

Inhabiting a Woman's Soul

Dialogue Sermon between Lori Cahill and Stephanie Ford

April 29, 2018

Part One: "Teresa of Avila's Experience of Transformation" ~ Stephanie

I want you to meet someone. Her name is Teresa of Avila, and her sacred voice from 16th Century Spain still speaks to us today. Teresa was a mystic, teacher, and reformer. And she lived in a time when speaking out as a woman was risky business.

The third of ten children, Teresa was born into a well-to-do family in the city of Avila. Given her circumstances, she could easily have sunk into the woodwork of passive, acceptable womanhood: pleasing a husband and birthing children. But tragedy came early. Teresa's mother, barely 33, died giving birth to her 10th child. The 13-year-old Teresa looked on grimly. She would choose a different path for herself.

So at 20, Teresa ran away to a convent, but the place turned out to be lax in discipline, favoring women who entered with big dowries. They got large apartments, while poorer women shared small rooms. The convent was less a place of devotion than a sorority, where families sent their unwed daughters. A few years after she entered, Teresa became deathly ill and was sent to her uncle's house to recuperate. While she was there, Teresa read a book about contemplative prayer that would forever alter her understanding of prayer **and** of God. In it, she heard Wisdom speaking to her soul, and she was eager to live what she had learned. Yet back at the convent, she was distracted by the social life. Later, Teresa, describing those years, recalled her inner life as painful. But, when she was nearly 40, she experienced a profound mystical vision in which she knew union with God. She was made new, empowered to live as she had long believed. Her male confessors dismissed her vision as female emotionalism, or even worse, a sign she had fallen under the sway of Protestantism.

But through this experience – Sophia-Wisdom came to Teresa, threading through her, a vine she could trust. And Teresa persisted! She was infected with new courage, animated by love for Christ, *authorized within* to write about prayer during a time when women could not teach. And she was skillful at it; she knew how to hide behind self-deprecating phrases in order to ward off the sniff of the Inquisition. Finally, she heard Sophia-Wisdom's voice within leading her to found a new kind of convent, one in which every woman would be treated equally.

At 47 Teresa began her new mission, and over the next twenty years, she founded 16 convents. When we hear about her reform in 2018, it doesn't sound all that remarkable-- but it **was**; it was radical! Teresa faced ridicule and resistance from all sides. For too long, convents had simply followed cultural privileging of class and honor, and folks

were content for things to stay as they had been. But Teresa knew better. Convicted by Sophia's truth, Teresa insisted that each woman in these new convents would have a room of her own, with no favor given to wealth or ethnic distinctions. To enter a sister's room, even the Prioress would have to knock. And Teresa would teach her spiritual daughters the precious beauty of the female soul. This, too, was radical – for women were taught from birth that they were inferior to men in intellect and spirit. And so Teresa did a nearly impossible task: traveling by horseback in her 50s and 60s all over Spain, planting convents, and then writing at night. Talk about inner strength.

Teresa wrote books about personal prayer--offering images that were often feminine: a womb of inner nourishment, a honeycomb of a beehive, a silkworm transformed into a butterfly. She taught that there was a dwelling place within each soul of deep peace and security. There God and the soul could commune. We could lose touch with this Holy center, she believed, by wandering after misplaced desires. If we would quiet ourselves to listen and pay attention, we would find a place of intimate friendship and partnership with God. Our egos would be freed of anxiety, and we would be strengthened to love.

Teresa's story brings up memories for me. When I was just 30 and in a lonely and uncertain time, I had an experience that I still can only describe as mystical. I was driving down the streets of Salisbury, North Carolina, when I was overcome with a sense of absolute Love welling up in me, and it seemed to flow out of the car and into the persons I saw on the street. I nearly stopped driving. For months after that, a sense of peace stayed with me through the hard decisions I had to make. It was Sophia-Wisdom's confirming voice giving me strength. Years later, I heard Her, again unexpectedly through a Catholic priest professor encouraging me, *a woman*, to be ordained; and then She came to me in a deep "yes" one snowy day in January, confirming my decision to adopt a child from India.

How do we recognize this inner voice of the Divine, of Wisdom-Sophia? By the fruit that is produced, yes, and, as Sonnie read to us—by the beneficent, humane, and steadfast tenor of her voice. Wisdom's voice frees us from the anxiety of the past. And while Sophia is sometimes subtle, She can also be persistent, knocking again and again at the door of our souls, coaxing us out of our apathy and fear. And She is eternal. In every generation, Sophia passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.

Part Two: “Authorized Within” ~ Lori

Wow. As Stephanie shared at the women’s retreat, and again here this morning, Teresa of Avila was a remarkable woman.

