

9th Sunday After Pentecost

[Romans 11.13-32](#)

[Matthew 15.21-28](#)

Rev'd Jamee Collard

(Transcript taken from YouTube)

Open up, Speak up!

It's vocation season for us at Holy Hermits Online, and there is also a focus in the wider Church, particularly in August every year, when we intentionally perhaps listen more deeply than at other times of the year. Hopefully, we also reaffirm an existing practice of encouraging and flourishing our vocations in the body of Christ. Certainly, that is a focus for us online together as we figure out ways that we can do just that: allow and make a way for us to serve one another, but also serve God online.

Every baptized Christian has a vocation, so let's sit with this idea of vocation a little bit, but also be inspired by those whose vocations and stories have been so inspiring in our Christian history as to encourage others into deeper listening, openness, and activity in faith.

One such person is our holy hermit, whom we are remembering for the very first time in our Holy Hermit Remembrance Ministry, and this person is Edith Stein. She is also known as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Now I'm not going to keep saying Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross for the whole sermon, so I'm just going to refer to her as Edith. I hope that is going to be okay. Who I am talking about is an amazing woman who was a feminist for her time, what we would call an egalitarian now. She was a philosopher. What a brain she had. She was a hermit and was called to a ministry, but she did also spend some time as a rampant atheist. Unfortunately, she was martyred — or fortunately for those she was martyred alongside — in one of the death camps in the Holocaust. And so we will really journey with her as we reflect on vocation, because what she can teach us, I believe, is a reaffirmation that being open to God and God's purposes sometimes takes us by a rather circular route. At any time in our life, we might have a calling that is affirmed and that we carry on with; we might have a calling that is new to us and makes us completely change what we are doing; we might have one that takes us completely out of our comfort zone and makes us do something we never thought we'd be able to do. It is through God's help that these things can happen.

When she was a philosopher, she was a younger person living in Germany, and she had all of these ideas that she wrote down. There is a lot to read through, but one of the things she began to glean as she was coming to faith, reading another hermit's writings, was that each of us is perpetually on the razor's edge: on one side, absolute nothingness; on the other, the fullness of divine life. One side nothingness, the other the fullness of divine life.

Now Edith, definitely in her story, is living extremes. She goes from not wanting anything to do with faith to then wanting to become a Discalced Carmelite nun, and that is what she did. It sounds very much like discerning vocation. There are sometimes very clear seasons of life that we move through, and changes and transformations that we experience. Often our journey through vocation is obscured, with many stops along the way. We can kind of fall into them, or come at them from a non-linear route, one that might not make sense to anyone else looking at our life from outside. But to be compelled to respond to something that God puts in our way and become a different version of ourselves that we never imagined we could be: this is how we respond to Jesus, who calls us to follow wherever he might lead, sometimes empty-handed.

There is another part of Edith's teachings I want to highlight, which perhaps can reassure us that even in the midst of an outward show of hostility towards religion or faith or God in general, you never know what is going on underneath the surface. She names this by saying, "God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether that is clear to them or not."

In the gospel passage today, we see Jesus encounter a woman not of his faith or his religion. She was Canaanite, not Jewish, and at her request to heal her daughter and cast out the demon that was plaguing her, Jesus was very clear that he needed to minister first to his own people: those who had been waiting for the Messiah, prepared by John the Baptist, and had received Jesus as a teacher, as a rabbi, even if they had not fully understood him as Messiah just yet. The salvation through his ministry would then extend to the nations alongside the mission of the Church. So she perhaps is a little bit early, but the woman shows that she is ready to pursue Jesus, to pursue the truth as she knows it: that this man has the power and the salvation that her daughter needs, right here, right now. She argues for the sake of her daughter and the love that compels her to speak up.

We then see that Jesus responds by extending his compassion to someone who was not in the circle of his focus for ministry. He includes this woman and her daughter and names her great faith. So we are celebrating several things in this gospel passage, which Edith also embodied in her life. The first one is this: love leads us to speak up and get active. It was because of the Canaanite woman's loving persistence, because she spoke up for what she believed in — in Jesus' healing power — that her daughter was made well that day, but also that Jesus' bubble of ministry began to grow. Love does lead us to speak up, to get active, and sometimes to stand before God to ask for what others need.

Sometimes this is fairly easy: bringing something to God in prayer, interceding on behalf of someone we know who is in need. We do this as a community every week. But sometimes it is actually in us becoming the answer to prayer ourselves and putting prayer into action by stepping in, stepping up, and maybe sometimes saying unpopular things. It could be at great cost to us. It might not just be in getting a reputation as the annoying advocate who just will not pipe down, like the disciples labelled the Canaanite woman, saying, "Lord, ask her to go away; she keeps nagging at us." Speaking up for those who have need, who perhaps cannot ask for that themselves, sometimes does lead us into hot water — uncomfortable situations that could be social, political, and practical.

