

**SLD06.22.14 22nd Ordinary Intro to Saints & Dionysius the Aeropagite
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 10:24-31
Jill Oglesby Evans**

“What You Hear Whispered...”

The text I am about to read is a part of what is called ‘the Missionary Discourse’ in Matthew, instructions given by Jesus to his disciples just as he sends them out to make more disciples. It’s a timely text for us since Lisa Schrott just sent *us* out last week with her interpretation of Jesus’ great commission in Matthew.

In today’s instructions, Jesus seems aware of the difficulties with which his disciples are bound to be confronted, which, in *his* context, would include likely unfavorable reactions to their ministry by the Jewish authorities.¹ But let’s you and I listen with today’s ears for a word on how to deal with the kinds of challenges we may encounter. Listen now for God Word to you. Says Jesus to his disciples,

Matthew 10:24-31

‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house (that is, Jesus) Beelzebul (or the devil,) how much more will they malign those of his household! ‘So have no fear of them (that is, your opponents, external or internal); for *nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.* Do not fear those

¹Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 7) Exegetical essay.

who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the One (God) who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your (God.) And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Interesting advice to those he's sending out: first a heads up about how they *will* likely, be challenged. Secondly, an assurance that they can count on God to reveal any mysteries and truths to them. And finally, that the disciples should attend less to the opinions, threats and distractions around them than to their inner spiritual lives, and to the galvanizing revelation of their relationship with Jesus Christ, from which they are meant to act.

Sure, you'll be maligned, but more powerful is God's work *in and through* you. *Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.* Listen carefully, attend quietly, and what God gives you, share with others. *What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.*

Not bad advice, I'd say, to launch you and me on our annual exploration through the lives and lessons of our summer saints. Here we, too, are being sent out, often into the unfamiliar, the peculiar, the dramatic, the new. But, advises Jesus, *Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to*

you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. May we listen carefully, and attend quietly, to what God gives us through the testimonies of the lives of this year's 'saints.'

This season of exploring a variety of ways and means of following Jesus over the ages is a time-honored tradition in this church. Having spent the majority of the year to date tracking Jesus' birth, baptism, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, and then celebrating the birthday of the church, why, it's time now for us to get on with the business of living out the gospel in our own lives. And one way we do that is to look at the lives of other disciples of Jesus, not to canonize them but to learn from them.

Now, I recognize that just because we've been exegeting the lives of the holy eccentric around here for a long time doesn't mean we have to *keep* doing it. So a while back I sent out a survey to check in to see how you were doing with this convention. Some love it, some are okay with it, some are over it. Include this saint, don't ever do that one. Do more saints that *you* really care about; do more that *others* really care about. Quit making us sing the damn Saints song, the Saints song is my favorite song in the hymnal. Make the series shorter, make it long, spread it out over a whole year. You get the idea.

Believe me when I say that I have fretted endlessly over your and the staff's feedback. So here, finally, is the deal: we're doing a saint series

again this year, only it'll be shorter, only through mid-August instead of clear through September. We promise we really care about the saints that we, and you, have chosen. We'll sing the damn saints song only twice, during the first and last services of the series. So if you like it, cherish then. If you don't, deal with it; the torture will be limited.

For I remain convinced that the best way to learn to follow Jesus is to hang out with others who do, or have, or are trying to. Most of us need to see it, or at least hear about it, to catch on; that's just the way we are. And too, some of us flat need our imaginations stretched a little so we don't start settling in too much with what we do or who or how we are. It's not that we're not enough; it's that God doesn't quit challenging, growing, and, from time to time, delighting us, with new gospel possibilities.

So let's listen carefully to the whispers, note judiciously what might be uncovered, and attend quietly to what might be brought to light in the coming weeks through scripture, through the lives and lessons of our summer 'saints,' and from our own intention to deepen our discipleship, for the Holy Spirit's word to us. The list of this year's summer 'saints' can be found in your bulletin.

In his book, [The Loving Search for God](#), William Meninger reminds us that there are three great loves involved in discipleship: the love of God, the love of others and the love of self; all three, of course, so interrelated

that any one or two of them is impossible without the other(s).² My hope is that the lives of the 'saints' we've chosen this year will exemplify at least one of each of these three great loves.

The life of our first saint, Dionysius the Aeropagite...who?...I said Dionysius the Aeropagite, falls in the category of love of God. Dionysius really, *really* loved God and wanted to help others learn how to love God, too. But of all the lovers of God over the millennia, why home in on Dionysius in particular?

Because it was Dionysius' insight and wisdom on which was based by the teachings of The Cloud of Unknowing from which modern practitioners of contemplative prayer, including Father Thomas Keating, about whom we've heard before in a previous Saint Series, distilled the practice of Centering Prayer, which is taught all over the world and which I personally have attempted to practice for the last 15 years, and which has caught the heart, spirit and time of new member Truette Stubbs, deepening and improving his relationship with God to the point of moving him recently to attend a weekend intensive workshop on Centering Prayer, which experience stirred him further to contract with the sponsors of that weekend to offer a workshop here at Emory Church on Saturday July 26th from 9 – 1, and, further, to join forces with Sally Fleming who also feels drawn to

² William A. Meninger, *The Loving Search for God*, Continuum, New York, 1998, p. 98.

