

Doxological Devotion

Sermon, May 10, 2020

Mother's Day

Text: John 17:1-5, I Peter 2:1-10

Just a quick word about our preceding hymn: Bill Stock sang that song as a solo on Mother's Day 2017 ... it was his first return to singing after his recovery from extensive abdominal surgery; as many of you know, Bill departed this life the following year, December 14, 2018. He wanted to sing that song in honor and memory of his mother; it was a testimony to his mother's solid, simple yet profound faith that *"But this I know that Christ the Lord is risen, and praise His name, He's risen now in me! Because He lives, I'll rise to life eternal! He took my guilty heart, and I'm forever free."* I remembered that Bill's mother, Lillian, who passed away November 3, 1997, had specifically requested one particular Bible verse be read ... no, proclaimed ... at her funeral, Romans 10:9-10: *"If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."* Like her son, Mrs. Stock had a strong, clear, simple and straightforward faith. You might say this mother and her son lived *doxologically*.

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed in John 17 what might more accurately be called the Lord's Prayer. Tradition has called the prayer we pray each Sunday the Lord's Prayer, but that should probably be more accurately called the Disciples' Prayer, for that was a prayer the Lord gave His disciples as a model for prayer. The great high priestly prayer our Lord Himself prayed is found in John 17. He prays in verse 4, *"I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."* Or, as other translations have it, *"I have glorified Thee, I have finished the work which thou gave to me."* The Greek root word here for "glory" is the word "doxa"; we get our word "doxology" from it. (*doxa = glory, splendor, appearance of grandeur; logia = word or expression.*) The root word doxa also has a connotation of *radiance* (as in *radiating splendor, a significant appearance*). It has to do with shining forth, and it has to do with an almost lingering and radiating sense of presence. In a practical sense, the word can mean to make a favorable or radiant impression. In this sense, then, to glorify God, to live doxologically, is to leave a favorable, radiant impression of the reality and significance of God, to leave an accurate and faithful *representation* of His glory. Jesus can say to God, *"I've done that. I've glorified You. I have completed the work You gave me to do. I left an accurate impression of Who You are. My life has radiated Your truth, Your Person has shone forth through Me leaving an accurate and radiant impression of Who You are.."*

Now, has Jesus done everything there is to do? No. At this point, He hasn't gone to the cross, He hasn't risen from the grave, and there are millions of people in the world who have no clue as to Who He is. However, He has certainly left an accurate impression of Who God is, He has radiated His truth; the love and character of God has shone through Him ... and, as He told his disciples earlier, the Holy Spirit of God will now come and take it from there. In like manner, our chief duty is to glorify God. As expressed in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: *"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."* To glorify God, then, is to faithfully go where He sends us and leave a lingering impression of the radiance of God wherever we may be called to serve. *That's* living doxologically; *that's* our divine purpose and calling. And, like Jesus, trust the Holy Spirit to take it from there.

I'd like to tell you this morning of two people ... a mother named Monica and a bishop named Ambrose ... who by their persistent doxological living were used by God to turn around the life of a man who went on to become perhaps THE greatest influence on the early growth of Western Christianity. As mentioned in the Children's sermon, that man was Aurelius Augustinus, who entered this world November 13, 354 and departed this life August 28, 430. He was better known as Saint AuGUSTine (*not St. AUGustine; that's a city in Florida*). Recognized as a saint by the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans, he is also recognized by the Catholics as the pre-eminent Doctor of the Church. Only thirty-three were so acclaimed "Doctors" throughout Catholic history; a **Doctor of the Church** is a saint to whom "eminent learning" and "great sanctity" has been recognized by a proclamation of a pope. Christians of all persuasions ... Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox ... hold Augustine in the highest esteem (*The great reformer Martin Luther was in the Augustinian order of monks: Augustine's systematic teaching on salvation and grace were instrumental in the theology of the Reformation*). Born in present day Algeria, Augustine was educated and taught in Carthage (*which is Tunis in Tunisia today*), traveled to Rome, lived and taught in Milan, and eventually returned to Africa to serve as the Bishop of Hippo. One of his best-known works was his **Confessions**, a remarkable series of thirteen autobiographical books widely seen as the first Western autobiography ever written, and a hugely influential model for Christian writers throughout the next millennium. From a secular literary standpoint, it's the most complete extant record of any single individual from the 4th and 5th centuries. The feast day for St. Augustine is August 28 (*the anniversary of his death*); August 27 is the feast day for his mother Monica, Saint Monica (*after whom, by the way, Santa Monica, California was named*).

