

“Union & What Follows”

**Sermon from John 14:15-21 & The Seventh Dwelling Places of
Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle***

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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“If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. I won’t leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you’ll see me, because I live, and you will live as well. On that day you’ll know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by Abba God. I, too, will love them and reveal myself to them.”

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I mean, Teresa of Avila couldn’t have known she was writing to us. She wrote more than 500 years ago, in Spain, this book we’ve been following all summer, where she develops this layered metaphor of the soul as a castle, where God dwells at the center, and our journey through it is our spiritual life. There’s a lot that she says that’s pretty far from our world. But here at the end – in the epilogue, actually – she sounds like she’s writing, *particularly*, to people in quarantine.

She tells her sisters at the convent where she also lives – the ones the book is addressed to – she tells them, and maybe us,

“Considering the strict enclosure, and the few things you have for your entertainment, and that your buildings are not always as large as would be fitting for [your situation], I think it will be a consolation for you to delight in this interior castle since, without permission from the prioress, you can enter and take a walk through it at any time.” She’s essentially saying, *your world may feel pretty limited these days, but the world inside you is endless.*

Except, this week, the journey she’s been leading us on is coming to an end. There are seven dwelling places in the castle she’s been describing to us, and this week, we finally arrive at the seventh. This is where she’s been leading us all along. This is our destination. This is the very center of our souls, the place inside each of us where God also makes a home. Teresa suggests we might call this space “another heaven,” that *inside each human soul is another heaven.*

And arriving here might actually be a little anti-climatic. In previous dwelling places, on earlier stops along this spiritual journey, she’s told us about incredible visions and feelings of ecstasy and splendor and how all the senses are overwhelmed and here – well, it’s not like that here.

Here, it's quiet. No trumpets announce your arrival, no processional makes way for God to be revealed. And here, the sacred presence is subtle. Glory doesn't blindingly shine and angels don't flit around in all the corners.

Here, somehow, the promises of the scripture we read for today are made real: here, Teresa writes, the Creator, and the Christ, and the Spirit, all speak to the soul, and explain, she says, "those words of the Lord in the Gospel: that they will come *to dwell with the soul that loves them* and keeps the commandments." The Scriptures give lots of different names to this presence that we meet at the center of our souls, this one who dwells within us: it's called an Advocate, a Helper, a Counselor, a Friend, a Comforter, a Companion, a Spirit of Truth.

All the names get at the idea that this indwelling presence is *not only with us but for us*, that *we can trust it*, that it is a kind of intuitive nature that wants our thriving.

We don't know it because it's noisy. We know it because *it is a natural part of who we are*. This journey awakens it – no, that's not right – this journey awakens *us* to it – and when we find it, we know a new aspect of our own selves.

“In this temple of God,” Teresa writes, “in this dwelling place, God and the soul rejoice together in the deepest silence.”

She calls this experience, this knowledge of God’s indwelling, ordinary and frequent, gentle and penetrating. It’s not like in some of the earlier dwelling places where the senses were sometimes overwhelmed with the knowledge of God’s nearness. Teresa is really practical here; she says that can’t last forever. If we always felt God’s presence so clearly, she writes, “*the soul would find it impossible to be engaged in anything else, or even to live among people.*” But here’s the thing, she says, here’s the mark of this dwelling place: ***every time the soul stops to take notice, it finds itself in God’s company.***

Isn’t that just wonderfully comforting? Isn’t it a gift? We engage with the world, we live among people, we work, we play, we love, and whenever we stop to take notice, we find our soul is still with God. It’s a mature enough relationship that there’s not the need for constant checking in, for ongoing reevaluation. Just a promise, and assurance, that God is right there, that we might get busy or distracted or sad or doubtful or anxious but just a pause, just slowing down our breath, just turning inward for a moment, and we

find God, saying, “I’m still here. I’ve been here all along. I’ll be here in all that’s to come.”

Teresa’s insistence on the subtlety of this presence helps me to believe that even when I maybe can’t feel it, I can trust that it remains.

T.S. Eliot says the purpose of a journey is to come back to where you started from and to see it again for the first time. In a real way, this is what Teresa does – she begins in life with her sisters at the convent. She tells them, “There is an incredible journey waiting for you, an unbelievably beautiful and complicated world to explore inside your own soul. You can begin anytime; it is always beckoning you.”

And then she describes for them what the journey is like – at least, how she’s experienced it – she describes the trials and the difficulties, her sickness, her worry; she describes criticism from other people and her own self-doubt; she describes moments of wonder and amazement; she describes feeling attacked, and feeling buoyed up; and the new knowledge and understanding that awaits her in each new dwelling place; and at the end of it all, she returns to

life at the convent with her sisters. She sees her place with them again, *as if for the first time*.

They're taken by this notion of journey – they want to go, too, but in a really literal way. They're worried that their world is too small. They're restless. They're stir-crazy. They say, “How can we be converting people when we stay right here all the time? And if we're not converting people, how are we doing any good for the kingdom of God? What do our lives matter if we're not out in the world doing big, bold things?”

And she tells them, *that kind of thinking is a trick*. It's a trick to distract us, and *it is not of God*. She tells them, “Concentrate on those who are in your own company. The fire of love in you will enkindle their souls, too, and each of your virtues awakens something new in those around you. And that is no small thing.”

After this long journey through the soul, what she calls our interior castle, she writes, “My Sisters, what I conclude is that we shouldn't build castles in the air. The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done. And if we do what we can, God will enable us each day to do more and more,” that is, *to love, more and more deeply*.

Wherever love does not increase, it decreases, she tells them. “I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same.” And so prayer and contemplation are good practices, she says, but only if they lead the Sisters to love each other more. This journey, and this arriving finally at the center, is only beneficial in that it shapes their love for each other in new and more profound ways. She says it’s an evil trick that convinces us our lives are only worth anything if we achieve incredible goals – it’s a trick that keeps us from focusing on what’s right at hand. And if we fail, we too easily become satisfied with at least having desired the impossible. She tells us, instead, “Serve God in possible things. You need not be desiring to benefit the whole world but must *concentrate on those who are in your company*, and thus your deed will be greater since you are more obliged toward them.”

Teresa is sixty-two years old when she finishes this writing; she will die when she’s sixty-seven. In those last five years of her life, she both follows her own advice and rebels against it. After she finishes this writing, she will go on to found four more monasteries in Spain, a seemingly impossible task for a woman with all her frailties – but they are all rooted in this same vision, this same *limited, local*,

possible ideal: that the best we can do is live for and with each other, grounded by the love of God that dwells within us.

That's the truth she comes to at the end of this long journey of her soul, and the one she spends the rest of her life traveling around Spain trying to teach. The union of her spirit with the Spirit of God compels her to unite her spirit in love with the sisters she shares her life with. That love will change, and grow – that's how she knows it's alive, how she knows she's alive, how she knows God's Spirit is alive within her.

I'd invite each of you to take some time now reflecting on that idea – this is our last journal entry for the summer – so if you have all of yours, maybe you'd want to gather them up, keep them somewhere, revisit them from time to time. But for today, I'd invite you to think, and write, or draw, or reflect on this sharing from Teresa: "I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same." How has this idea been true in your life? How has your love for God, or yourself, or others, changed, shifted, or grown over time? Get some thoughts about that on paper, and in a few minutes we'll sing together.