

Reclaiming Prayer

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2023

Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

- [0 : 0 0] In Western Christian theology, there are two names that really tower above all other names. One of them is Augustine of Hippo, and the other is St. Thomas Aquinas.
- Augustine is known for helping to formulate the doctrine of original sin for just war theory and for a little book he wrote called The Confessions, which is somewhat different from Usher's album of the same name.
- Yeah, some of you might know that too. But Thomas Aquinas, who is a lesser known of the two men and who wrote about 900 years later, wrote one of those influential systematic theologies to come out of the West, and it was called the Summa Theologica.
- If you go on Audible, you'll see that one volume of the Summa is 53 hours long, and the second volume is 48 hours long, and there are five volumes.
- But I start here not because of the influence of the Summa or how massive and long it is. I start here because of an interesting story that's associated with it.
- [1 : 2 1] The story goes that one day while Thomas Aquinas was attending Mass in his regular course of worship, he had a mystical experience.
- He encountered God in some way that was outside of the ordinary, and he refused to continue dictating afterwards the rest of the Summa.
- His secretary, Reginald, begged him, like, keep going. You're creating this amazing theology. And the story says that he replied, Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me.
- After that, Aquinas fully abandoned his attempt to capture a systematic theology of God. He never finished the Summa.
- When confronted with this actual experience of God, all of his words fell away. All of his logic, all of his systems. Can you imagine having some of the most important theological frameworks flowing through you?
- [2 : 4 1] Nearly 259 hours of ideas that would come to shape the course of Western philosophy and Christian theology. And then getting to the point of realizing that it is all as brittle as straw.
- Because of one encounter with God. St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the fathers of the early church, said that concepts create idols.
- Only wonder understands. I, myself, would love to know whether Aquinas came to see his focus on systematic theology as a move toward idol making.
- And even more, I would love to understand, to know how he saw God differently after being captured by wonder. Now, if you've been hanging out with us for the last couple of weeks, since Easter really, you know that we've been moving through a sermon series that's called Practicing Resurrection.
- Essentially, we're asking what it means to have our relationships with God resurrected. We're asking what we do when we have this feeling of like, my theology is pretty good, but my relationship with God kind of sucks.

[4 : 12] When it feels like you've got right words, but you're kind of short-circuited on wonder. When your reason about God is strong, but your actual day-to-day relationship with God is not so much.

You've got a formula, but not a lot of strong faith. You've got math and science, but not a lot of poetry and romance and hope.

Before I came out as gay, I had a really, I would consider it a really strong relationship with God. I was very emotionally unhealthy, and we can talk about that outside.

But I did have this really strong sense that God was present, that God was near, that God was speaking. I prayed and I read the Bible consistently. I went to church, and I felt rooted in all those kinds of practices and disciplines.

Three times, three times in my life, I can confidently say that I felt like God was speaking to me in a real way. Things that have come to really define my sense of self and my sense of calling.

[5 : 28] Join this church where you can learn about Christian history and exegesis. Travel a little further up north into North Africa so that you can understand what it means to do ministry on the margin and in the edges.

Come out fully. Come out. Because there are spacious places for you and room to roam and be nourished.

That last one, that last word that came to be represented for me much better theology, much more emotional health, and a much clearer sense of how to engage the scriptures.

But it was also really the last time I felt like I heard God's voice for a really long time. Better theology meant turbulence in my relationship with God.

Better theology meant that I knew that God spoke in many more ways than I had previously understood. Yet I was overwhelmed and how to train myself in hearing when there were so many more options.

[6 : 51] When God was present in so many more ways. Because God could be speaking in so many different things beyond the Bible and beyond an audible voice.

Because God could be speaking in nearly everything. For a long time, I lost the ability to hear God speak in anything. It was an area in which I needed deep resurrection in my everyday life, in my relationship with God.

Jesus, Jesus brings resurrection not just to our theologies. And let me say this very, very clearly because it's really important.

we do need better theology. And somebody needs to say an amen. Kevin Garcia, who some of you might know or have read, he has kind of coined this phrase that bad theology kills and it sums up something that just cannot be underestimated.

Bad theology does kill. And yet Jesus invites us into a conversion of our theology without ignoring our hearts.

[8 : 06] He invites us into something beyond fact fundamentalism, which is essentially adhering to logic and categories and structures of reason that explain God, that are their own kinds of literalism.

Following, Jesus invites us into depths of experience and communion that lead to other ways of knowing and that lead to wonder. Carl Reiner, an influential Catholic theologian, said this, the devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or will cease to be anything at all.

in order to continue to practice resurrection in our day-to-day relationships with God, we have to be those who are experiencing something.

