



A Room Full of Friends: Cynthia Bourgeault
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; August 17, 2025
 10th Sunday after Pentecost
 Psalm 23; Matthew 5:1-12

This morning our summer sermon series, A Room Full of Friends, continues as I share with you another favorite writer of mine—someone who has taken up residence on my study shelf and has become—to me—a treasured friend and wise teacher. If you participate in our Centering Prayer group, you have already met Cynthia Bourgeault. Bourgeault has studied and taught in a number of Benedictine monasteries in the US and Canada. An Episcopal priest, she is well known as an international retreat and conference leader, modern-day mystic, teacher of prayer, and writer on the spiritual life.

It was a hunger for a deeper spiritual life that led me to Bourgeault in the first place. But I get ahead of myself. Allow me to share a little back story. While I was in seminary, I developed a friendship with Wes, a student who had spent a lot of time in monasteries around the country. The idea intrigued me. At the time, I had never met anyone who had a connection with this aspect of contemplative life, and I had yet to be introduced to Kathleen Norris' work, *The Cloister Walk*. So, Wes planted a spiritual seed in my heart that simply had to be watered and the only way I

knew to water it was to entice my friend, Gloria, to go with me to Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, for a 3-day retreat after graduation. It was a celebration, of sorts.

While the experience was phenomenal on many levels, one lesson has remained central to my faith journey and that is the importance of singing or chanting the Psalms. In a matter of weeks, the Benedictine monks chant the entire Psalter—month after month after month. By doing so, the Psalms become part of their DNA—their very being. And it just so happens that part of the hospitality offered to retreatants is to invite them to sing along. So there Gloria and I were, with a few other strangers on retreat, trying to keep up with which book to open and which reading to read. Fortunately, the singing was simple, with only a few chords on a guitar played as accompaniment. But that was all that was needed.

Since that visit many years ago I have been on retreat at Mepkin Abbey numerous times. And each time, the chanting really speaks to me. So much so, I was left with a burning desire to sing the Psalms on my own. (In fact, that's one of the things I love about our new hymnal. Finally, the Psalms have been set to tunes that are sing-able!) Anyway, in my desire to sing the Psalms, God opened doors for me.

First, when I completed my doctoral work at Columbia Theological Seminary, I bought myself a graduation present—a guitar—and with a little help from my son, Shane, I began to learn one chord, and then another. Finally, I was able to play a tune or two. After many hours of practice, I could even play a few Taizé pieces for the Celtic worship services we started at Colonial Heights Presbyterian Church.

Then, God opened a second door when I happened upon a book written by Cynthia Bourgeault entitled *Chanting the Psalms*—with a CD included. Needless to say, I was tasting a bit of heaven as I learned more about simple chants as well as a little history of Taizé and Iona. But here was the greatest pay off—I learned that I could write similar tunes—using Scripture passages that touched me. And so that's what I began to do. It wasn't a plan: Let me sit down and see if I can write a song. No, it was more like—during morning prayer, while reading Psalms, and other passages of Scripture—my eyes would fall on a certain phrase—a phrase that really resonated. And sometimes, sometimes, a tune would come and then more words—enough to piece together something to offer back to God in praise and thanksgiving.

One morning while reading Psalm 55, for example, I was struck by verse 7, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” Isn't that beautiful? No doubt, there have been times for each one of us when we have felt the pressures of life closing in and have thought, “Oh, if I could just get away for a while...things would be better....” After sitting with this phrase a few moments, I noticed other phrases like, “Hear my prayer, O God” and “I will call upon God, and the

Lord will deliver me.” It was then that the words and tune began to come together. You may remember the prayer song one of our retreats.

*O that I had wings like a dove
I would fly away and be at rest. (Repeat)*

*Hear my prayer, O God.
I will call on you.
And you will deliver me.
You will deliver me.*

Singing the Psalms—whether in chant or in song—is a beautiful way to let Scripture travel the long road from the head to the heart. Let me offer you an example. If I were to ask you to recite the 23rd Psalm, most of you could do so without hesitation. That’s knowledge of the mind—words well memorized, perhaps even cherished. But what if I asked a different question: “Tell me about a time when you experienced the Lord as your shepherd.” [Pause] Do you feel the shift? That’s not a question for the head—it’s a question for the heart. Reciting a Psalm is one way of knowing. But singing it, chanting it—letting its rhythm and melody sink deep into your spirit—that’s something else entirely. That’s not just remembering. That’s inhabiting. That’s letting the Psalm live in you, and you in it.

God used the writings of Cynthia Bourgeault to fill a hunger in my soul—a hunger to learn to sing Psalms and other Scripture passages—and to share them with others. Along the way, I have learned many other things—not the least of which has been to see Scripture in a different light.

In another work, *The Wisdom Jesus*, Bourgeault speaks of seeing Jesus, and thereby Scripture, in a different light. She proposes that Jesus was less a priest or prophet and more a wise sage. For her, he was not only a teacher of wisdom. He was a master of wisdom. And while his wisdom is evident in many Scripture passages, this gift is especially evident in the Beatitudes. While time does not allow me to go into each of the Beatitudes and Bourgeault’s discussion of it, I would like to highlight one in particular. It is the fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Bourgeault writes,

To our...ears, righteousness is a synonym for virtue. It means being moral, behaving correctly. But in Israel of Jesus’ time, righteousness was something much more dynamic than that. You can actually visualize it as a force field: an energy-charged sphere of holy presence. To be “in the righteousness of God” (as Old Testament writers are fond of saying) means to be directly connected to this vibrational field, to be anchored in God’s own aliveness. There is nothing subtle about the experience—it is as fierce as picking up a

downed electrical wire. To hunger and thirst after righteousness,” then, speaks of this intensity of connectedness. Jesus promises that when the hunger arises within you to find your own deepest aliveness within God’s aliveness, it will be satisfied—in fact, the hunger itself is a sign that the bond is already in place. As we enter the path of transformation, the most valuable thing we have working in our favor is our yearning. Some spiritual teachers will even say that the yearning you feel for God is actually coming from the opposite direction; it is in fact God’s yearning for *you*.

When my heart yearned to sing psalms, God opened doors to show me how. Actually, the greater truth may be that God put a yearning in my heart that God then satisfied.

This morning, as you reflect on your own spiritual journey, ask yourself: *What is it I’m truly yearning for? What is it I’m truly yearning for?* It’s a sacred question—one that can open the soul like a window to the wind. Because simply daring to name our longing is the first step toward recognizing the God who has already begun to meet us there. That meeting might come through the wisdom of writers like Cynthia Bourgeault, the tender fire of preachers like Fred Craddock, through the strains of a song, a line of poetry, a quiet moment with a friend, a fleeting conversation with a stranger—grace arriving unannounced, yet perfectly on time. There is no limit to the ways God opens doors or lays a path beneath our feet—so that our deepest yearnings might lead us ever closer to the heart of God. And truly, should that surprise us? After all, the Lord is our Shepherd.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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