

Benediction: At Loose in the World

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Jeremiah 31:31–34, Matthew 28:16–20

Before I left for Galilee in 2009, Lydia Mercado made an off-handed comment to me about Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Carmelite nun and mystic. Teresa and the much younger John of the Cross later would become Saint Teresa and Saint John, but during their lifetimes they were spiritual companions during the dark, difficult years of the Spanish Inquisition. Teresa and John were favorites of my friend, Gerald May. The last book he wrote before his death was about the two of them.

Lydia's comment prompted me to take Teresa's classic work, *The Interior Castle*, with me on sabbatical.

It's a book that easily could never have been written. Teresa did not enjoy writing. She once said:

I am not meant for writing. I have neither the health nor the wits for it.

The only reason we have *The Interior Castle* is a vision that came to Teresa, in which she saw the human soul as a diamond in the shape of a castle. Within the castle are seven mansions, or seven stages of prayer, and the closer one gets to the center, the stronger is the light where God dwells. She started writing on June 5th, 1577, and completed it on November 29th of that year. However, her writing was interrupted and she went 4-5 months without working on it at all, so much of it was written in June, and completed months later by the end of November. So what we have is a writing frenzy by a remarkable woman who would not have chosen to write, but was compelled by her vision to share with her Carmelite sisters a guide on how to find their way to the center of their souls.

Hearing this, you might get the impression that Teresa's writing is this highly spiritualized language, but she uses plain language, and throughout her guidance on prayer is a humble, delightful, self-effacing humor, with comments that are as off-handed as the one Lydia made to me.

There are dozens of examples, but I want to tell you one of my favorites. As Teresa works so hard to describe this journey of the soul on its way to illumination by the Presence of God, waiting for us all at the center, she pauses and writes:

Maybe I'm only making sense to myself.

Boy, do I know that feeling!

In another time and place, decades ago, I was on the phone with someone who was highly critical of my decision to carve out some time at home to work on my sermons. He thought I should do that work in the office. I tried to explain how it enhanced my sermon writing to work in what for me was a holy space. I wanted to write where I prayed. The cold silence on the other end of the phone was so palpable that I stopped and said:

You're not getting this, are you?

And he said:

I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about.

We're all different. We're not of one mind about everything.

But you have trusted me, and no pastor can be effective without the congregation's trust. I told the RBC search committee over 18 years ago that I could get excited about a congregation that cared as much about my personal authenticity, as how I fulfilled the roles of a pastor.

Being a person, and a pastor, is not as easy as it may sound. Several years ago, I was at a denominational meeting, and the featured speaker was someone I had known since college. When I knew him then, he was one of the funniest people I've known. Being funny was just natural for him.

I was sitting on the back row, and the minute before he got up to speak, his wife came over and sat down beside me. As he was up front, doing his usual impressive thing, I turned to her and said:

Is he as funny as he used to be?

She replied:

No, being a pastor took a lot of that out of him.

One reason I've been here 18 years, and not 8, is the freedom you have given me to be who I am. You have respected my life, and the way I do my pastoral work.

Here's something else, and believe it or not, it has to do with the benediction. All those times, when somewhere inside ***I wondered if I was only making sense to myself***, you received what I had to offer. You nodded, and smiled, and responded, and in so many ways allowed my preaching to be part of an ongoing conversation.

Hey, I'm not Jesus. Leah and I joke about how I'd always read the Jesus parts of the Gospels, but I'm absolutely clear that who I am, and who Jesus is, are not identical. But I do get why Jesus, on his last night with the disciples, said to them:

You are my friends.

I get that because I'm more aware than ever in these last days of being your pastor—

that you are my friends.

I've mentioned before that I'm a Quaker Baptist. I said that in my first days as pastor here, and I had the chance in 2009, in a Quaker meeting in Ramallah, to say that when we were asked to introduce ourselves in the Meeting.

The Quakers did not call themselves that originally. They were nicknamed Quakers by others, and it was not in a friendly spirit, but intended as ridicule.

