

Teresa of Avila:
Rev. Cindy Maddox
September 18, 2022

Romans 8:24-27, 38-39

(I apologize for the change in scripture from what was printed in your bulletin. I ended up rewriting the second half of my sermon after the bulletin was printed.)

She was born Teresa Ali Fatim Corella Sanchez de Capeda y Ahumada in Avila, Spain in 1515.

We know her as Teresa of Avila or Teresa of Jesus.

Her mother died when she was in her late adolescence or early teen years, which led her “to embrace a deeper devotion to the Virgin Mary as her spiritual mother.”¹

At the same time, she became convinced that she was a horrible sinner.

After all, “she cared only about boys, clothes, flirting, and rebelling.

When she was 16, her father decided she was out of control and sent her to a convent.

At first she hated it but eventually she began to enjoy it— partly because of her growing love for God and partly because the convent was a lot less strict than her father.”²

When she finally chose religious life, she did so because she thought that it was the only safe place for someone as prone to sin as she was.”³

It reminds me of what I think every time people say that clergy are closer to God.

Often ministers are closer to God in the same way that the problem student is closer to the teacher.

You put them up front where you can keep an eye on them!

Teresa struggled with prayer and for many years did not feel like she got results.

She said she would rather do a heavy penance than pray.

After many years she read a book called *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, which included directions for how to examine one’s conscience, and instructions on concentration and contemplation.

¹ http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

She also was advised to pray to the Holy Spirit,
 and somehow these led to the breakthrough she had been seeking,
 and not only did she start praying, but she began to have visions.
 We are told that “God gave her spiritual delights:
 the prayer of quiet where God's presence overwhelmed her senses,
 raptures where God overcame her with glorious foolishness,
 prayer of union where she felt the sun of God melt her soul away.
 Sometimes her whole body was raised from the ground [in levitation]. . . .
 Teresa felt that the best evidence that her delights came from God
 was that the experiences gave her peace, inspiration, and encouragement.
 [She wrote] ‘If these effects were not present
 I would greatly doubt that the raptures come from God;
 on the contrary I would fear lest they be caused by rabies.’”⁴

She was inspired to bring about reform within the convent and the order,
 believing that the lively social scene of her current convent
 limited the nuns’ ability to be close to God.
 So she traveled around to start new, stricter convents.
 One might think that the church powers would applaud this attempt at reform,
 but that was not the case.
 When her former convent voted her in as prioress,
 the leader of the Carmelite order excommunicated the nuns.
 When she traveled to start other convents, she often had to enter a town secretly
 in the middle of the night to avoid causing a riot...
 In 1582, she was invited to found a convent by an Archbishop
 but when she arrived in the middle of the pouring rain,
 he ordered her to leave.
 Teresa replied, “And the weather so delightful too.”
 (You’ve got to love a sarcastic saint!)
 You know that joke “No one expects the Spanish Inquisition?”
 She did—
 most likely because her grandfather, a Jew living in Spain,
 had been forced to convert to Christianity or be banished.
 When she wrote her autobiography,
 she knew her words would either clear her or condemn her,

⁴ Ibid.

so she protected herself with a form of verbal camouflage. She would follow a profound thought with the statement, “But what do I know. I’m just a wretched woman.” She also famously said, “May God protect me from gloomy saints.” In spite of all the resistance, she founded sixteen convents and wrote several amazing books.

She did not, however, write the words most often attributed to her: “God has no hands now on earth but yours...”

Here’s how one of my favorite writers describes Teresa of Avila:

In an age when the Church thought women incapable of sustaining an inner life without contracting madness or heresy, she created communities of women contemplatives, teaching them not to be afraid, even of Satan, and especially not of alarmist clerics. “I don’t fear Satan half as much,” she said, “as I fear people who fear Satan.”

In a kingdom that had pressured Jews like her grandfather to be baptized or else, and then discriminated against those new Christians because of their ‘impure’ blood and dubious orthodoxy, Teresa cultivated new Christian support and bucked the common practice of excluding them from entering religious orders.

In a church where holy people were supposed to be perfect, austere, and forbidding, she prayed to be delivered from sour saints.

She was a woman of her times who saw the conquest of the Americas as a providential opportunity for evangelism. She characterized the Reformation as a re-crucifying of Christ. Yet she thought people should be praying for Lutherans and Indians, not slaughtering them, and she complained to God about obtuse churchmen who squandered the Spirit’s gifts by outlawing women preachers.

An indefatigable reformer, founder, businesswoman, and administrator, she was also a determined writer, authoring several important books in brilliant (if unruly) and captivating prose, and thousands of revealing letters. By sheer force of personality she turned detractors into supporters.

*We remember her today mostly as an ecstatic visionary, a great mystical soul prone to levitations, visions, and voices. In a way, that's too bad; it might be the least interesting thing about her.*⁵

*"To this day, she pleases no one who clings piously to the belief that saints are actually holy."*⁶

Teresa could teach us many lessons,

but the one I want to talk about today is prayer.

We don't talk about prayer a great deal in the United Church of Christ.

It's no wonder. Many of us are not sure what we believe.

Do we believe in a God who can be bent to our will?

Do we believe in a God who would heal someone

only if they had enough people praying for them?

Is it enough to "send positive energy" or "hold intention?"

