

## **Teresa of Avila and Benedict of Nursia**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, March 10, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#) and [Acts 6:1-6](#)

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I think my parents tried hard to raise my siblings and me in a household that appreciated intellectual inquiry and opposed the laziness of stereotyping. I think they liked the fact that my three best friends in junior high and I created a religiously diverse group: I was the Protestant; Larry was the Catholic; Evan was the Jew; and John was the Agnostic.

The one place where religious stereotyping managed to take root, where a lack of religious understanding managed to become a prejudice, was around Catholics and saints. Why would someone pray to a saint when you can address your prayer to God directly? Were saints being made into demi-gods? Somewhere along the way I got the message that this practice was at least silly and potentially wrong (or even bad).

When I was in college, a Catholic classmate encouraged me to ignore the official process the Catholic church uses to declare someone a saint, and to simply see the saints as people the church recognizes as exemplars of faithfulness. Then, years later, I read an article in *The Christian Century* in which the author suggested that ‘praying to a saint’ be reframed as asking someone who has passed through death into the mystery of life after death to join you in prayer. We ask others in the church to join us in praying about a concern. Why not ask members of the eternal church to join us in prayer, too?

I think that is a way to understand what the author of the letter to the Hebrews is getting at. After listing many of the heroes and sheroes of the Hebrew scriptures, the author says that we are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, this congregation of faithful people, this community of exemplars. In other words, we have models of how to run the race, of how to persevere, of how to remain faithful in all kinds of circumstances.

That is how I’ve come to regard ‘sainthood.’ For me, saints are the people, dead and living, who are exemplars of faithfulness. And, as a good congregationalist, I realize that my list of saints might be different from yours. In this sermon series, Pastor Brenda and I are going to lift up 10 people who we regard as exemplars of the faith. We are going to tell you a little about them and some aspects of their faithfulness that we think you individually and we collectively might want to reflect on during Lent, some aspects of their lives and work that we can see as an invitation and a challenge to deepen our faithfulness. Today, we look at Benedict of Nursia and Teresa of Avila.

I did not know much about Teresa of Avila before this sermon series, other than her reputation for having a deep mysticism and that the Catholic church had declared her a “Doctor of the Church” (which I think is an unusual thing to happen to a woman). Truth be told, I still don’t know much about her, but what I do know I find interesting.

She was born in Spain two years before the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. This was just years after the Spanish victory over the Moors and the

expulsion of the Jews from Spain, a time when Spain was “exultantly and aggressively Catholic,”<sup>1</sup> and the power of women was negligible.

Somehow, Teresa managed to outshine nearly all of her contemporaries. Educated in a local convent after her mother died, Teresa decided to become a nun at age 20. Her father did not approve, but that didn’t stop her. She ran off and joined the Carmelite convent in Avila.

After some time away from the convent because of an illness that almost killed her, she returned to a convent that did not encourage her spiritual life. The original rule under which Carmelite communities functioned had been watered down with exceptions. One biographer says the convent was more like a boarding house for wealthy maidens than a house of prayer, which at first worked just fine for the extroverted Teresa.<sup>2</sup>

That is, until the fortieth year of her life. That is the year she experienced a conversion. One day she happened to glance at an image of the suffering Christ. “Instantly she was filled with loathing for the mediocrity of her spiritual life, and she determined to devote herself more seriously to a life of prayer. Almost immediately upon this resolution she began to experience the sensation of God’s love, transforming her from within. She decided to establish a new reformed Carmelite house, returning to the spirit of the original primitive rule of Carmel. After strenuous lobbying she finally won permission to undertake this initiative. Her new convent was founded in Avila in 1562.

“Her new community was known as the Discalced (shoeless) Carmelites. In fact the nuns wore hemp sandals, but their name referred to the strict poverty that was a feature of Teresa’s reform. Her nuns were to seek no endowments but to live entirely by alms and their own labor. A strict enclosure was to be maintained, along with a vegetarian diet and a rigorous schedule of prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

I’m not surprised that the Rule for her convents focused on prayer. It was vital to her personally. It was through her rigorous prayer life that she had repeated mystical experiences. She described her spiritual “ecstasies” and other spiritual experiences “in great detail in her autobiography, along with several other volumes on prayer and mystical spirituality. And yet for someone who had achieved a virtually unique degree of communion with God, she remained fully able to speak in common terms: ‘Prayer, in my view, is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with Him Who we know loves us.’”<sup>4</sup>