What’s most compelling to me from Teresa’s story is that the images she used to teach, images that made up her own personal theology, were “often feminine”; and that she was, as she called it, “authorized within” to develop and share these visions.

What does it mean to be “authorized within”? Interestingly, most of the earliest works in Christian feminist theology start by addressing the issue of authority – after all, if authority isn’t established, why should anyone listen to what you have to say?

And that’s the paradox – in feminist theology, the very notion of authority itself is called into question with the idea that received authority from history and tradition might actually *not* be that authoritative. From the 1987 book Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology, Letty Russell writes:

“Feminist theology is part of a revolution of consciousness that touches the issues of authority at every turn. In appealing to authority in community, it challenges both the content and the thought structure of Christian theology as we know it.”

I know this notion is not unheard of at a progressive American Baptist church. Here, I have participated in countless instances of authority in community - deacon meetings, sermon shaping, adult Sunday school classes - where we look to each other to “enrich rather than outrank”.

As we look to Teresa of Avila as an early example of a woman who trusted the authority of her own personal experience, we know it was a risky proposition for her. But fast forward 600 years and somehow it can still feel risky to discuss religious language, let alone personal theologies, especially when we bring gender into the conversation. Designing a worship service as participants from the women’s retreat have done today can have a feeling of going “off script” – something unusual in the life of the church.

Does it feel surprising, maybe even a bit uncomfortable, to hear so many “She’s” in our hymns? For people who might not see themselves in the word “She” does it feel exclusive? Language does have direct and subtle influences on our theological imaginations. Wondering about the feminine language and images used in today’s

worship reminds me of feminist theologian Mary Daly's assertion that if we removed all passages from the Bible with "He" language and symbols, we'd be left with a pamphlet.

So what's in a name? Why do the words and language we use at worship matter? We all understand that when we say "Kingdom" and "Lord" we know that that language doesn't really imply domination, right? Jesus used the word "Father" and not Mother when he spoke of the divine as a parent, but was that choice deliberate, arbitrary, or just a sign of the times? We use the term "God", but we've transformed that into an inclusive term, right? We all know that God is not gendered – or do we?

I remember running into this teaching Sunday school when a very astute 5th grader said that of course God is male – if God was female we'd use the word Goddess. Duh. I remember trying to convince him of the possible expansivity of the word God – how it could encompass male/female, person/non-person, but he wasn't buying it. I remember feeling frustrated at the time that he wasn't willing to perform the mental gymnastics that I routinely performed when I heard the word God, but really, was that fair to ask of him? Should I really be asking that of myself? Is it possible that continuing to use traditional language not only fails to affirm diversity and difference, but also legitimizes domination and oppression?

Part Three: "Empowering Humility" ~ Stephanie

As you said, Lori, it is interesting to see what comes up in my own soul when I hear She as a pronoun for the Divine or when I think about Goddess as an alternative name for God. My feminist heart is warmed, but I also feel somewhat nervous, as though I am trespassing a boundary. Yet Teresa's life and her teachings give me confidence to always seek new and fuller understandings of the Divine image, who encompasses all genders *and* goes beyond gender.

There is actually a funny story told about Teresa, and as happens with stories, there are many versions of it. Here's one of them: Teresa is out on the road, founding a new convent, and her traveling band starts to cross a full spring river. She is riding her horse, and ahead of her is the cart carrying their supplies. Suddenly the cart is knocked over by the current, and all of their provisions are whisked away downstream. In the middle of it all, Teresa hears the voice of Christ within her: "This is how I treat all my friends." "Well, it's no wonder, then," she retorts, "You have so few of them."

Prayer for Teresa rested in a confident friendship with God, not in a piety of servitude. It was an honest friendship and mutually loyal. "If at times you should fall,"

Teresa wrote, “don’t become discouraged...For even from this fall, God will draw out good. Even though you may not find someone to teach you, God will guide everything for your benefit, provided that you don’t give up. There is no other remedy for giving up prayer than to begin again.”

We come to God, she believed, with our own quirks, our own particular wounds. Nevertheless, God meets each of us where we are most ourselves. “It is foolish,” Teresa wrote, “to think that we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves.”

