

## Everyday Mysticism: The Sacredness of All Things (Teresa of Avila) Genesis 1:26-31      Psalm 8

Our sermon series these next few weeks: everyday mysticism. Like last week, I want to be quick, again, to demystify the word mysticism. Because the word mysticism, or mystical experience, to many people sounds like something that only a few super spiritual people experience, and that it involves otherworldly transcendental visions and so forth. And that you have to be a little weird to be a mystic. Well, something we ought to just acknowledge is that many of us are already weird. So, we may as well be a mystic anyway! Actually, you don't have to be weird to be an everyday mystic. You just need to be yourself.

Mysticism simply means *experiential knowledge of spiritual things*—in other words, *experiential* knowledge of God. In contrast to just book knowledge, or intellectual knowledge. Mysticism is when we move from our heads to our hearts; from intellect alone, to experience of God and encounters with God that move us in some way. And it can happen anywhere, and everywhere. It's simply a matter of being open.

Which means there is no template; there is no right way to encounter God and the Spirit. It can occur as a simple awareness of unity, and oneness; feelings of sacredness, and peace; an experience of timelessness (you know, when you are in

the middle of an experience and you are so present to it that time seems to stop, because something deeper is going on); or it's an intuitive conviction that the experience is a source of fierce reality for you. The ordinariness of mystical experiences teaches us that being an everyday mystic is not limited to ritual, visitation from angels, or mysterious power. Sometimes it happens while staring at a tree. Or the night sky, as we hear from the Psalmist...

## **Psalm 8**

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark  
because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon  
and the stars that you have established;

what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that  
you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them  
with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you  
have put all things under their feet,

all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along  
the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

This is the word of the Lord!

I'd like to remind us of a quote that, to use a little preacher's hyperbole, contains perhaps the most important truth that humanity needs to hear right now. How's that for an introduction?! But I believe it, hyperbole aside, that this is perhaps the most important thing that people need to hear.

The quote is from Thomas Berry, one of the most influential people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not Wendell Berry, the poet. I'll be quoting him also, in a few minutes. This is from *Thomas Berry*, who was a man of deep faith, hope and love, who was a cultural historian, a scholar of the world's religions, and studied earth's history, geology and evolution. He dabbled in some light subjects! Although he was an astute theologian, he refused to be called a theologian. He called himself a "geologist." I love that. He contributed significantly to our understanding of ecological and environmental issues, especially from a Christian worldview. So he earned the title of geologist!

So here is his quote—the first half, that is: "The one thing wrong with the human species today is..." I wonder how each of us would complete that sentence... I'm sure we could each come up with a *list* of things we think are wrong with the human species today, let alone one thing. But, he says: "The one

thing wrong with the human species today is... *we have forgotten the sense of the sacred.*"

He goes on to explain: "An absence of the sense of the sacred is a basic flaw in many of our efforts at adjusting our human presence to the natural world. We will not save what we do not love. And we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us." Wow. He could be accused of using hyperbole, but he wasn't exaggerating; he meant it. "*We will not save what we do not love, and we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us.*"

And, the key to recovering a sense of the sacred is an awareness of God in all things, and people. This isn't pantheism (everything *is* God). More like panentheism—God *in* all things. God the Creator's presence being manifest in and through all things. Through our awareness and attentiveness.

So, a tree can and should be experienced as sacred. And a raccoon. And your next-door neighbor. That which is sacred isn't just in a church or on some dedicated holy site, or in some people but not others. But in *all* of the parts and pieces of God's creation. If God looked at every detail of creation and called it *very good*, as we heard from Genesis, then we also ought to call it very good. It

was made by God, infused with the breath of life by God, and therefore it is sacred.

Before getting further into this, I'd like to reframe the Thomas Berry quote. Because I don't want to begin with a negative ("*What's wrong with humanity?!*"), because then that frames the conversation in a negative way. So instead of saying that the one thing wrong with the human species today is that we have forgotten a sense of the sacred, let's put it this way: *the greatest potential for the human species today is... the recovery of the sense of the sacred*, and the recovery of mystical experience as the experiential dimension of the sacred. So that we can learn again to love the world, so that the world, then, may thrive.

We don't have to go far to recover a sense of the sacred. And we don't have to wait for something to happen to us. There are things right under our noses that we often pass by without paying attention, or that we have taken for granted. Some of them are things we have bought or collected that we once were amazed by but now we perhaps don't see any more. Some of them are things that are being created or are growing outdoors, right around us.

People travel to the "Holy Land," which can be a real and true learning experience, but that land isn't any holier than the land under your feet where you live, and where you live out your daily life in your comings and goings. It's *all* holy

land! Because God is there. And, because *you* are there! Because you, too, are sacred.

