

“Be Not Afraid”

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I would like to talk to you about a woman, named Anyes Gonja Boy-a-geo, better known as Mother Teresa. She was born in what is better known today as Macedonia. She is of Albanian descent - originating in Kosovo. Her father died when she was only eight years old. She was raised by her mother and grandmother and had one sister. They lived a very faithful, pious life together.

According to a biography written by Joan Graff Clucas, in her early years Agnes was fascinated by the stories of the lives of missionaries in the Roman Catholic Church, especially the ones who were serving in an exotic place named Bengal. By the age of 12, she had been committed in her mind to become part of the missionaries' life of the Roman Catholic Church.

Her final resolution occurred on the 15th day of August 1928, while praying at the shrine of the Black Madonna of Letnice (Let-neat-sa), where she often went on pilgrimage. She felt God speaking to her. She left home at age 18 and joined the Sisters of Loreto, as a missionary.

In that generation, when you were a missionary, you said good-bye to your family and went to some far flung part of the world, knowing you would never go home again. So when she kissed her mother and sister good-bye and left for the Far East, she knew she would never see them again. Now that is faith.

She took up her solemn vows on the 14th day of May 1937, and served as a teacher in the Loreto Convent School in the eastern part of Calcutta. Teresa served there for almost 20 years. In 1944 she was appointed headmistress for that convent.

Although she loved teaching, when she walked around Calcutta she saw all the vast amount of poverty, the hunger, the pain and the depravity. Then suddenly in Bengal, in 1943, there was a severe famine and people were dying all around her. Then, of course, there was the outbreak of Hindu/Muslim violence in 1946. If you have ever seen the movie “Gandhi” or read any of his books, Gandhi sat there fasting and then went on a hunger strike to stop the very same bloodshed and pain that Mother Teresa - at that time Sister Teresa – saw it, and she knew she had to do something. She knew she couldn't do it teaching or being a head mistress in a comfortable life in a convent.

So on the 10th of September 1946, Teresa was riding in a train from her convent to Calcutta for her annual retreat. I will let her words describe what happened next: *“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.”* One author later observed, *“Though no one knew it at the time, on that train trip she went from being Sister Teresa to Mother Teresa.”*

She began her missionary work with the poor in 1948. She didn't have any money or any support. She wrote in her diary that the first year was fraught with difficulties. The way she

stayed alive was by begging for food and supplies, just like the untouchables she was trying to serve. Teresa experienced doubt, loneliness and the temptation to go back to her comfortable convent and teach again, but she just kept going. Again she wrote in her diary:

“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 they must ache in body and soul, looking for a home, food and health. Then the comfort of Loreto (her former congregation) came to tempt her. ‘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.”

It began as a small congregation - not even a convent - and just 13 other people who had the same feelings that Mother Teresa had about caring for the poor, and knowing the only way to care for them was to live and be among them. From 1948-1997, they went from having 13 women together to having over 4,000 sisters running orphanages, AIDS hospices and charity centers, worldwide, caring for refugees, the blind, the disabled, the aged, the alcoholic, the poor, the homeless, and victims of floods, epidemics and famine.

It looks - at first glance - like Mother Teresa was just blessed by the very hand of God, and the Holy Spirit ignited this flame within her that just could not go out. She must have felt God’s hand to be able to do all of that. And if you think that - like I did - then we would both be wrong. Mother Teresa’s life was never easy and, from the late 1940s on, claims she almost never felt the spirit of God, and questioned over and over if God had left her.

Now today’s passage - both in the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water episode - talks about Jesus wanting to get away with his Disciples, because they had come home to tell him about what they were doing in their missionary travels. He couldn’t even spend an evening or any time with them without the crowds gathering around and manipulating him - trying to make him a King when he didn’t want to be a King - trying desperately to help those, so they could go out and do ministry again. But they just kept pushing and pushing and finally he just - out of compassion - had to give up rest and teaching, and provide for their needs.

What is inspiring about that walk on the water wasn’t the fact that Jesus walked on the water. It’s that those simple ordinary people (who had very little - if any - faith) could continually confuse what Jesus was trying to do, receive comfort, have their fears taken away, their anxieties lessened; and it would empower them with the ability for them to walk through their hard times and endure their own Golgathas on their crosses. That is the miracle - not that Jesus did something that was beyond the natural realm of creation, but that he could get people to respond in faith.

