – Jesus, out of money. I had all kinds of questions about this. Like, where did his money usually come from? What were his expenses? Food? Rent? Taxes to the Romans? Or did he live, like, off the grid – eating whatever figs he could snag from a tree, couch-surfing at friends’ places, every now and then building a small table or a shelf to get some cash to carry him through a little while longer?

And here’s what else I realized as I ran through these questions: I am not nearly this fascinated by most people who run out of money.

I don't spend time imagining the back story of everyone in obvious need. I sometimes think it's very sad; I sometimes think it's very unjust; I sometimes think it's very scary. But I am not always – maybe not even often – intensely curious about it.

And I know tradition makes different claims for and about Jesus than it does the rest of us, but I wonder if what Teresa said here was actually working on me – if thinking about his humanity is starting to break me open in new ways, to think about the humanity all around me, too.

I mean, what if I – what if we – came to the park to walk the labyrinth or check the tomatoes, and we stumbled over a woman lying across the entrance? What if the first thing we were – before we were sad, or scared, or carrying on about injustice – what if the first thing we were was curious? What if instead of making judgments or looking for solutions we started by just coming alongside and asking questions?

This section from Teresa has me thinking about everything I assume I already know. Has me wondering how often I'm too afraid, or too lazy, to have those assumptions challenged. Has me considering that

maybe, along with gentleness, gratitude, respect, honesty, purity – maybe we could list “curiosity” as a spiritual virtue.

There’s a lot about I don’t understand – not yet, and maybe I won’t ever. But today, and here at this point on the path with Teresa, I’m interested in how questions about Jesus might also be questions about anyone else, and questions about anyone might also be questions about Jesus. If working from near the center of our souls means thinking about those connections, then spiritual work is also deeply practical work, work not separated from how we live each day but work with profound implications for that living. These journeys of our souls are not private. What happens on this path matters not just for us but for the worlds we inhabit and have been entrusted with. How can you be curious about your world?

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Friends, take some time now, while Geoff plans, to reflect for a while. Write or sketch or somehow work out some thoughts, responding to these questions: What does Jesus’ humanity make you wonder about your own? And, or... What does your own humanity make you wonder about Jesus?