

A LITTLE PENCIL

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, February 8, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Greatest Disease: Being Unwanted

Mother Teresa is a spiritual teacher, saint, and mystic for today. This is the second in a sermon series on Modern Mystics and Spiritual Teachers. I'd like to begin with a few quotes from her writings, books, and diary.

From her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 1979:

“The greatest disease in the West today is not tuberculosis or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more who are dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty – it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There is a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.”

From her diary:

“If you can't feed a hundred people, feed just one.”

“Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.”

She writes elsewhere:

“Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough. Money can be gotten, but *[the poor]* need your hearts to love them. So spread your love wherever you go.”

From one of her books:

“I am not sure exactly what heaven will be like, but I know that when we die and it comes time for God to judge us, he will not ask, ‘How many good things have you done in your life?’ Rather, he will ask, ‘How much love did you put into what you did?’”

“Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening – this is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world, seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread and in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

And perhaps one of her most famous quotes:

“I am a little pencil in God’s hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything, and sometimes it is really hard because it is a broken pencil and he has to sharpen it a little more.”

And finally one brief line from her diary:

“It is a kingly act to assist the fallen.”

Born in Macedonia in 1910 of Albanian descent, Mother Teresa died on September 5, 1997. But despite all the goodness and fame in her life, her death was completely eclipsed by the funeral on September 6 of Princess Diana, who had died tragically on August 31. On the day after Mother Teresa died, Princess Diana’s funeral caught the attention of the world’s press with British Prime Minister Tony Blair reading I Corinthians 13, the love chapter, and Elton John singing “A Candle in the Wind.”

The Fourth Vow: Free Service to the Poorest

But the way in which we know Mother Teresa best is that she was the founder of the religious order called Missionaries of Charity, a Roman Catholic congregation, which currently consists of over 4,500 sisters and is active in 133 countries. They run hospices and homes for people with HIV/AIDS, leprosy, and tuberculosis; soup kitchens, pharmaceutical dispensaries, and mobile clinics; child and family counseling programs, orphanages, and schools. In a word, they are very busy indeed.

Members must adhere to four vows: three of them are very traditional and typical – chastity, poverty, and obedience. But it’s the fourth one that is distinctive for these Missionaries of Charity – “wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor.”

In one of her diaries, Mother Teresa (at the time, Sister Teresa) wrote about her call, which came in 1946. She was then living in a convent in a tiny suburb of Calcutta called Loreto. For a little context, there was a brutal famine in 1943 that killed thousands upon thousands. With those deaths and the ensuing rebuilding and poverty that followed, the tension between Hindus and Muslims kept climbing until August of 1946, when particularly vicious violence erupted between the two religions.

One month later, in September, Sister Teresa heard a clear message from God. He speaks to her directly:

Quoting from her diary:

“I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith.”

A Sister Becomes a Mother

One of her biographers later observed, “Though no one knew it at the time, Sister Teresa had just become Mother Teresa.” So she leaves Loreto, enters the slums of Calcutta, and looks for a place to stay and begin her life’s work.

Another excerpt from her diary, shortly after the call:

“Our Lord wants me to be a free nun, covered with the poverty of the cross. Today, I learned a good lesson. The poverty of the poor must be so hard for them. While looking for a home, I walked and walked till my arms and legs ached. I thought how much [*the poor*] must ache in body and soul, looking for a home, food, and health.

“Then the comfort of Loreto [*her former convent*] came to tempt me. ‘You have only to say the word, and all that will be yours again,’ the Tempter kept on saying. . . . Of free choice, my God, and out of love for you, I desire to remain and do whatever be your Holy will in my regard. I did not let a single tear come.”

As they say, in a sense the rest of it is history. That was in 1946. She died in 1997. So Mother Teresa began her service and stayed there in the slums of Calcutta for the entire 51 years, serving the poorest of the poor, building up her order, The Missionaries of Charity, with thousands of sisters and hundreds of countries where it’s involved, doing incredible things for all those years.

No Faith; Just Plain Denial

But there’s an intriguing plot twist. After her death in 1997, it was rather famously revealed in the world media (*Time Magazine*, *The New York Times*, television) that Mother Teresa had had a crisis of faith. Upon reading about it, it’s plain that “crisis” isn’t really the right word at all. Pretty much for the whole of her service in Calcutta, from the 1940’s to the 1990’s, she had no faith whatsoever. Not so much doubt as just plain ordinary denial.