Teresa believed that friendship with God asks three things of the soul, all interconnected; they are humility, detachment, and love. Humility may be the trickiest to explain today, especially since women worldwide still cry out to have their voices heard. But Teresa wasn’t talking about the withering kind of humility, nor about the humiliating feeling when we think we have nothing to offer. No—she taught a humility that liberates, the kind of humility that enables the soul be candid with God about the desires of our ego, the kind of humility that recognizes our need for Divine guidance. Such humility brings strength, because we no longer need the approval of others to act as God is leading us. The humility Teresa taught and lived from grew out of her connection to the Vine—and it was a divine energy that coursed through her branches. This humility gave her the freedom to trust the gifts God had given her—and a determination to trust Sophia’s voice within.

In the mind of the Inquisition, Teresa was always suspect. Who did she think she was, this lowly woman with no educational merit, who claimed to hear voices? *Who was she* to bring reform to the institutions of the Church? For Teresa, such questions were not ultimately hers to answer; they were God’s. She found confidence when she returned to her inner dwelling place with God. Even though the outer world brought struggle, trial, and fatigue, she knew peace in that deep place.

Growing up in the Church, I heard stories about women in the Bible, like Ruth and Esther, but it wasn’t until I got to seminary that I discovered the rich communion of saints, the mystics of the Church: women like Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and those on the fringes, like Simone Weil and Etty Hillesum. In their words, I heard women’s experiences of the Divine, witnessed the particular ways they as women saw theology and life, and considered new images for God. Meeting them brought me into a deeper knowing of my own spiritual center. Through their feminine, and feminist, voices -- the canon of my Christian faith was forever enlarged.

Sophia-Wisdom, borne of God and returning to God, flows best, Teresa said, in just souls. God takes delight in these souls, calling them a paradise. And so may we continue to find the Divine, the Sophia-Wisdom, revealed in the just souls of our generation.

Part Four : Enlarging the Canon, Embodied Theology, Dialogue Approach ~ Lori

Amen to that.

Stephanie, when you mentioned that the canon of your Christian faith enlarged when you discovered the women mystics, it reminded me of my own experiences of reading newly recovered gnostic gospels when I first came to Binkley 15 years ago. Learning that there was more than one perspective, more than one interpretation of stories I knew so well, opened up new possibilities that resonated deeply with my own experiences.

I remember reading Karen King's translation of The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, a text dated back to the early second century CE. I was amazed by the ending when Mary is asked by Peter to teach what she has learned from Jesus and after she esoterically does – it is a gnostic gospel after all – Andrew and Peter both express their disbelief and scorn. How could a woman know this when they have never heard these teachings before? And Mary goes to that place we women try not to go when asserting our authority in a room full of men – she starts to cry.

Wow – does that sound familiar. This was someone I could relate to, and a story that reflected my personal experience in a profound way. As Stephanie shared that Teresa of Avila had given her confidence to seek new and fuller images of the Divine, so this story of Mary Magdalene reminded me that I'm in good company when sharing my learning does not go over so well.

But there was something deeper in this experience of reading the Gospel of Mary for me. As I read, I could feel the reaction welling up in my body. I could feel my face getting hot, my shoulders lifting up, my jaw clenching. I knew this reaction in my body, but what does my body have to do with my theology?

In their book, Embodied Theology: Goddess and God in the World, authors Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow argue that our personal experiences and responses to the world are necessarily through the body. Embodied theology is the name they give for recognizing how these experiences and responses shape our beliefs.

As a result of their embodied theological approach, these two women - who met in the 1970s earning PhDs in religious studies and have been reading, writing, and generally “doing” theology ever since – engage in an alternating chapter-by-chapter dialogue on their conception of the divine, while at the same time examining how their own personal histories have informed their theological thought.

As I mentioned previously, the feminist approach of authority in community requires dialogue, which - and you can ask either me or Stephanie - does require more work. For this sermon, not only did we have to develop our own ideas about what the women’s retreat meant at this time in our own lives and the life of Binkley church, but also to listen, and listen again to each other’s words and determine how to build on and support, as well as widen and enhance each other’s ideas with our own experiences and understandings.

In the final chapter of their book, Christ and Plaskow recognize the apparent futility of engaging in a discussion that has neither clear beginning nor definite conclusion. But they embrace those ambiguities that weave through their different interpretations. Even as their final words on the nature of divinity diverge, they still argue that:

“...theologies matter because they situate us in the world and orient us as we act in it.”

And we know this to be true: we see Jesus as a voice for the oppressed and try to emulate him by speaking up against and dismantling unjust social structures; we interpret the creation story as one where we have responsibility to care for the natural world not dominion over it; we choose the interpretation that *all* are made in the divine image, no exceptions. Our theologies matter, and the way we puzzle them out as a community matters too.

May the light of “inhabiting a woman’s soul”, as we’ve invited you to do today in our dialogue sermon, shine into our personal theologies, and ultimately, our action in the world. Amen.