Benedict lived a thousand years before Teresa. He was born just years after the fall of the Roman Empire in what is now central Italy. When the Roman Empire fell, there was an authority vacuum. Through the gift of his Rule for monastic communities, Benedict may well share responsibility for helping the monastic communities fill that authority vacuum.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 449.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

Like Teresa, Benedict was born to a distinguished family, and like Teresa, he left his social position behind to pursue a deeper relationship with God. This first took the form of being a hermit, but somehow he attracted the attention of other spiritual seekers who would seek him out. Eventually, he agreed to organize the spiritual seekers who came to him into a group of monasteries.

One of the monasteries he organized is the now famous monastery at Monte Cassino. It was there that he wrote his famous Rule, a rule that became the standard for the western monastic tradition. "Whereas earlier monastic experiments had stressed rigorous asceticism and often superhuman self-denial, Benedict's Rule was designed for ordinary human beings. The element of discipline was shifted from externals to the interior, from the flesh to the will. His monks were not to be denied adequate food or sleep; they were in fact counseled to avoid any extraordinary or self-imposed mortifications. Their discipline was to lie in humility, obedience, a commitment to stability, and an accommodation to the requirements of community life."<sup>5</sup>

"Benedict put a high value on hospitality, urging monks and sisters to view strangers as Christ himself coming to stay. Guests [were] to be received as they are and for who they are. There [was] no mandate to require guests to participate in any of the monastery's activities. At the same time, there [was] no interruption of the monastery's rhythm because of the presence of guests."<sup>6</sup>

"Community was, in fact, the key feature of his monastic vision. Rather than writing for a collection of individuals competing against each other in their solitary quests for perfection, Benedict stressed the value of community life as a school for holiness. The community for Benedict was ideally suited to bring individuals to their highest potential. Salvation, in effect was thus a team effort."<sup>7</sup>

This view of the importance of community reminded me of a description Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote of the church she founded in Colorado. In her description of the church, she almost describes herself as an anti-Teresa, though she acknowledges that Teresa's approach to spiritual matters is of value. Here's that Bolz-Weber wrote:

"I recently was asked by an earnest young seminarian during a Q&A, 'Pastor Nadia, what do you do personally to get closer to God?'

"Before I even realized I was saying it, I replied, 'What? Nothing. Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get *closer* to God.' Half the time I wish God would leave me alone. Getting closer to God might mean getting told to love someone I don't even like, or to give away even more of my money. It might mean letting some idea or dream of that is dear to me get ripped away.

"My spirituality is most active, not in meditation, but in the moment when:  
I realize God may have gotten something beautiful done through me despite the fact

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 297.

<sup>6</sup> Lynne Baab, "Benedictine spirituality: hospitality, service and work," *Lynne Baab*, <https://www.lynnabaab.com/blog/benedictine-spirituality-hospitality-ser> (posted 3 March 2016; accessed 9 March 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Ellsberg, *op. cit.*, 297-298.

that I am an asshole,

and when I am confronted by the mercy of the gospel so much that I cannot hate my enemies,

and when I am unable to judge the sin of someone else (which, let's be honest, I *love* to do) because my own crap is too much in the way,

and when I have to bear witness to another human being's suffering despite my desire to be left alone,

and when I am forgiven by someone even though I didn't deserve it and my forgiver does this because he, too, is trapped by the gospel,

and when traumatic things happen in the world and I have nowhere to place them or make sense of them but what I *do* have is a group of people who gather with me every week, people who will mourn and pray with me over the devastation of something like a school shooting,

and when I end up changed by loving someone I'd never choose out of a catalog but whom God sends my way to teach me about God's love.

"But none of these things are the result of spiritual practices or disciplines, as admirable as those things may be. They are born in a religious life, in the life bound by ritual and community, by repetition, by work, by giving and receiving, by mandated grace."<sup>8</sup>

So here's the invitation and challenge I hear in the aspect of the lives of Teresa and Benedict I shared today. And I'll phrase them as some questions for your reflection:

- How might you (we) make your (our) prayer life more rigorous, thus opening your heart (our hearts) wider to the still speaking God?
- How might you (we) better embody the Benedictine values of hospitality, service, and work?
- How does and can this Christian community help bring you to your highest potential?

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<sup>8</sup> Nadio Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, (New York: Convergent, 2015), 8-9.