And that something, I believe, is transformative friendship with God. I am convinced that transformative friendship with God cannot come without commitment to prayer.

So, here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna go to a passage of scripture that means a whole lot to me. It's one of those passages that has lines that I often feel like whispered to me as I pray.

[9 : 33] And it's the story about Jesus' invitation to transformative friendship. So, if you have a Bible in any form, feel free to turn to Luke 5, 1 through 11.

It'll also be on the screen if you prefer to follow along that way. Once, while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Genesaret and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake.

The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon and asked him to put out a little away from the shore.

Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

Simon answered, Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.

[10 : 50] when they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them.

And they came and filled both boats so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.

For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish they had taken. And so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching people. When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Now this story contains the very first invitation to discipleship in the Gospel of Luke.

[11 : 53] Jesus, after feeling these crowds pressing in on him, decides to sit in this ordinary fisherman's boat slightly offshore to get some relief, to get enough distance from the crowd to be able to effectively proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

Maybe enough distance and space to have a better sense of just what to say, to hear his own voice. Some of us just need a little distance.

He chooses Simon's boat, a man who is going about the ordinary business of running the small fishing enterprise. Once he's done, once Jesus is done teaching, he directs Peter, put out into the deep.

He wants Simon to travel into the deeper parts of the lake where he and his companions will catch more fish. Simon's skeptical. After all, fish usually came to the warmer and shallower parts of the lake at night and that hadn't worked.

Why would this professional try something that had such small chances of success? I wonder if there's a little bit of insight, don't tell me how to do my job.

[13 : 17] I don't know if y'all have ever felt like that. Don't tell me how to do my job. I got this. I know what I'm doing and you just got here. That's what I would be thinking. Okay. We all have people that show up in our lives like that.

You know, we have like, you know, a work project or a marital impasse or a family issue and they show up claiming like everything's easy. It's a magic bullet. Why don't you have this yet?

But Simon discerns in this moment that it's a time to let go of his skepticism. He replies to Jesus, yet if you say so.

I love that. I will let down the nets. And when he does, he and his coworkers, they catch more fish than they can imagine. Simon recognizes that Jesus is not an ordinary man and so did James and John.

And then they get this further invitation to catch people. And he's not asking them to participate in random acts of evangelism. He's asking them to participate in his entire mission of mercy and healing and justice and salvation that have these communal and cosmic implications.

[14 : 35] In many ways, we live in a society in a time that conspires against us putting out into the deep. That's set up for us to stay in the shallows.

And this is particularly true when we think about prayer. Ron Roheiser, a Catholic writer, I went to the Catholics, I don't know why, y'all. They have some good stuff.

He once said, or he once used an example that I really thought was compelling. He talks about our days as being similar to going through a car wash.

In a car wash, all you have to do is drive up to the conveyor belt, to the entrance of it, and then you just take your feet off the pedal, put up your hands, and you just lean back.

The car wash, you know, brushes will come at you from every side. The car might be jostled and shaken a little bit. But overall, you'll just be sucked through.

[15 : 38] And that's how often our days are. We just gotta wake up. And that's all it takes. From there, we will be sucked through until we go to sleep.

From there, there will be so many motions to go through and so many important tasks to accomplish. There will be so many work projects and errands to run and things that come up with our family and our friends and so much to inform us and to entertain us.

We are people. We are people who struggle to get past our need for bread and our desire for circuses. And then, on top of that, some of us find it especially hard to approach fare because of the way it's been used against us and really just abused.

I mean, flat out abused, right? This past week, one of the elders here, Shea Washington, invited me to be on the panel for the screening of this film, Pray Away.

It's a deeply moving film about conversion therapy, which is a movement that holds that queer people should and can become straight. They can't?

[16 : 51] Okay, okay. I'm sorry. And then, some of the hardest scenes in that movie involve prayer. They're scenes in which people are basically told how they're supposed to feel and what they need in the course of being called to altars and having people lay their hands on them.

They're moments that are clearly manipulative and non-consensual, at least not in a way of true consent. And many of us carry the experience of those moments, and I'll be honest, I do.

We carry it in our bodies. Trauma is held in the body. Or we have witnessed those kinds of moments that have forever impacted our interaction with prayer.

And then, on top of those two things, the way our society keeps us in the shallows and the way that we've seen prayer manipulated, there is this theological suspicion that rides underneath our desire to pray.

Dallas Willard puts this really well. the idea that everything would happen exactly as it does, regardless of whether we pray or not, is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess their belief in God.

[18 : 19] It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. the suspicion that stops our prayers is basically that God doesn't intervene.

And if God doesn't intervene, why pray? And in light of that question and the realities of our lives overall, it's easy to concern ourselves with piety, with holiness.

