

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 2

with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music playing] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to The Mystics. [bell sound]

Greetings, everyone. Welcome to our time here together, which will be turning to the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, for guidance and deepening our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. The passage I've chosen for this session is the second chapter of part two of Thomas Merton's book, *Thoughts in Solitude*.¹ By the way, if you've not yet had the opportunity to read Thomas Merton, and if you're inclined to do so, *Thoughts in Solitude* is a great way to start. It's very short, little meditations intended to be used for daily prayer, as *Lectio Divina*, spiritual reading.

In the passage from *Thoughts in Solitude* I've chosen for today, in this chapter, Thomas Merton says:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think I'm following your will does not mean that I'm actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

I would like to reflect with you on this passage. What I'll be doing here is sharing with you what I see in this passage, as I listen to it as my own spiritual reading. So, as you listen to what Merton is saying and you listen to what I see in it, it might help you to prayerfully sit with and open yourself to what you see in the passage, how it personally touches you, and how it personally helps you in your spiritual path, in your daily life. And I think what's about this particular passage, is that the intimacy of the passage is that Merton is inviting us to listen in as he prays to God. And to realize that as he's doing so, he's offering us guidance that will hopefully help us in our prayer and in our daily life. And it is in this sense then that we're sitting with his words, and I'm sharing these words with you that you might sit with your own inner unfolding path and see where the path takes you.

And what strikes me about this passage-- In this session, I want to limit myself to the first opening words of the text, "My Lord God." And this will segue in the next session into the remaining words of the passage, segueing into the next text that we'll be looking at together, the spiritual path that Thomas Merton marks out for us.

Jim Finley: What strikes me about the passage is the sense of quiet confidence in Merton's words that as he speaks to God, he knows, and he trusts that God hears him. Merton said somewhere, he said "In the spiritual life to know is to know that you're known." And we would say, too, that to speak is to know that you're heard. And so, another word for it, I think, to my mind, is Merton is guiding us in a certain kind of attitudinal stance that we can look for and foster in ourselves. I think we might call it "devotional sincerity." Thomas Merton once said, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way"; that Merton's words they're heartfelt. They're heartfelt.

1 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958) pg. 79.

And I think, too, this sincerity, this heartfelt sincerity echoes a sense of God's infinite sincerity towards us, that we see embodied in the teachings in the life of Jesus. In the teachings of Jesus and in all that he said, there was no posing or posturing. There doesn't seem to be about it anything that's contrived or manipulative. Everything comes directly from his heart, in this kind of devotional sincerity and devotional oneness with God that resonates in his words and carries over into us, awakening our sense of being in the presence of God.

And so, another way that I would look at this, as we keep opening this up here together on the nature of these teachings, the subtlety, the intimacy of these teachings, is that there's also a feeling for me then in this prayer, that there is within Merton, we might say an intra-personal awareness of subsisting in an interpersonal communion with God.

The intra-personal meaning it's inner most within himself, but what's inner most within himself is his inter-personal communion with God, that he's subsisting in God, like light subsists in flame. He's in a state of this communion with God, this oneness with God. The Cistercian order, the Abbey of Gethsemane where Merton lived as a monk, it was a reform of the Rule of St. Benedict in the fifth century. And in the "Prologue," the first sentence of the "Prologue" of the Rule of Saint Benedict is, "Listen my child to the words of the master, if today you hear his voice harden not your heart." And the thing about monastic life is everything about the life is designed to foster and to protect—we might call it a state of sustained attentiveness infused with love—of this deepening communion with God.

So, when I was in the monastery for nearly six years, in the silence of the monastery, I was immersed in this contemplative culture devoted to cultivating this deepening state of communion with a sense of fidelity to that communion, reaches out and touches the whole world in ways we don't understand. So, when I left the monastery and came out here, where we all live, where 99.9 percent of us live, I still wanted to live a contemplative way of life, to which I was introduced in the monastery. And on the retreats that I lead, the people come to these silent contemplative retreats, they think they come to because they desire that also. And the situation is, is that we do not live in a contemplative culture. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said, "It would be so much simpler if we were asked to be simple in a simple world, but we're asked to be simple in a complicated world."

Jim Finley: And so, we're being called upon here, our own heart draws upon us here, to become a contemplative man or woman in a culture that is in many, many ways, not contemplative. We have to foster and cultivate this contemplative consciousness.

And Merton, in this passage, the tonal quality of his words, kind of gives us experiential entrance into the subtlety of this sense of being in the presence of God, speaking to God, that God hears us. I want to say something, too—and these words kind of touch right on the edge of spiritual direction—I know there are times in my life I could easily say that I could speak to God and I'm not necessarily sure that God hears me, at least I can't feel that God hears me because of the stress of the moment, or different things. And in the spiritual direction over the years with people, I think for a lot of people, they're not certain at all. They might not be certain at all that God hears us or even that God exists.

