

Spiritual Guides: Teresa of Ávila Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen NPMC – August 15, 2021

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9; John 15:1-12

Hymns: VT 568 – Christ Has No Body Here but Ours, VT 604 (HWB 562) – Nada te Turbe

Psalm 136:1-9

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for God is good,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.
- ² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.
- ³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁵ who by understanding made the heavens,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁶ who spread out the earth on the waters,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁷ who made the great lights,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁸ the sun to rule over the day,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁹ the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.

John 15:1-12 (NRSV)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

As Anabaptist-Mennonites, we like to think we're pretty up on church history in 1500s Europe. That's our wheel-house, so to speak, when our little branch of the church was born out of a rediscovery of the Bible and a sense of being empowered to follow Jesus as a community of disciples. Many of us could probably name some of the main reformers of the Radical Reformation: Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock, who were the first to re-baptize each other; Michael and Margaretha Sattler, who left life in

monasteries to become early Anabaptist leaders; Menno Simons, the pastor for whom our denomination was named. But what we may not know is that ours was not the only church reform movement going on at that time. And no, I'm not talking about Martin Luther and John Calvin and the mainline Protestants. I'm talking about the Catholic Reformation, sometimes called the Counter-Reformation. You see, the Protestants and Anabaptists weren't the only ones who realized the Catholic Church had some serious corruption issues and was in need of change. There were those within the Catholic tradition who recognized this as well, and set about making reforms – only their method wasn't to break off and form a new church, like the Protestants and Anabaptists! I want to speak today about a spiritual guide who was part of the Catholic Reformation movement.

Teresa of Ávila (also known as Teresa of Jesus) stands out as one of the key figures in the Catholic Reformation – a woman remembered as a mystic, a church reformer, and a spiritual writer. Born in 1515 in Ávila, Spain, Teresa was said to even be interested in spirituality as a child. When Teresa was a girl, she and her brother would meditate by repeating the word, “Forever” over and over until they felt a sense of union with God.¹ This little story from Teresa's childhood brought to my mind the words of Psalm 136, which has this kind of meditative or contemplative repetition to it, also centred on the word “forever”:

O give thanks to the LORD, for God is good,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.
² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.
³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for God's steadfast love endures forever;

¹ James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Turning to the Mystics Podcast, August 24, 2020, *Center for Action and Contemplation*, Transcript p. 4, <https://cac.org/podcasts/bonus-the-life-and-work-of-teresa-of-Ávila/>

⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for God's steadfast love endures forever.

This psalm is a wonderful example of Teresa's understanding of prayer as profoundly personal, emotional, and intimate. "For Teresa, prayer was essentially an 'exchange of love with God.'"²

At the age of 20, after a tumultuous adolescence, Teresa joined a convent, the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation.³ Her father was initially against it, but soon gave her his blessing. However, she was disappointed by the "low quality of spiritual nurture she found there," which started her on a path to church reform. She eventually founded a stricter order of nuns called the Discalced Carmelites and an order for men. She's the only woman in the church to have founded a monastic order for male friars.⁴ So you might wonder what gave her this kind of spiritual authority in the church as a woman in the 16th century? In a word, it was her visions.

Teresa's health was not very strong, especially in her late twenties and early thirties. These experiences of suffering and illness led her to rely entirely on God and to pray her way through seemingly hopeless situations, even near-death experiences. This puts Teresa's words in the hymn, "Nada te Turbe" (VT 604/HWB 562) into a different light. The English translation is: "Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. Whoever has God lacks nothing. Only God is enough." This kind of prayer served as her mantra as she spent many hours bedridden with illness.

² Bradley P. Nystrom and David P. Nystrom, *The History of Christianity: An Introduction* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2004), 281.

³ "Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)," in *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 196.

⁴ Bradley P. Nystrom and David P. Nystrom, *The History of Christianity: An Introduction* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2004), 281-282.