That same insecurity and timidity the Apostles felt that night, on that boat, was an ongoing part of Mother Teresa’s life and ministry. I’m just finishing a book called “Mother Teresa: Come be My Light,” an interesting, interesting book. She never wanted the book written. It was a gathering of her diary notes, notes taken by her spiritual directors. She didn’t want

those ever to be seen by the public - but they printed them anyway. (You can never trust anybody!) They felt she was wrong and it needed to be read.

The author writes:

“From the time she received the call, she was convinced that her mission was to bring the light of faith to those living in darkness. Little did Mother Teresa realize that ‘darkness’ would become the greatest trial of her own life, and a fundamental part of her mission.”

I’m sorry to keep quoting, but it’s important that you are not hearing my words for hers. In her diary again, Mother Teresa writes:

“Now Father, since ‘49 or ‘50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness--this loneliness, this continual longing for God---which gives me that pain deep down in my heart---Darkness is such that I really do not see---neither with my mind nor with reason---the place of God in my soul is blank---There is no God in me---when the pain of longing is so great---I just long and long for God---and then it is that I feel---He does not want me---He is not there---God does not want me---Sometimes---I just hear my own heart cry out---‘My God’ and nothing else comes---The torture and pain I can’t explain.”

Only her spiritual directors knew the deep, empty ache in her soul that entire time in Calcutta. She never really felt God’s presence. According to her archbishop in India, Archbishop Perier, “She always insisted that all documents, and I’m quoting, ‘revealing the inspiration behind the foundation of the Missionaries of Charity be destroyed, for fear that she would be given a prominence that she believed was due to God alone.’ She was worried that if they realized that she didn’t feel God’s spirit in her, that they would deny God as well.”

Ironically, the more she felt God was absent - and her spiritual life was dark and empty - the more God worked through her. It seems that everyone else saw God’s light in her, but her. Perhaps, and I’m trying to figure out why this could happen, perhaps God kept her in the spiritual dark to keep her humble. I mean when everybody is telling you that you are the greatest thing since Jesus Christ, maybe God kept some distance from her to make sure she didn’t feel self-inflated.

Perhaps Mother Teresa’s soul and despair is what motivated her because, while she didn’t feel God’s spirit working through her, for 40 years it never once stopped her from doing God’s work. The reason I bring this up isn’t to say anything derogatory about Mother Teresa; it’s to say, you don’t and I don’t have to feel that way either. There are long moments when - at least in my life - when I feel I’m faking, and maybe faking it is a good part of doing it. There are moments when you just get up and go, but I don’t feel it here, but I do it anyway; there are moments when I feel that, but most of the time I’m just going through the routine. I’m trying, I can’t force God to go “get up” right in front of my face or in my heart all of the time.

I'll bet - if we are honest - most of us feel the very same way; but we keep coming, we keep doing, hoping, praying - like Mother Teresa - that maybe, once in a while, God will give us that feeling that we had those few times. What's amazing is, I'm willing to bet that if you ask other people, they see the Spirit in you, even when you don't feel it within yourself.

I think Mother Teresa was right. She didn't want her diaries shared, because she didn't want it to be about her, I wonder if her spiritual advisors ever said to her, "and God is giving you just what you want. You want God to be the message. You don't want it to be about you, but if it is not about you - and you are doing the ministry - then what does it matter whether you feel God's Holy Spirit speaking to your heart every minute of every day or not."

It is not about you; it is not about me. It's not about Mother Teresa. It's about God's ministry getting done, and it got done beyond anybody's imagination. She did more than feed 5,000 on a day with a few loaves of bread and fish. She fed millions begging on the street. So it didn't matter if she felt the Holy Spirit or not - God's ministry got done. So the only thing I can take from that is, that there are moments in your life and mine where God feels a million miles from us, and we just go through the motions - because we believe that the very definition of belief is to do it when you don't feel it. You can't prove belief - you just know it and do it.

So that is what we do. When God feels like He is a million miles away, we do it. That is routine. When you are really down and you think you have gotten to the place where you believe God has totally left you and you can't go on, talk to someone like a spiritual advisor. We Presbyterians aren't into that sort of thing very often. So, instead of a spiritual advisor, find a friend who you trust - who can be honest with you - and ask them, "Do you see anything in me; any light?"

I think you will be surprised that everyone else is seeing it - at least now and then. When you stop seeing it, remember, it's not about you and me. It's about God getting the work done. If God is getting the work done, with you feeling empty, so what? It is getting done.

God will speak to you. God will never forget you, as God has not forgotten Mother Teresa, the Apostles and even Jesus on the cross. As God fulfilled the resurrection in Jesus and the ascension, God will for us. Remember to hold on to that in your darkest moments. For it is in Jesus name that we pray.

Amen