Although raised by his devout mother Monica, Augustine at first seemed more influenced by his very *un-devout* father Patricius (*an arranged marriage, Patricius was much older than Monica; largely due to Monica's faithfulness and prayers, he did become a believer the year before he died*). Much to Monica's despair, her son left the church and the faith while in

Carthage to join the Manichees (*not to be confused with the Manatees ... you'll find THEM in the waters off St. Augustine!*). Manichaeism was a large sect in those days, with Manichaean churches and writings being found as far east as China, and as far west as the Roman Empire (*seen as sort of a precursor to Islam, the Manicheans were followers of the Persian prophet Mani ... not the brother of Moe and Jack*). Augustine lived a rather hedonistic lifestyle in his young adult years; in his autobiography he refers back to Carthage as a "hissing cauldron of lust." He later wrote that at the time his mother "... wept on my behalf, [she] wept more than most mothers weep when their children die. Thou heardest her, Lord. Thou heardest her and despised not her tears from pouring down. They watered the earth under her eyes in every place where she prayed. You heard her." She would go on to pray for her wayward son for seventeen years, but I'm getting ahead of the story a bit.

Augustine's education was in philosophy and rhetoric ... rhetoric, the art of persuasion and public speaking. In 383 he moved to Rome; about a year or so later, at age thirty, he landed a prominent position as professor of rhetoric for the imperial court at Milan. It was in Milan that Augustine's life changed. He had begun to move away from Manichaeism, but still had his doubts. As mentioned, mother Monica had been praying relentlessly for him, and it seems her prayers were about to be answered through the faithful ministry of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan.

Very soon after he arrived in Milan, Augustine met Ambrose. He wrote about Ambrose, "*My heart warmed to him not at first as a teacher of truth, which I had quite despaired of finding in the church, but my heart warmed to him simply as a man who showed me kindness.*" This skeptical, disillusioned, discouraged but highly intelligent and talented teacher of rhetoric was drawn by the **kindness** of this churchman. Ambrose did not insist upon Augustine's immediate conversion, he did not insist of "fixing" him. He just showed Augustine welcoming and warm kindness, while remaining faithful in his preaching and pastoral duties as bishop. And that kindness radiated by Ambrose is in large part what drew Augustine back again and again to listen to Ambrose, because here was a man who was just so tender toward him. A large part of that tenderness was exhibited in the way Ambrose allowed for Augustine's doubt ... his grave doubt.

For any of you who may be engaged in relationship with someone struggling with belief, don't try to take away the doubt too quickly. Leave room for doubt. The Holy Spirit of God is the one who moves into that room, and He works as He will. You don't have to do the work of the Holy Spirit; your work is simply to live doxologically ... be faithful, pray, and do what you can to leave an accurate impression of the kindness and mercy and love of God. Augustine kept coming back; he kept listening to Ambrose's sermons. He wasn't really interested in the message, at least not at first. As mentioned, he had already despaired of finding truth in the church, but he wanted to see what made this man so kind, and he also had a bit of a professional interest in Ambrose's rhetorical technique. He wrote, "*I had lost hope that man could find the path that leads to You, O God, nevertheless, Ambrose's meaning, which I tried to ignore, found its way into my mind, together with his words, which I had admired so much. Sunday after Sunday I listened as he preached the word of truth to the people. I refused to allow myself to accept any of it into my heart, because I was afraid of a headlong fall. But I was hanging in suspense, which was likely to be more fatal than a fall. I restrained my heart from agreeing to anything, [but] by hanging in suspense I was being strangled.*" Augustine is searching for certainty. And he wants Ambrose, he says, to make him as "... certain about the truth of God as I am certain that 3 plus 7 equals 10. But I was forced to just keep listening to the sermons and in time I began to prefer the church's teaching. Even though I had not yet accepted it, I began to prefer it." In this stage in Augustine's spiritual journey, he realizes he is somewhere between believing and not believing. Maybe some of you have been there. You've come to the point of doubting your doubts, but you're not quite at the point of faith. You can be there for a while, but eventually it becomes a difficult place to be, for when you're hanging, you're in danger of being strangled.

Mother Monica and Bishop Ambrose could only get so far with the spiritual and intellectual journey of Augustine; conversion is a work of the spirit of God. Augustine was realizing the more educated he got, the less happy he was. He could not find any joy. He wrote how one day he found himself praying in a garden, "*How long, O God, will I live in despair and despondency? Lord, how long will I continue in this unclean life?*" He then heard the voice of a child beyond the fence singing a children's song, "*Tolo lege, tolo lege (which means "take up and read").*" He immediately got up, went into the house, took up a Bible, and read where it opened from Romans 13: "*Let us throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.*" As he later wrote, at that moment all doubt vanished away.

And the first thing he did? He "called" his mom, which makes this a great story for Mother's Day! He got in touch with her right way and let her know her prayers had not gone unheard. Augustine was baptized by Ambrose on Easter Sunday in 387. Soon after, that very same year, his mother died at the age of 56. She said shortly before her death, "*There was indeed one thing for which I wish to tarry a little bit in this life and that was that I might see you a Christian before I died. My God has exceeded this abundantly.*" On her death, he later wrote, he wept for over an hour ... with it on his mind that his present weeping was so little in comparison to all the tears she had wept for him over the years.

So, eventually Augustine does convert; a process that began with the radiant impression and constant love of a faithful mother, augmented by the kind impression and faithful ministry of a kind bishop ... doxological devotion that the Holy Spirit brought to fruition in the life and ministry of this eminent Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine. The chief end of man ... your chief purpose, my chief purpose ... is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Live doxologically ... and trust the Spirit of God to take it from there.