Here is an example of her writing during this period about her feelings of emptiness and abandonment. I chose one among many such writings. In addition, there is testimony from friends and from her confessor.

From Mother Teresa’s diary:

“Where is my faith? Even deep down . . . there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. . . . If there be God, please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those [*same*] thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. . . . How painful is this unknown pain? I have no faith. Repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal. . . . What do I labor for? If there be no God, there can be no soul. If there be no soul, then Jesus, you also are not true.

Mother Teresa wrote that!

My imagination saw her, maybe in the wee hours of the night, just prior to going to bed, and then she would wake up for morning vespers before dawn, and about at the break of light, she would resume her daily work once again, day after day, week after week, and year after year. Motivated by love for the poorest of the poor, never contracting tuberculosis or leprosy or AIDS from any of those whom she so freely touched.

Lesson 1: Do not Get It Backwards

Lesson 2: Pound the Damn Bolt Down

I'd like to suggest two lessons from the life of Mother Teresa, though there are many. We're talking about a saint here.

As you may know, I've just hit one of those big round numbers on my birthday, so as an old man, let me give you Lesson Number One: If I could condense this lesson, it would be to say to a young person about ready to start his or her career, to make choices, to choose a path, do what you feel is the right thing for you. Don't worry about obstacles, don't worry about critics, and don't worry about money. The obstacles will be overcome, the critics will fall away, and the money will follow.

But be careful. Do not get it backwards. Don't wait till you have the money. Don't wait till you've overcome the critics. And don't wait till there are no obstacles to choose what you're going to do. In profound mistakes you would waste your life. Get the order right. Do what you know in your heart is right. The obstacles will fall away, the critics will be silenced, and the money will follow.

Lesson Number Two from the life of Mother Teresa is harder. This one I've pondered for a whole week. I'm not sure about it; I have a few doubts. But for me it's like a profound lesson. Here I need to tell a brief story from my past:

I was working with two other guys renovating a house. Beside the house there was a concrete driveway where there used to be a garage. But the garage had long since been removed, and we wanted to make this a parking area for the house that we were renovating. However, there used to be a garage on this pad of

concrete, and there were bolts that stuck up out of the concrete. The wood was long gone, but the bolts were still there. Not cool if you wanted to park a car there with five-inch bolts sticking up out of the concrete. Therefore, they needed to be removed.

So there were three of us. Art was saying, “I think we need to get an acetylene torch and cut the bolts off flush. When they melt, they’ll become smooth, and you won’t have to worry about harming your tires.”

Brant was of the school of thought that said, “Nah, we don’t have an acetylene torch. We’d have to rent one, and that costs money. Just use a hacksaw.”

Art, of the acetylene school of thought, said, “Nyah, with a hacksaw, you’re still going to leave like a quarter-inch or a half-inch bolt sticking up. You can’t get flush with a hacksaw.”

So we’re sittin’ there debating this when Ralph, the third guy, suddenly wasn’t in the discussion anymore. He was just gone. We sort of looked up from the midst of our philosophical argument and realized that he had gone over to his truck and had gotten out a small, hand-size sledgehammer. Then he had pounded the damn bolt down and had come back to rejoin the conversation to see what we had decided.

Something Philosophical About This Story

There’s more to it than meets the eye. Remember these two quotes:

“If you can’t feed a hundred people, feed just one.”

“Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.”

That’s what she said.

Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and at that time the award that she got was \$192,000, a nice chunk of change in 1979. The bitterest criticism that she ever in her life received was that she did not use a single dime of the prize money to relieve the causes of hunger. She used all of it then and there for the desperately poor.

And that’s where the philosophy comes in. I find her view deeply compelling. Granted, governments and agencies, churches and Non-Governmental Organizations should all be addressing the root causes of the world’s problems, hunger being one of them. But what Mother Teresa did was to “Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.” She was of the go-to-the-truck, grab-the-sledge, pound-down-the-bolt school of thought, while these other two were sittin’ there arguing philosophy and accomplishing nothing.

Now here's why I find her view compelling. Governments, NGO's, and churches have all been addressing the root causes of hunger for a long, long time, with very modest success. But imagine if we all were to act upon that quote – "Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you." The alternative would be unnecessary.

I offer this to you as a lesson in life, of how to approach your life and your responsibility of making the world a better place because you lived. What if we all were to do that?

In conclusion, "It is a kingly act to assist the fallen." Indeed, Christlike.

Amen.