And so, how could we apply this passage to that? By the way, there are other passages in

Merton, which we'll be looking at, where he himself expresses this doubt. Jesus felt this doubt, "My God, my God, "dying on the cross, "Why has thou forsaken me?" And so, how do we then bring this doubt into this sense? And I think it's this, that if I have this doubt, I sit down in prayer—a little sincerity goes a long, long way—but there is this doubt that God hears me, even if God exists, maybe, so personal, all of this is. So then, be sincere in telling God about your doubt. That is, let your sincerely expressed doubt be the way that you enter into this interpersonal communion with God, which is the kind of the integrity of your doubt that's open and receptive to where this openness might take you. Like, I believe. Help my unbelief.

So, this is his stance then. Yeah, I think he is inviting us. A lot of the teachings of the mystics are these teachings to cultivate this stance, this interior stance that we're attempting to bear witness to here. And what does he say to God? He addresses God by, "My Lord God." I would like for us to look at this. Pay close attention to this. First of all, God. I think Merton here, too, is echoing Teresa of Ávila in *The Interior Castle*. She says to the Sisters in Carmel, sixteenth century Spain. She said, "Sisters, when we talk to God we should be aware who we're talking to." So, Merton, as a Christian monk, was very aware when speaking to God, he was aware of who he was talking to. That is, he was speaking to the one who in the opening words of Genesis in saying, "Let there be light," speaks light into being. See, "Let there be light. Let there be stones, and trees, and stars. Let there be you. Let there be me," that God is speaking. God speaks. And he's [Merton] speaking to the one who speaks all things and speaks him into being.

Once in the monastery, Thomas Merton, giving a talk to the novices, he was speaking of creation," and he said, "We should always keep in mind that creation is not something that just happened in the beginning and God goes off to let the universe run on its own devices." He said, "Creation is going on all the time. Creation is a perpetual act." We might put it this way—to me, it helps to put it this way—it's like the infinite presence of God is presence-ing itself. That is, it's pouring itself out and giving itself away, whole and complete, in and as, the gift in the miracle of our very presence, the gift in the miracle of others; the gift in the miracle of all things.

Jim Finley: This is not to say that we are God, that the world is God, to the contrary. It's to simultaneously affirm our absolute nothingness without God, that if God would cease loving us at the count of three into the present moment, at the count of three, we would disappear because we're nothing. We're absolutely nothing outside or other than the infinite love of God pouring itself out and giving itself, whole and complete as the gift and miracle of our very life. But it is our very nothingness without God that makes our very presence to be the presence of God; so, too, with all created things. This is Brother Son and Sister Moon. This is the holiness of the material world. This is the divinity of all life seen through these eyes, like this.

You know, to be at the death bed of a dying loved one, it's tangibly clear that our next breath belongs more to God than to us, lest we be presumptuous. We didn't bring ourselves into existence, and it doesn't lie in our power to maintain ourselves in existence. Our ongoing gift of existence is the generosity of God being poured out as the miracle of our ongoing existence on this earth. And Jesus called this, this infinite

generosity, “Abba. Abba.” See God as our father. See God as our mother. See God as a deeply loving, infinite presence, presence-ing itself and pouring itself out as the reality of ourselves and of all things so that our destiny, the dignity of ourselves as persons is not as human beings that we have the gift of reason that distinguishes us from the animals, and so on, as with all the dignity of reason, of the mind, the conceptual mind, but the deepest dignity is our God-given capacity to see this is to be awakened to it, which is spiritual experience, which is the gift of faith.

So, there is in Merton then, in his writings—and he’s so steeped in the Scriptures and the tradition—he has this deep, reverential sense for the mystery of God. In God we live and move and have our being, and he’s now sitting in the presence of God, opening up his heart to God to renew and deepen his awareness of that communion that is life itself. And then when he says, “Lord God; My Lord God,” it’s the Lord of my heart. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which is Merton’s spiritual autobiography—it kind of echoes St. Augustine’s *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, this mystical memoir, spiritual memoir—he tells a story of how at Columbia University, as kind of a wild, young man, his wild days, how God so mysteriously accessed his heart, and how God awakened him and in him a desire for God that led him to the monastery. He led him to the monastery where he could seek, and find, and give himself to God who with each breath and heartbeat is completely given to him and to the whole world.

And so, I think here’s another thought, I think, for us here is that insofar as you’re drawn at all to this path, which would be, I guess, what motivated you to listen to reflections like this, you could ask yourself, “Well, how did I get on this path?” That is, “How did it come to pass that I’ve come to be the man or woman who is sensitive to such things, or who has such longings?” And if we look back to the very origins, the mysterious origins, is it not so that there was a person, where there was a moment, where there was an event, in which this awakening first began to emerge in a conscious, felt, lived way; and maybe with a lot of cul-de-sacs along the way; a lot of circuitous, misguided adventures; here we are sitting here right now like this, together like this on this path of being led right up to this moment?

Jim Finley: So, what I’m suggesting to you here really is that when we turn to the mystics for guidance, the guidance they give is not a method. It’s not a technique. It’s not that at a certain level there aren’t methods of prayer, active contemplation—we’ll be talking about that in this series—but it’s not a method. It’s not a dogma. It’s not that. The essence of the matter is something deep within our heart that Merton, in his own sincerity in sharing it, it arcs over and accesses into our heart and awakens it. So, there’s a certain resonance that happens between our heart, and Merton’s heart, and God’s heart, which is really the teacher of Thomas Merton to do this.