What they call themselves is *A Society of Friends*.

That's who we have been together—a Society of Friends who love one another, as Jesus has loved us. That has been at the heart of our life together as Beloved Community. The fact that you have a pastor in Leah who understands that, and that she has a congregation who gets that, is a powerful sign of hope for your future together. I am leaving with a profound mix of gratitude and grief, but I am not at all anxious about what might happen here. I'm excited for all of you.

Back to the benediction:

Last Sunday, I said that it was our benediction, not mine.

You could have said years ago:

*God's Spirit at loose in the world through our lives?
That doesn't make sense.*

*The love and the power?
The joy and the justice?
The goodness and the mercy?
The hope and the healing?
What do these have to do with each other?
What do these have to do with God's Spirit?
What does it mean, loose in the world?*

This benediction could have died on the vine a long time ago.

But you wouldn't let it. And it became ours, not mine.

In 2007, when a group from our church traveled to the Holy Land, we spent a quiet and unforgettable evening in Jerusalem with Rami, a Jewish father whose 14-year-old daughter was killed in a suicide bombing on a bus. With him was Shureen, a Palestinian woman whose family had undergone great suffering at the hands of Israeli soldiers.

After Rami and Shureen left, we stayed in the room and talked for a while. We had been so affected by what we had heard. You would have been, too. In a very hushed atmosphere, we talked about our church back home. We were so far away, yet the bonds of love between there and here were so strong.

Something flipped inside of me that night. In a most unlikely place, the Notre Dame hotel in the Old City, only a short walk from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, I felt the power of our life together, reaching across the miles. I remember saying to our group that we needed to change our language, that if we were going to continue to call ourselves a small church, we should be saying small but powerful.

It came to me that when Holy Spirit is at loose in the world, love and power truly do belong in the same breath.

In going through my papers this week, I came across a card that Bea Kirby sent to me after my mother died. Bea was there that night in Jerusalem. She was sending me words of friendship and comfort, yet the card so directly reminds me of Bea. The card had a quote from Antoine Boveua (bo-vee-uh):

A luminous light remains where a beautiful soul has passed.

Our congregation is one of the wealthiest I can imagine, if the currency we're talking about is beautiful souls. This place, our life together, has so much luminous light remaining where our friends have passed from us, but left behind a love that never ends. Their love that remains with us is powerfully woven into our life together.

I'm going to leave this sermon unfinished. Goodness and mercy, hope and healing belong together in the work of Spirit, at loose in the world through your lives. I've got things to say about them, but then—so do you.

But I do want to say something about joy and justice, and I'll admit that when I first put these two together in the benediction, it sounded strange to my ears.

How can I close out my preaching in this place and not quote one more time the words of Micah:

*What does the LORD require of you but
to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

When we think of the Hebrew prophets, it's hard not to see them with stern faces and sparks of fire in their eyes. But what I see now, that I did not before these years of life together with you, is that Micah is giving us a recipe for joy.

This is the path to real, deep joy:

To do justice, to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with God.

Does that sound like the Way of Jesus, or what?

That can be our path. I have so many flashbacks of being surprised by joy. I would not have expected joy to find me in a Palestinian refugee camp, or a Gay Pride Parade, or the squalor of an East Jerusalem neighborhood, or a baseball game in Havana, Cuba. You can find the luminosity of the human soul anywhere, in unexpected places, but especially when you are trying, even in the most modest ways, to be with those who know what it is to be treated unjustly.

Am I only making sense to myself?

No—because we've been in this together, this work of writing our version of the Gospel of Jesus; this taking seriously what it means that Holy Spirit is at loose in the world through our lives; this learning how to pray together as we find our way to the center of our soul as Beloved Community.

The love and the power, the joy and the justice, the goodness and the mercy, the hope and the healing of God's Spirit—have all been poured out into our life together. And everywhere Holy Spirit touches down, and reaches inside of us,

A luminous light remains.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.