

“To Be Good”**Rev. Maeve Hammond****Psalm 25 | Matthew 19:16-22****1 September 2024**

You all know how much I love saints—St. Teresa of Avila, St. Julian of Norwich, St. Hildegard von Bingen, and (someone who should be a saint) Dorothy Day, to name a few, not to mention the saints who walk among us every day who aren’t canonized. But, today I am going to explore how sometimes saints aren’t all that they are cracked up to be. Over the summer, I listened to a podcast called “The Turning: The Sisters Who Left.” Produced by the podcast company Rococo Punch (don’t you love that name?), host Erika Lantz guides the audience through a twelve-episode docu-series on Mother Teresa’s religious order, the Missionaries of Charity. Whether or not you grew up in a church, you very likely will recognize Mother Teresa. If you can picture her in your mind’s eye, you’ll see a small woman with deep smile lines and crows’ feet, wrapped in a blue and white sari-turned-habit, her palms pressed together before her chest in grateful prayer. Canonized by the Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, she’s the woman heralded for her work with poor, sick, and disabled communities around the world. She was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. She heard God’s “call within a call,” not unlike Saint Paul’s own conversion story. She would go on to be “Mother”—as she called herself, often, yes, in the third person—to thousands of eager missionaries of all ages, sisters and, later, fathers, inspired by what they saw was the selfless call to empty themselves completely and wholly for God, neighbor, and the good of the world.

Mother Teresa’s sisters are the subject of “The Turning.” Mother Teresa was the head of the religious order, the Missionaries of Charity, or MCs. She established the tone, tenets, and organizational structure of the women who serve God by serving under her, their “Mother.” Sisters come from all over the world, live in communal simplicity with other like-minded women, and aim to be the Christ in their small section of the world through an endless outpouring of

service. To become a missionary, the sisters dedicate themselves to these four vows: poverty, obedience, chastity, and “wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor.”

On paper, these vows don't sound too bad to the women who find themselves called to be an Missionary of Charity, an MC. Perhaps, even, there's freedom in these four vows. By committing yourself to the work of giving as inspired by Christ, the worldly temptations melt away, your purpose becomes one with your ministry, and your relationship with God grows ever closer. In other words, you focus on what really matters: bringing God's goodness to the world and becoming a better servant every day. These vows don't sound too bad, but *sounding* one way and *living* one way can be completely contradictory. Based on the testimonies of the ex-MCs interviewed in “The Turning,” I don't find God in the ways these vows were mandated and lived out.

Religious orders aren't known for being lax with their vows. But, according to sisters who left the order as recently as the early 2000s, the Missionaries of Charity took them to an extreme the sisters hadn't expected, or, in most cases, hadn't been made fully aware of. As the convents of Missionaries of Charity and their inner workings are completely shut off from the world, it is unknown whether these practices are still in place. *Some of these extremes may disturb some of you, so please take care of yourself during and after this sermon as you need.* Superiors, called “the voice of God in the order,” were and potentially still are never to be questioned—for doing so is questioning Christ himself. They would read all incoming and outgoing mail, sometimes hiding or refusing to deliver mail to or from the sisters. MCs were prohibited from reading newspapers, watching television, or asking anything about the outside world. They were only allowed to visit their loved ones once every ten years, and their superiors had the choice to deny them the right to even attend funerals or visit their close family in the hospital. Sisters had no say in where they were stationed, and they could be moved around anywhere in the world at the whim of the Missionaries' hierarchy. Especially in countries outside of the United States, like India, sisters were encouraged to physically assault poor and sick

patients, reuse dirty needles, force conversions, and administer treatment without painkillers in Mother Teresa's wish to "bring the poor closer to Christ through suffering." Sisters must not engage in friendship with the other Missionaries. They must not touch, speak, sit, or walk beside each other for too long, or, sometimes, even make eye contact. Victims of assault were and are blamed for their "role" in misconduct and abuse, and wrongdoers are simply transferred to another convent to perpetuate assault elsewhere. Sisters must make penance every day for their "sins" in painful and elaborate ways, endure hard physical labor and sleepless nights, wake before dawn, go to bed late in the night. They eat molding or expired food, have irregular and icy-cold showers, cut their hair to the scalp, and work tirelessly, mindlessly. They must not discuss the order or their work or the world or criticize Mother Teresa. Above all, they must not question, they must not doubt, *they must not have a voice*. To be a Missionary of Charity, you must erode your confidence and your self-esteem—you must erase yourself.

The system of the MCs is prime for abuse, manipulation, and secrecy. "The Turning" podcast documents many of the stories of these sisters: the sisters who stayed and continue to support Mother Teresa's work, the abusive sisters, the victimized sisters, the sisters who fled very little money, worldly possessions, and connections to their name, the sisters who held both the trouble and the good of the order, sisters who loved each other, the people they served, and Mother Teresa. Lantz's podcast is an unveiling of the inner lives of the women shut out from the rest of the world and their supreme leader. How can a woman who sought to do so much good in the world until her very last breath create such a monster? How is it possible the intention of God's goodness can result in the impact of so much pain, so much evil?