Am I doing the right things personally to live a life pleasing to God? It's easier to concern ourselves with social justice. Am I doing the right things communally to help advance the calls of God, to advance God's justice for the marginalized?

And both of those questions should profoundly concern us. Yet both of them by themselves only lead to us becoming good people.

People. Neither of them on their own are about transformative union with God. Neither of them are about friendship with God. Neither of them are about salvation.

[19 : 38] And my favorite definition of salvation is just being caught up into the Trinitarian life of God. Seeking holiness and justice are incredibly necessary.

But without this deeper rooting in God, those things leave us depleted and burnt out. And if they don't, they become ways that we advance our own personal agendas and satisfy our ego desires for prestige and for power.

Putting out into the deep requires trust. trust. In the ancient world, the deeper waters carried significance. To go out into the water was to be at the mercy of the forces of chaos, the unknown.

It was to lack completely self-control. Yet, one of the major themes of the Bible is that when God overcomes the forces of chaos, God does so through reconciling love and not through violence.

While something in us will always caution us against going out into the deep, maybe something deeply self-protective that we do need, that's where we experience God's reconciling love most profoundly.

[21 : 07] Consensual, consensual loss of control is always the precondition to new life. it's always the precursor to resurrection.

To venture out into the deep, we need a spirituality that is comfortable with the unknown, that's uncomfortable with messiness and unanswered questions, that actively moves us toward trust.

We need a spirituality that really is offered to us in the book of Psalms. Psalms, the Psalms are basically poetic prayers that are set to music.

Psalm 1 opens really simply with this kind of black and white binary world. Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers.

They are like trees planted by streams of water. On the other hand, the wicked are not so, but they are like chaff that the wind drives away. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

[22 : 21] In thinking about this, I had a chance to listen to a talk by Dr. Peter Choi and his thinking about Psalms really influenced me. Psalm 1 is basically about obedience.

It allows us to cast ourselves as righteous, whether that's about personal holiness or about communal justice. If we read this by itself, we get this surface-level faith.

But Psalm 1 is meant to introduce us to the rest of the book, to a life of prayer, to a life of depth. If you read the Psalms, you get these moments of desperation and then joy and then frustration and confusion and sadness.

You get seasons where the world seems basically good and then you see these seasons that the writers go through which are desperately sad and then you get seasons of like total new life and surprise.

And in the end you get Psalm 150 which is from beginning to end a prayer of praise. I'm going to read that because I think sometimes our souls just need to hear something like this.

[23 : 31] praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise him in his mighty firmament. Praise him for his mighty deeds.

Praise him according to his surpassing greatness. Praise him with trumpet sound. Praise him with lute and harp. Praise him with tambourine and dance.

Praise him with strings and pipes. Praise him with clanging cymbals. Praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes everything that breathes praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord. This kind of spirituality ends in a life that asks nothing from God and lists no specific benefits of following God.

This is not transactional. the encounter with God through every season of life has been enough a life spent in these deep places of prayer that are beyond reason but are about wonder.

[24 : 40] Everything everything everything has been held before God such that the desire to systematize becomes as brittle as strong. people. And the good news in all of this is that God comes to us in the ordinary moments of our lives and invites us into the deep into a life of prayer.

It's like the moment when God appears to Moses in a burning bush when he's just shepherding or the moment when the prophet Isaiah who's a priest is just in the temple going about his normal duties and he sees a vision that changes everything.

It's like Simon running his fishing business and suddenly being asked to go out into the deep. It's like Thomas Aquinas showing up in worship and having God reveal God's self beyond perfect theology.

It's like the moment when you're at home and you're making your coughing and you're talking to somebody on the phone and all of a sudden the quality of light changes. such that you can see every particle of dust floating in the air.

And it's beautiful. And you realize that deeper reality is always available to us in our everyday lives if we can enter into prayerful attention.

[26 : 11] In this city, Washington, D.C., where so many of us are doing important work. God is not asking us to deplete ourselves.

And I'm saying that to myself too. God is not asking us to deplete ourselves. Before Jesus ever tells Simon that he will catch people, he invites Simon into the deep where he can be sustained.

He invites him into friendship. friendship. The revelation of God's invitation into friendship overall is a key reason why Jesus comes into the world in the first place.

Next week, I'm going to talk some more about prayer and get into some practical things, talk some about moving out of transactional relationships with God. But for now, my prayer is that in this moment, this Sunday, right now, that you would have a deep sense of the joy, the joy of being called into friendship, of being invited into prayer and relationship with God and romance.

may wonder draw you near to God and keep you there all the days of your life. Amen.