What does it mean to pray?

As I mentioned earlier, Teresa struggled for many years with prayer.

She said she would rather do heavy penance than pray.

One scholar states,

"Before she started praying with sincerity and devotion,

Teresa was typically preoccupied with waiting for her allotted prayer time to end.

(This is reassuring for those of us who find that prayer challenges our attention spans.)

St. Teresa actually spent more than eighteen years struggling in her prayer,

pulled between conversing with God

and being caught up in the activities of the world."⁷

She was distracted often: "This intellect is so wild that it doesn't seem to be anything else than a frantic madman no one can tie down."⁸

But eventually she recognized the need to focus on whom we are praying to with our minds, not just our mouths.

In [her book called] *Interior Castle* she wrote,

'If a person does not think [of] Whom he is addressing, and what he is asking for,

⁵ Written by Mary Luti and posted in the UCC Clergywomen Facebook group, though it may be elsewhere as well.

⁶ Luti, Mary. <https://sicutlocutusest.com/2015/10/15/teresa-of-jesus-1515-1582/>

⁷ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/st-teresa-of-avila-on-prayer>

⁸ https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208

and of Whom he is asking it,
 I do not consider that he is praying at all
 even though he be constantly moving his lips.”⁹

Teresa came to believe that there were four stages or levels of prayer.
 She called them “the four methods of watering.”

“The soul’s effort to unite with Jesus in prayer
 is sometimes like drawing water from a well:
 it involves a lot of muscle power and labor.
 At other times, by God’s grace, the efforts [to unite with Jesus in prayer]
 are less difficult,
 like collecting water from a water wheel.
 Occasionally a soul will be able to simply draw water from a ‘river’
 that God provides in [God’s] goodness.
 And if God sees fit, [God] can even send a heavenly spiritual rain
 that requires no action from the soul.
 Since God’s wisdom and timing—not our power—bring the heavenly showers,
 we are to simply focus on that which is in our power.
 We draw water from the ‘well’ by staying dedicated to our prayer time
 and keeping our attention focused,
 until God should lead us somewhere else.”¹⁰

As someone who has struggled with prayer, I find this comforting.
 The success of my prayer life is not all up to me.
 I just need to show up for it.

Our scripture passage for today holds another comfort.
 When we don’t know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us
 with sighs, with groanings, too deep for words.
 It’s those prayers that are the hardest, aren’t they?
 When the only words we have are trite and have lost their meaning.
 When we’ve run out of words.
 When there are no words, only tears.
 This is when we most need to pray,
 even if prayer is only sitting in silence aware of God’s presence—

⁹ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/st-teresa-of-avila-on-prayer>

¹⁰ Ibid.

or hoping for God's presence,
 or merely hoping not to be alone in our pain.

This is when we most need the definition of prayer that Teresa offered:

She wrote, "Prayer is nothing more than spending a long time alone
 with the one I know loves me."

She also wrote, "Prayer is an act of love; words are not needed.

The important thing is not to think much but to love much
 and so do that which best stirs you to love."¹¹

There are many ways to pray, of course.

Words. Silence. Music. Meditation.

My friend Bob taught me a new way . . . unfortunately, not until after his death.

Bob was a retired minister and pastoral counselor in the first church I served.

We hit it off from Day One.

We taught adult education classes together
 and shared countless meals together.

In spite of our age difference I considered him one of my closest friends,
 and we shared things with one another
 that we shared with few others.

Bob told me that he'd had a difficult childhood.

He never told me the details, but I do know that several times
 he was sent to live with relatives,
 when his parents were in too much turmoil to take care of him.

In one of those homes, the home of his aunt and uncle,
 he found the first safe, gentle, loving home he had ever known.

His aunt and uncle had a grandfather clock, and for the rest of his life

Bob associated the sound of a grandfather clock
 with that safe, loving home.

But he never had one of his own.

When he and his wife retired and moved to Asheville,
 their first purchase for their new home was a grandfather clock.

Bob was told on a Monday night that he had leukemia.

He met with an oncologist the next morning,
 who told him to go home and pack a bag for the hospital

¹¹ https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208

and be prepared to stay there for three months.
 When he went home to pack, he took his wife over to that grandfather clock,
 and he taught her how to wind it
 so she could keep it going while he was in the hospital.
 And he told her what he had never told anyone:
 that every time the clock chimed the hour,
 he prayed for as many people as the clock chimed.

I heard this story at his memorial service, right before I was to get up and speak.
 And I sat there and cried because I knew my name had been spoken many times
 at the chiming of the hour.

The following Christmas I got a chiming clock.
 It's not a grandfather clock—it's just a simple wall clock—
 but it does chime the hour.
 And when I'm in my office alone and the clock chimes, I stop . . . and I pray.
 Sometimes I pray for whoever comes to mind.
 Sometimes I pray through the emails in my "Prayers" folder.
 I pray for you, individually and corporately.
 I have found it to be a powerful way to order my day.

There are many ways to pray.
 Prayer isn't a one-size-fits-all enterprise.
 As a contemporary poet and mystic has famously said,
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Before you answer, maybe you should pray about it.
 "But what do I know? I'm just a wretched woman."

Please join me in singing a hymn composed of Teresa of Avila's words:
 Nothing Distress You.