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew 19, an unnamed someone comes to Jesus and asks him, "Teacher, what good must I do to possess eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good. But if you wish to enter into Life, keep the commandments' (Mt. 19:16-17). Jesus's message may seem clear to us: life springs from truth, justice, compassion, peace, hospitality modeled by Jesus himself and

the prophetic figures in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Yet, the Missionaries of Charity demonstrate just how easily the word “good” and the pathway to “goodness” can be twisted into something unrecognizable from how we understand God. The stories of the sisters help us realize how the commands to “not bearing false witness,” “honoring your parents,” and even “loving yourself as your neighbor” can become oppressive tools in an unhealthy relationship and through a theology of suffering—a theology that based Mother Teresa’s teachings and one I do not believe in.

It seems to me that humans have a longstanding preoccupation and fascination with *being good* and *being good enough*. In fact, according to the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, the translation we most often use in worship, the word “good” appears 430 times in the Hebrew Bible and 252 times in the New Testament. So, we humans have been worried about doing things right and how and who would judge us and what God thinks and if we’re good enough for literally thousands upon thousands of years. I genuinely believe Mother Teresa and her sisters of all hierarchical levels intended to do good—to serve God, to serve others, to give of themselves to the world. But, their impact perpetuated a theology of suffering, shame, voicelessness, mindless servitude—as if unchanging and unquestioned patterns of abuse and pain were the only way to get to the fullness of God.

You may not know this, but shortly after Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity, she entered into a period of spiritual hopelessness and numbness. Others have called this period her “dark night of the soul,” a phrase borrowed from 16th-century St. John of the Cross to describe how saints and holy people can experience spiritual and mystical disconnection from divinity. But, Mother Teresa’s dark night wasn’t just a blip in the fullness of her life. Mother Teresa’s dark night lasted *fifty years of her ministry*, during which much abuse occurred in her religious order, all while she was disconnected from God. In her letters addressed to her confessors and close confidants, she writes of an endless desperation to try and bridge the gap between her and God. She longed for the relationship she had had with God

that she had in her youth. Yet, as far as we know, she was never able to cross the threshold of her darkness. Mother Teresa tried time and time again to rekindle her closeness to God, believing suffering and complete abandonment of the self were the keys to becoming who she once was. In her attempts, she created a false narrative for the MCs and the people she served that equated suffering and abandonment of the self with God's goodness. [PAUSE]

“Teacher, what good must I do to possess eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good.” (Mt. 19:16-17). What Mother Teresa and many of her MCs failed to see is that the God of goodness is not the God of suffering. Redemption and healing are not found by the way of pain, shame, making yourself smaller and smaller, and keeping your head down to appease authority. God's goodness lives outside the realm of suffering, though God is certainly found within suffering as a companion and comforter. If we believe, as we do and as the Scriptures tell us, that Jesus suffered on the cross, then we, too, must believe that this is only a part of Jesus's *multi-chaptered, multifaceted* life.

In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Word was God, as the Gospel of John goes, and this Word laughed, cried, grieved, loved, told weird, confusing, and conflicting stories, self-cared, mobilized community, needed his friends, healed others by touch and sight, preached hope, fought for what was just, and stayed in the heart of his people as he stays with us. He did not *only* suffer, and he did not have to suffer to be good—*that*, among many other things, is what Mother Teresa got wrong. In fact, I don't think Jesus worried at all too much about *being good*, not in the way that we do. “Why do you ask me about what is good?,” he asked “There is only One who is good. But if you wish to enter into Life, keep the commandments.” No, he had other things to worry about than the pursuit to be good. Instead, he was focused on *living* and *teaching* God's grace: actively, honestly, and honorably welcoming and taking care of God's creatures, your neighbors, your family, and yourself. *That* is what it means to *live* in God's goodness.

When we are in pursuit of the *idea* of being “good,” and when we follow a model of goodness who has erred in what goodness is, instead of *living* our lives modeled from Jesus’s teachings and God’s goodness, what good is really being done? Mother Teresa is not the model of goodness we should be following, one that has harmed thousands and thousands of people, both sisters and people supposedly served by her sisters. This is my call to you: let us “lift up” our souls to God, let us not “be ashamed,” let us “hope” and “trust in” God, let us follow the “paths” of God’s “ancient and unwavering love,” let Jesus “guide” us “in what is right.” To do good is simple: we must care for each other, we must not harm one another, and we must be honest about who we are. May Jesus be our guide and example, leading us into transformation and into the fullness of who we are, embraced and changed by God’s truth and Word.

Amen.