So back to Edith's story, Sister Teresa Benedicta's story, which really reflects this. It is said that even prior to the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, where she was, she believed that she would not survive the war. She wrote to her prioress asking permission to offer herself to the Heart of Jesus as a sacrifice for true peace, and she made her will. This sounds a little bit like there is a vocation and a calling unfolding here. Her sisters later recounted how Edith began training herself for life in a concentration camp, and especially that this became quite pronounced after the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands in 1940. Unfortunately, she was not safe, nor were her other converted sisters who had been Jewish and came to faith as Christians and then gave their lives in this way. The Church had spoken against what the Nazis were doing, but as a response to this, only six days after the Church spoke up, 243 baptized Jews were arrested by the SS in 1942.

Her story continues. She and her sister Rosa were imprisoned at the concentration camps of Amersfoort and Westerbork before being deported to Auschwitz. Interestingly, her vocation was very noticeable because a Dutch official at Westerbork was impressed by her faith, her calm, and offered her an escape plan. Edith refused, and she said that if someone intervened at this point and took away her chance to share in the fate of her brothers and sisters, that would be annihilation for her. On 7 August 1942, 987 Jews went to Auschwitz, and it was probably two days later that Sister Teresa, along with her sister Rosa and many more Jewish people and professed Christians alike, were killed in a gas chamber.

We do not know what it was like for those imprisoned around Edith to have this indomitable faith in their midst, as they did not survive to tell us. But we can imagine that her conviction and her strength, this calm that had been recognized by an official not long before, was a light for those who were facing the darkness of persecution and death for their race or faith. Here we see her vocation taking her to that razor's edge: on one side, nothingness, which she described as walking away from the companionship she bore her brothers and sisters experiencing this; and on the other side, this martyrdom, which she did live out to death. But now what she leaves us is a legacy, and also what she might have done for those around her. It was love that led her there: the love of God.

That was number one: love leads us to speak up. Number two, the thing that we celebrate from the gospel passage, but also from Edith's story today, is openness, which is a very important

equation of vocation. Jesus opened his ministry to the woman in the gospel because he always met people where they were. He had a living compassion and reacted in real time to the needs of those around him. He is also calling all Christians to do the same, which is such a hard thing for us to do. I know I particularly struggle with this. It takes me time to process things as they happen sometimes, and so to be able to jump in very quickly can be a really, really big challenge. That is why we must rely on God to be the one who fills us, if only we are open and ready.

This vocation is the heart of things: to listen for God's call, to ask God for what is needed, and then to be ready to answer those prayers ourselves; to be filled and become Jesus' hands and feet, and go about doing the work of the Kingdom wherever it leads us. We will likely get it wrong. We will likely be closed at times in our lives and not able to discern God's direction or call at that particular time. But there might be those moments when we do actually have that discipline of openness in our lives that then calls us into action. Edith names this powerful and prayerful discipline, and openness to God's grace, as our vocation. This is what she has to say about it: "To stand before the face of God, that is our vocation. Our daily schedule ensures us of hours of solitary dialogue with the Lord, and these are the foundation of our life. No human eye can see what God does in the soul during the hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace, and all of life's other hours are our thanks for them."

This is perhaps offered to us as a reassurance that we do not have to generate vocation ourselves. All we need to do is open up and listen for what God is gifting to us and filling us with. This comes from our epistle today, this little passage from Romans, which says, "Remember, it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you." So we must rely on God to fill us, and it is our job to cultivate our discipline of prayer, but also our openness, and remember that anything we do well, anything that seems to be an answer to prayer, is from God, our source. It is not us.

So I'm going to offer now a prayer that was written by Edith, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. I'm going to offer it first in her words, which are in the first person, and then I'm going to pray it for us, turning it into a community prayer. First, I invite you to open up to the words and listen to what she has offered, and then perhaps to move into that openness of prayer. Here it is:

"O my God, fill my soul with holy joy, courage, and strength to serve you. Enkindle your love in me, and then walk with me along the next stretch of road before me. I do not see very far ahead, but when I have arrived where the horizon now closes down, a new prospect will open before me, and I shall meet with peace."

So let us now pray this prayer for our community at Holy Hermits Online, as well as our brothers and sisters in Christ in other communities; for ourselves and our vocation; for our openness to serve; and for God to work on us, in us, around us, and through us as love leads us to speak up. Let us pray:

HOLY HERMITS ONLINE

"O our God, fill our souls with holy joy, courage, and strength to serve you. Enkindle your love in us, and then walk with us along the next stretch of road before us. We do not see very far ahead, but when we have arrived where the horizon now closes down, a new prospect will open before us, and we shall meet with peace. Amen."