This is an essential part of everyday mysticism, of seeing the sacredness in all things. And perhaps we should put a period after the word “seeing.” An essential part of everyday mysticism is seeing. Because when we can slow ourselves down, or stop altogether for a while, we will take the time to see. And when we take the time to see, really see, we open ourselves up to experiencing places and things as sacred, and therefore experiencing God in that moment.

This is the psalmist, in Psalm 8 as in other Psalms, who beheld a night sky and was gob-smacked by what he saw. He was amazed by children and infants, and what would come forth from them. He was also amazed that God was mindful of us humans.

Let’s pause for a moment and take that in: God is mindful of us! Mindful! Mindfulness has been a widespread emphasis and practice the last few years. It’s actually an ancient practice that went dormant for centuries until it got picked back up a few years ago. And here we are told that God also practices mindfulness. Of us! Genesis tells us that God saw (really saw) his creation, and delighted in it. And now it’s confirmed in this psalm that God sees, and delights,

in us, and all humanity. It's a reminder that we are invited to see ourselves as sacred too.

With all of this, I'd like to introduce Teresa of Avila to us, who is one of our guides on this journey of recovering a sense of the sacred. Teresa was a spunky, funny, sometimes cheeky mystic from the 16<sup>th</sup> century who grew up in a large family of 13 children in Spain. Teresa's mother died when she was 14, and at age 21 Teresa ran away from home to join a convent, not because she wanted to become a nun, primarily, but because convents at that time were more like hotels for women, which allowed them a great deal more independence than they would have been allowed at home. This tells us something about Teresa's spunkiness and independent spirit!

Two years into her time at the convent Teresa had a near-death experience that changed her life, and it created a spiritual awakening in her. That can sometimes happen, right? When a near death experience can change a person's outlook. During this awakening in the coming years, she cultivated a system of meditation which was perhaps the birth of the modern practice of *Christian* mindfulness, that sought a quieting of the mind to such an extent that God could be seen in the ordinary everyday things of the world, and his voice heard through those things. Her system helped people practice not just mindfulness for their

own peace of mind and heart, but awareness of the sacredness of all things. And, of course, an awareness of God within which led people to seeing their own sacredness, in the unity of all things.

After years of practicing this herself, Teresa wrote what is probably her most famous saying:

*Let nothing disturb you.*

*Let nothing frighten you.*

*Everything changes (or, all things pass).*

*God alone is unchanging.*

*With patience all things are possible.*

*Whoever has God lacks nothing.*

*God alone is enough.*

Isn't that wonderful?

Teresa, like some of the people who fought for reform in the church at that time, was persecuted by the ecclesiastical authorities for her work and for her belief and teaching that God could be found and experienced in *all* places (much like what Julian did two centuries earlier in telling people to go find and experience God in their everyday life). And after one particular episode of mistreatment, Teresa wrote this prayer in her journal: "God, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them." That's honest! She was spunky! And funny. And a bit snarky. We'll hear an example of her snark in a moment. I love snarky saints...



A lot could be said about the history of Teresa's time, and of her own family's experience (namely, her Jewish grandparents' experience) of being forced to convert to Christianity by the Spanish Inquisition, who forced Jews and Muslims to convert or be killed, and who implemented countless atrocities in the name of purifying the church, but I'll mention what I believe is an essential historical element of that tumultuous-but-rich time, which influenced Teresa: the widespread corruption of the priesthood in the Catholic church which in turn led to the protestant Reformation in 1517.

I'm WAY oversimplifying and generalizing what happened at that time, but suffice it to say that by the late Middle Ages the priests had gained an excessive amount of power and influence and control, and the practice of selling indulgences had gotten out of hand. An indulgence, in a nutshell, was paying a priest to reduce what penance was required for absolution of sin. Sort of like paying for forgiveness, because at that time it was taught that unless you went to a priest to be absolved of sin and given penance to perform, you could not be forgiven by God and you would be sent to hell. So, priests held all the power and sold these indulgences, as they were called. This practice had gotten out of hand as the priests became very wealthy, and showed favoritism to wealthy people.

This was the straw that broke the camel's back for Martin Luther, which caused him to nail his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. It was largely about the abuse of indulgences and the corruption of the priesthood. This ignited what we call the protestant reformation, which spread throughout Europe in the decades that followed.

Teresa of Avila was only two years old, and in Spain, at the beginning of the protestant Reformation in 1517, but by the time she reached adulthood the reformation's affect and influence had spread. She, too, had become concerned about the abuses and corruption of the church. But rather than leave it or rebel against it, she began her own reform movement within the Catholic church through the Carmelite order. Named after Mount Carmel, where Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and prevailed.