At age 40, she experienced what she called her “second conversion” and began receiving visions, often of Christ. In her first vision, Teresa saw only the hands of Christ, and he spoke to her, explaining that he understood that she could not take in his whole glorified form at once, so he just showed her his hands, as a start, a preparation. She experienced this as profoundly generous and loving.⁵ Later, one of her most vivid



visions (and somewhat disturbing to our modern ears) was of Christ piercing her heart with a spear.⁶ This vision of Teresa’s is depicted in a famous statue called “The Ecstasy of St. Teresa” by Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini, which is installed in a church in Rome. (Notice an angel here holding the spear.)⁷ These visions established Teresa as a spiritual leader, and

word spread about her. It was at this time that she began to work to establish new Carmelite convents where much more time was spent in contemplative prayer – two hours a day! This was one of the main reforms she introduced. She also began writing, first her spiritual autobiography and later a book on prayer called, *Interior Castle*. John of the Cross was her assistant for many years (and later went on to write his own well-known spiritual book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*).⁸

But not all were happy with Teresa’s influence. Precisely because of her emphasis on contemplation and silent prayer, she was looked on with suspicion by

⁵ James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Transcript p. 8.

⁶ *Devotional Classics*, 196.

⁷ Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

⁸ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), 74-75.

those who wanted to control the theology of the church. This was, after all, during the time of the Spanish Inquisition, which was supposedly trying to root out heresy – a charge which held a death sentence, as our Anabaptist history shows. Reflecting on this time, Dorothee Soelle writes, “For the church authorities, the oral communal prayer in the words of the church tradition and shaped by its doctrinal knowledge was beyond questioning. That people might pray without moving their lips and without murmuring words appeared strange, even threatening,” especially among nuns, who as women, were not supposed to think theologically for themselves.⁹ Accused of heresy by priests and friars who resented her spiritual influence, Teresa began to be suspected of receiving her visions from the devil, not Christ. It was actually a demand from the Inquisition that she begin writing to document the visions and voices in order “to prove that her experiences, in fact, were gifts from God and not tricks of the devil.”¹⁰ But her name was finally cleared by the king of Spain himself, who investigated and found no wrongdoing in her writings or the convents she formed.¹¹ According to one of my sources, even her inquisitors fell in love with her writing and became her students!¹²

Teresa’s most influential book, *The Interior Castle*, which she wrote in 1577, reflects her emphasis on prayer. In it, she uses the metaphor of a castle with many rooms to describe stages of the spiritual journey, beginning outside the castle and entering the door (which is prayer) to the first room. This imagery is based on Jesus’ words in John 14:2, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” The ultimate goal in Teresa’s book is to arrive in the central room, where the soul can enter into complete

⁹ Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 74-75.

¹⁰ James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Transcript p. 5.

¹¹ See the following sermon by pastor Rob Durocher, “St. Teresa of Ávila – A Renewer of the Church, a Saint, and a Child of God,” Oct. 14, 2020, St. John’s Lutheran Church, Salisbury, NC, <https://stjohns-salisbury.org/2020/10/14/st-teresa-of-avila-a-renewer-of-the-church-a-saint-and-a-child-of-god/>

¹² James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Transcript p. 6.

union with God. This theme of uniting one's soul with God – in contrast to a theology of obedience to God – is a common thread through the mystical tradition. Teresa talks about union with God this way in *The Interior Castle*: “The *will* inclines the soul to love God, the one in whom it has seen so many acts and signs of love. In particular, the will shows the soul how this True Lover never leaves it but goes with it everywhere and gives it life and being. Then the *understanding* comes forward and makes the soul realize that, for however many years it may live, it can never hope to have a better friend.”¹³ One can really hear echoes in her words here of our passage from John 15, where Jesus talks about being united with and sustained by God as “abiding in God.” In an almost dizzying back-and-forth, Jesus calls us to “Abide in me as I abide in you,” for



Teresa of Ávila, by Fray Juan de la Miseria (Public domain)

in doing so we will abide in Christ's words and abide in God's love in Christ. Through this mutual and seemingly interchangeable abiding, we can bear good fruit and have complete joy. This is another way of speaking about loving union with God, which was Teresa's

highest goal. She describes it at one point as rain falling into a river – once they have been united it's impossible to tell which drops of water were rain or river-water; they've become indistinguishable and inseparable. That's what union with God is like.¹⁴

But despite this seemingly other-worldly mysticism, Teresa's spirituality was firmly grounded in the here and now (hence her emphasis on reforming injustices within

¹³ *Devotional Classics*, 196-197.