And so, I think this way, in a very practical way then if you don’t live in a monastery—by the way, this isn’t necessarily easy in monasteries—for us out here the situation we face is that we get caught up in the momentum of the day’s demands. It’s hard work being a human being. There are so many things going on, and you somehow can get the feeling that there’s something missing in this, in the complexities of sorting out, and achieving, and attaining, and maintaining, and all of

that. It's not easy, and there's a sense that we're lonely for ourself; that is, we're lonely for the depth of ourself in the depths of God. Or, put it another way: we get this feeling, this uneasy feeling that we're skimming over the surface of the depths of our own life. And that this tendency is all the more regrettable and that God's oneness with us is hidden in the depths over which we're skimming.

As a psychotherapist and being with people in psychotherapy, and going through my own psychotherapy, it always seems to me that a lot of psychotherapy is being in the presence of someone who keeps inviting you to slow down and listen at the feeling level to what you just said, not to skim over the surface of the depth that waits to be discovered in pausing in a state of sustained attentiveness to these stirrings within our heart. And so, I think we're already into it here. See, we're already into this setting the tone of cultivating an attitude of our mind and heart. Now, the thing is, of course, that another practical thing that we all face is that which is essential, namely this love of which we're now speaking, which Merton is speaking, that which is essential never imposes itself for love is always offered, it's never imposed, and that which is unessential is constantly imposing itself.

And so, we have to create a contemplative culture in our heart by committing ourself to a daily rendezvous, to a daily quiet time, and these sessions together are intended to serve this purpose like one of many possible ways to do this. So, what is a meditation practice in this broad sense? Meditation practice we could say is our commitment to any act, which when we give ourselves over to it with our whole heart, it takes us to the deeper place. So our practice might be tending the roses, it might be the long, slow walk to no place in particular, fidelity to a quiet hour alone at day's end, being vulnerable in the presence of that person in whose presence we're taken to the deeper place, renewed commitment to a community of people.

And so, there is this daily rendezvous, a kind of a hiatus in the momentum of the day's demands to slow down enough to catch up with herself, to be present to ourself in the presence of God. And that's the essence of this *Lectio Divina*, this spirituality, this language that embodies us and invites us to this.

Jim Finley: And so, we've set the tone of this whole series here, of all the mystics, God willing--we'll see what happens here—but we set the tone, so we'll be ending our session here then with meditation. And let me say again the guidelines here for the meditation. And these are the guidelines that I use when I lead contemplative retreats that I want to be inviting you to. So, if you're driving your car, for example, you're obviously going to pull off to the side of the road or wait until you get home, or where you create a space where you can give yourself to this.

And if I choose to sit still, to sit straight out, to fold your hands in prayer, and to bow. The Sōtō Zen master Shunryu Suzuki says that when we bow, we give ourselves up. If ever you get to a place in life where the only thing you can do is bow, you should do it. So as contemplative women, as contemplative men, the least and the most we can do is bow in a kind of liturgy of the body, a kind of deep gratitude, that we're being awakened to this ancient path of love, this ancient path of endless liberation. And in bowing, I'll say from the Psalms, "Be still and know I am God," and you'll read silently within yourself, you whisper, and repeat after me. Then I'll take off one word each time. Repeat after me each time. Repeat after me each time, until I just say the word "Be, and then I'll ring the bell three times.

At the end of this sitting, the meditation, I'll ring the bell once and then we'll bow. And then when we bow, bearing witness that we're here in the mystical lineage of the Christian tradition in concert with all the mystical lineages of all the world's great religions, we'll slowly say The Lord's Prayer together. And then I'll say, "Mary, mother of contemplatives," and the response will be "Pray for us." He's looked on his servant in her nothingness, "henceforth all generations will call me blessed." It's an archetype of the contemplative soul. And I'll name two Christian mystics. The response to which will be "Pray for us." And in this bow at the end and in this prayer, we're also expressing at the end of the meditation that it was more than enough. It's always more than enough. As poor and as fragmented as it might be, in the sincerity of our heart it's always more than enough sustained by the love that loves us so in our wayward ways.

And, of course, too, here in the recording, the meditation will be very short, but on your own, as you listen to this again, or each time you listen to these, of course you'll extend that meditation for as long as you're inclined to do. So often for beginners, it really varies, sometimes three minutes is good, but a norm as you kind of get into this is about twenty minutes for a sitting. It's short enough to be practical with the demands of the day, but it's long enough to begin to settle down into this deeper place, this kind of a devotional sincerity in the presence of God.

So, that's it. I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands, and bow. Repeat after me.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [bell sounds]

Jim Finley: [bell sounds] And bow and then we'll slowly say The Lord's Prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen. [music playing]

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. St. Francis, pray for us. St. Clare, pray for us.

Thank you. Blessings to all of you.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.

