

Song 4:12-16; Rom. 8:22-27; Matt. 5:13-16
Feast Day of Teresa of Avila

Soy Sauce of the Earth

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As someone who grew up in a first-generation Chinese American immigrant household, I've always found the phrase "salt of the earth" somewhat odd. We never had salt at home on our kitchen table. Nor was there salt at the Chinese restaurants we frequented in the San Francisco Bay Area.

What we did have, however, was soy sauce. A lot of soy sauce. My mom used to buy these large gallon-sized tin containers of soy sauce, long before Costco and Sam's Club was popular. So I've always thought that "you are the *soy sauce* of the earth" sounds a lot better – to these Chinese American ears, anyway.

Now, whether we're talking about soy sauce or salt, however, one thing is clear. Neither soy sauce nor salt is useful by itself. I mean, have you tried drinking pure soy sauce or eating salt out of the container? Yuck. Soy sauce and salt are useful only to the extent that they enhance something else. They work because they make our food tastier – and, in turn, they make the earth a tastier place.

The same goes for light. Light by itself can actually be harmful – for example, if we stare into a bright light too long, we end up damaging our eyes. Light works because it illuminates the object on which it shines – and, in turn, it makes the world a more beautiful place.

Today we celebrate the feast day of Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth century Spanish nun, mystic, and monastic reformer. Teresa made the world a more beautiful and – dare I say it? – a tastier place. As someone who teaches early Christianity and the work of theological heavyweights such as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, I'm grateful for the fact that Teresa was the very first woman to be named a doctor of the Roman Catholic Church.

Of course, this didn't happen until 1970 and until after thirty male doctors of the church had already been named over the course of 672 years (that is, since 1298), but who's counting? A recent happy development, though: Hildegard of Bingen was just named by Benedict XVI only eleven days ago as the newest and thirty-fifth doctor of the church.

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Now, normally one does not associate the heady intellectualism of the thirty-five doctors of the church with embodiment, but, as a queer theologian, I am struck by how important the body is to Teresa. One of her famous prayers acknowledges the importance of our bodies. She writes:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth.

In this prayer, Teresa makes it clear that Jesus needs us – and our bodies – to bring about God’s reign on earth. But the connection between Teresa and embodiment goes much deeper than this prayer.

One of the most celebrated images of Teresa is Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s sculpture called the “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa.” This amazing sculpture depicts Teresa’s ecstatic encounter with an angel who repeatedly penetrates her heart with a spear of gold. When the sculpture was first unveiled, some people criticized it for being obscene. One person remarked that Bernini had “dragged that most pure Virgin down to the ground” and “prostituted [her] as well.”

But, in fact, Bernini’s sculpture is incredibly faithful to Teresa’s own description about her mystical experience. Listen to Teresa’s own words – and I invite you to meditate on the photograph of the sculpture behind the altar, with the beautiful rays of light shining down upon her. Teresa writes:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.

Wow. Pretty provocative stuff, right? I think what is so unsettling for many people about Teresa’s words – as well as Bernini’s sculpture – is the blurring of spiritual and sexual imagery. That is, spirituality and sexuality is not an “either/or” binary, as the proponents of the Augustinian view of original sin would have us believe. Rather, spirituality and sexuality is a “both/and,” in true EDS style. Spiritual ecstasy and sexual ecstasy are actually two sides of the same coin.

Today’s readings remind us of the deep connections between the spiritual and the erotic. The first reading, taken from the Song of Songs, refers to the female lover as a locked garden, with her “channel” filled with the “choicest fruits” and fragrant spices, ready to be eaten by her beloved. For centuries, conservative Christian biblical exegetes

have insisted that the Song of Songs is merely an allegory for God's love for God's church. A pretty tasty allegory, indeed. So much for a literal reading of the Bible!

The psalm and the epistle also evoke erotic notions of desire and longing. Psalm 42 likens the longing of our souls for God to the thirsting of a deer for flowing water. And Paul's Letter to the Romans reminds us that we are constantly in a state of inwardly groaning; we can pray only with the intercession of the Spirit, with its "sighs too deep for words."

And, of course, the Gospel reading for today, taken from Matthew's narrative of the Sermon on the Mount, is about salt and light. Those of us who walk as disciples of Jesus are called to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

Now, as I mentioned earlier, salt and light are not intrinsic goods by themselves. That is, no one can survive by eating salt alone. No one can stare indefinitely into a light without losing her or his sight. Rather, salt and light are valuable precisely because they enhance the thing to which they point.

As disciples who are called to be salt and light, we need to remember that it's not about how tasty *we* are or how beautiful *we* are. It's actually not about us. Rather, it's about how we enhance the lives of others. We're called to make the earth a tastier place, and the world a more beautiful place. And, by doing so, we end up glorifying God.

Similarly, sexuality and the erotic are not intrinsic goods by themselves. The erotic is good only when it ultimately points to – and glorifies – a God who creates our bodies and sees that they are good. The erotic is good only when it points to an incarnate God through whom the Word was made flesh. The erotic is good only when it points to an eschatological end time when our bodies – and not just our souls – will be raised. Sexuality without spirituality is just as empty as spirituality without sexuality.

This is why I do queer theology – because sexuality and spirituality are two sides of the same coin. And this is why the Bernini sculpture of Teresa is such an important icon of queer theology.

May the light of our bodies make the world a more beautiful place. And may the salt – or soy sauce – of our bodies make the earth a tastier place. For that is how we, like Teresa of Avila, are called to give glory to our Creator God in Heaven.

+Amen.