Part of Teresa's reform was to teach that God's grace could be experienced and mediated anywhere and everywhere, and not only through priests or the church. In other words, she taught that all is sacred and holy, and that God can be seen and known through everyday sacred things and experiences. Even though she herself remained committed to the church, much like Julian of Norwich, and she encouraged faithfulness to the community of Christ-followers, she saw Christ's

church as one part, or piece, of a person's spiritual nurture. An important one, but not the only one.

Teresa writes of it this way (what I'm about to read reveals how she felt about the priesthood at that time—with a certain appropriate level of snark):

“All has been consecrated. The creatures in the forest know this, the earth does, the seas do, the clouds know, as does the heart full of love. Strange, a priest would rob us of this knowledge and then empower himself with the ability to make holy what already is.” As some would say today, she's stickin' it to the man.

I don't want to focus on her view of priests at that time (I don't like to pick on Catholics; this same concern exists amongst protestant pastors too; there have been, and still are, plenty of protestant pastors who empower themselves in unhealthy and unhelpful ways). I'd rather focus on her understanding of the sacredness—or as she puts it, the consecrated nature—of all things. Teresa is but one voice in the grand chorus of people throughout the ages who see and experience all things as sacred.

It is so important for us see this, and let this inform our spirituality and our experience of God because since Teresa's time there has been created a false dichotomy between sacred and secular. As if some places are sacred, and others are secular. “Secular” being defined as places, things, or activities that have no

spiritual or religious basis or meaning. Again, it's a false dichotomy, because God made everything, and called it very good, and therefore God's Spirit and presence can be experienced in and through all things, if they are approached with hearts open and full of love as Teresa puts it.

A couple summers ago Heidi and I attended an outdoor concert at the Gorge amphitheater—a spectacular venue with the setting sun behind the stage, the Columbia River floating by below in the gorge, and the beautiful rolling hills of eastern Washington spreading out as far as the eye could see.

Many Christians I know, or know of, would call this a secular event in a secular place. Because the artist wasn't singing what we would categorize as Christian music. Even though Brandi Carlile has a beautiful personal story and a faith of her own, and in her life and music she advocates for welcoming and supporting people from all walks of life. Even so, some would say that this was a secular event and place. But looking around, I can tell you that the Spirit was there, community was happening, and songs were sung about love and life, about heartache and healing, about the human journey, and even about faith in this spectacular wide open part of God's creation. Voices were joined in song, people felt uplifted, and Heidi's and my experience was that this was a sacred place and

time. Not on the same level as a Sunday morning worship service, but taking everything in, we felt a connection. As others did.

I'm sure you experience this in places like the Cascade Symphony, or listening to your grandkids play in the school ensemble. Those are sacred places too.

One of my favorite poets and writers is Wendell Berry. Wendell Berry is a brilliant writer, and his writing comes out of who he is as a farmer, agrarian, environmental activist, and Christian. In one of his essays he says, "I don't think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is. It is a book open to the sky. It is best read and understood outdoors, and the farther outdoors the better. Or that has been my experience of it. Passages that within walls seem improbable or incredible, outdoors seem merely natural. That is because outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders; we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary, but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread."

Wendell Berry also said this in one of his poems, "There are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places." His point: all is sacred. Yet sometimes people desecrate what is sacred through hatred and injustice, selfishness and overconsumption, and abuse of the earth. He went so far as to say that Christians who believe that all the resources of the earth are

there for the taking, for monetary gain and consumption, are entering “a conspiracy to commit murder against Creation.” That’s some strong language! And we get the sense that those who hold to the sacredness of all things have strong feelings about it. As they (we) should.

So, to come full circle back to Thomas Berry, and Teresa of Avila, the way to save the earth, and perhaps even ourselves, is to recover a sense of the sacred. In all things, and all people. For our own spiritual nurture and edification and connection with God, and for the sake of the future of Creation, and all that it holds.

Jesus revealed his belief in the sacredness, the consecrated nature of all things by taking ordinary everyday elements—bread and wine—and using them to impart grace. There’s nothing super spiritual about bread; it’s an ordinary everyday source of nutrition and sustenance for people around the world. There is nothing super spiritual about wine, or juice. But these ordinary everyday elements, blessed by Jesus, become part of the everyday mystical sustenance for people, as we remember the One who made us, redeemed us, and sustains us by his presence.

Hymn based on Psalm 8: O Lord, our God, How Excellent, How Glorious is  
Your Name