Centering Prayer but is still trying to figure out what the heck to do with it but is nevertheless conscious enough of its gifts to join forces with Truette to invite and encourage any of *us* who might likewise be feeling spiritually curious or dry these days to attend the upcoming workshop which will take place right here in this sanctuary, or the fellowship hall if it's ready, and give Dionysius the Aeropagite's discipline of centering prayer a try to see if it helps you love God more, too.

Follow that?

Never mind. The main thing to know about Dionysius is that he, or at least the body of wisdom that sort of organized itself around him over the centuries, planted the root of Christian contemplative prayer, practitioners over the subsequent millennia watered it, and one blossom is the Centering Prayer workshop here at this church next month. .

But just who *was* Dionysius?

Fairly recently it was established that Dionysius was a Syrian monk of the early sixth century. But for the *medieval* church, he was the Apostle Paul's convert writing to Timothy with an authority close to that of the Scriptures themselves. And what did the body of work associated with Dionysius have to say?

...That there are two ways to know God: one is the way of reason (of which we Presbyterians are especially fond) and the other is the way of

mystical contemplation (of which we Presbyterian are especially suspicious, although not without...well ...reason.)

In any case, Dionysius, (let's call him 'D' since Dionysius is such a mouthful) 'D,' who was *not* Presbyterian, allowed as how *mystical* knowledge of God is greatly superior to rational knowledge of God.

Yeah, well, maybe. But really, since all knowledge of God is incomplete, who's to say one kind is more incomplete than another? But what I say *can* be said with some confidence is that, if you happen to hail from a tradition that's emphasized knowing God through reason for, oh, the last 500 years or so, as you and I do, it's a pretty good bet that making a stab at knowing God through some other means may have something to add.

And my personal life experience and faith journey says it does. You, of course, are welcome to judge for yourself.

So, reason is one way to know God, says D, but there's yet a higher way of knowing God which takes place through...wait for it...*ignorance*.

Wait. Ignorance? Really?

Yup. Hard as it is for us education-loving mainstream reformed Protestants to swallow, and despite pastors' seminary debt, 'D' says the better route to knowing and loving God is through ignorance, emptiness, darkness, the void, in which, he says, the intellect is illuminated by the

unsearchable depth of wisdom. Such knowledge is not found in books nor can it be obtained by human effort, for it is a divine gift, he insists. Though we *can*, through prayer and contemplation, *prepare ourselves to receive* this kind of divine knowledge.

He writes, 'Do thou, then "in the intent practice of mystic contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things which are not and things which are, and *strain upward in unknowing*. Strain upward in unknowing, toward the One Who is above all things and knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from thyself and all things in purity, abandoning all and set free from all, thou shalt be borne up to the ray of divine darkness that surpasseth all being. (*De myst. Theol. I, 1*)

Doo doo doo doo.... (twilight theme song) Right?

Maybe. But don't be too quick to dismiss an insight that's captured the spirit and soul of Christian seekers for roughly the last 1800 years. Or, either, dismiss it if you like. Maybe it's *not* for you. As far as I'm concerned, God wows us with the variety of ways in which God woos us.

But in case you're curious, what D taught was that in order for God to empty God's Self into us, we've got to empty ourselves first to make room. Listen to this: he says, 'When the faculties are emptied of all human knowledge there reigns in the soul a 'mystic silence' leading it to...union with God and the vision of God *as God is in God's Self*.

The vision of God as God is in God's Self. Not our projections or expectations of God, not our hopes or wants or needs of God, but simply

God as God is in God's Self. Oh! There is so much more to say, and I am so not qualified to say it! Come to the workshop on July 26th; maybe somebody there will say it better.

But I do want to share this, from the bottom of my heart: *one miniscule moment with God as God is in God's Self is worth more than a lifetime of belabored belief.*

And this, too. This is important. The most important element in contemplative prayer is love - the love that you and I know through Christ Jesus. The way the author of The Cloud of Unknowing puts it is this: 'Love can discover beauty and potentiality that reason alone cannot find.'

Okay, that's all I'm going to say today about Dionysius the Aeropagite, or about loving God, or about *straining upward in unknowing*. Because it doesn't really matter so much what *I* say as what you hear, which is pretty much between you and the Holy Spirit. Which is why, I believe, that it's important for us to keep going back to Jesus' instructions to the disciples he sent out: Listen. *Listen* carefully today and during these coming weeks as we focus on discipleship for what God uncovers, for what God brings to light, for what God whispers. For *nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known* through the lives of our saints and the love of God.

To the glory of God. Amen.