¹⁴ James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Transcript p. 10.

the church). Like other spiritual guides that have been shared about this summer, Teresa saw contemplation and action in the world as profoundly connected. Reflecting on reopening at this stage of the pandemic, Stephanie Paulsell makes this observation about Teresa's outlook in *The Interior Castle*: "It might seem counterintuitive to read an account of an inward journey to think about a journey back out into the world, but Teresa seems always to be looking in both directions at once. The whole point of the journey inward, she writes, is to make ourselves fit for service to our neighbor; the whole point is to love more."¹⁵ Teresa's life and writings often seem to reflect this sense of meeting God in the everyday, or of the sacredness of the ordinary – even ordinary challenges. In *The Interior Castle*, she writes, "God appeals to us through other good people, through sermons, or through the reading of good books. Sometimes he calls through our sicknesses and our trials as he bids us to pray. However feeble such prayers may be, God values them highly."¹⁶ Teresa is indeed remembered for her "acceptance of and ability to find hope and meaning in physical suffering."¹⁷ There is another earthy story about Teresa that I found amusing. Late one night, a group of nuns and priests had come back from visiting another convent, and one of the nuns went into the kitchen to find Teresa enthusiastically eating roasted partridge in the convent kitchen in the middle of the night! And she was kind of scandalized, believing that eating should be done very modestly. So she said something like, "Oh, Mother, I didn't realize you were eating, and with such gusto." But Teresa was not at all embarrassed, and hit the table and said, "Hija [Daughter], when praying, pray. And when eating partridge, eat

¹⁵ Stephanie Paulsell, "As the World Reopens Post-pandemic, How Will We Find Our Way in It?" May 5, 2021, *The Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/world-reopens-post-pandemic-how-will-we-find-our-way-it>

¹⁶ *Devotional Classics*, 197.

¹⁷ See francesca ekwuyasi, "Dear St. Teresa of Ávila, I love you but some of your ideas are nonsense," *Broadview Magazine*, June 11, 2021, <https://broadview.org/st-teresa-of-avila/>

partridge.” In other words, give yourself fully to whatever it is you’re doing. Be present in the moment. Find the sacredness in the ordinary. Teresa is also remembered as saying, “God lives among the pots and pans” – a declaration which “blesses our ordinary experiences [as] the very ground of where the Holy reveals itself.”¹⁸ “God lives among the pots and pans.”

Teresa died in 1582, leaving behind her writings and at least 22 Carmelite convents and monasteries that she founded. In 1622, she was made a saint in the Catholic Church – among other things, she is patron saint of the sick. And in 1970, Teresa was declared a Doctor of the Church, one of only two women to hold that title, because of her exemplary devotion and service to the church. She continues to be read and remembered by Catholics and Protestants alike. I myself heard of Teresa of Ávila through theologian Dorothee Soelle, whom I shared about as a spiritual guide several weeks ago. Teresa’s emphasis on God meeting us where we are and desiring to be united with us struck me as very moving and profound. Her spirituality resonates with our Anabaptist-Mennonite spirituality of lived faith and easy, equal access to a loving God, of finding the sacred in the ordinary – even among the pots and pans! Our hymnals contain her words in two hymns – Christ Has No Body Here But Ours (VT 568) and Nada te Turbe (VT 604/HWB 562), which I mentioned. There is also a prayer of hers about union with Christ. As the closing to my sermon, I ask you to turn with me to VT 1035 (also StJ 164) and we will read this prayer of Teresa’s together:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
Yours are the only hands / With which Christ can do his work,
Yours are the only feet / With which Christ can go about the world,
Yours are the only eyes / Through which Christ’s compassion
Can shine forth upon a troubled world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours. AMEN

¹⁸ James Finley, “Bonus: The Life and Work of Teresa of Ávila feat. Mirabai Starr,” Transcript p. 9-10.