

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 4

with James Finley

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

Jim Finley: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together turning to the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, for guidance in helping us to deepen our experience of and in response to God's presence in our life. In this session, I'll be sharing a passage that focuses on the theme of prayer and Thomas Merton. We referred to this passage before in an earlier session. The passage, "*My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going,*" but there we stopped with the first three words, "*My Lord God,*" as a way of grounding oneself in the devotional sincerity in which this deepening union with God takes place in prayer.

And so, I want to now return to that passage again. I'll read it and then share with you how Merton's prayerful exchange with God in this passage, he's sharing with us how he's learning to understand himself, and to understand his life in the presence of God, and to understand how God sustains him and guides him.

And so, Merton in the monastery listened deeply to God. And in having listened deeply to God, his lectio, and prayer, and silence in the Psalms, he's now talking to God engaging in kind of a meditative dialogue with God. And as I listen to Merton's words as he talks to God, his words become my lectio. That is, I hear the rhythms or cadences of God's voice communicating itself to me in Merton's words. And as I share it with you, what I personally see in this passage, as you listen to me, my words become your lectio; that is, how you might possibly hear the cadence or the rhythms of God speaking to you in these words in your life. And so, you can deepen that and personalize that in your own meditation, and in your own prayer, in your own life. And, in particular here, how this quiet time with God in prayer, this kind of daily rendezvous with God in prayer, how it sheds a light on our life, on how we understand our life in the presence of God and find God in our life.

And so, in that spirit, then, I'll read the passage, and then I'll kind of prayerfully walk through it with you so that then you on your own can sit with it on what strikes you. And I'm also modeling here, how to read a text. That is, how it's so personal and so endlessly evocative, and with repetition, you could go over it again and again, and the repetition is not redundant.

So, Merton writes:

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.¹

Jim Finley: I'd like to reflect on this text. So, "*My Lord God*" then grounds us in this devotional sincerity. He's speaking from his heart to God, who has spoken to him, the Scripture in life, and he's allowing us to listen into this prayer to see what light it might shed on our life, on our way

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

of experiencing, understanding God in our life. And it begins by saying “*I have no idea where I am going.*”

So, what does that mean? How are we to understand what he means here? It seems to me first, that he certainly does know where he’s going at a certain factual level. That he lived in the monastery, and he can assume that the patterns of the monastic life—prayer and work—like the rhythms of that life following the liturgical year, and so on, that was going to continue on. He also knew that his ministry of writing and also, as novice master, spiritual direction, probably that was going to continue on. Just like with us, I think we’re in a certain pattern. You might happen to be right now in a time of radical transition where things are very unforeseeable. But I think for most of us, most of the time there’s a fairly stable pattern where to some degree at least we have some sense about where next week, next month, next year, whatever, some sense of where we assume we might be in a few years, you know, here we’re going.

So, what does that mean: “*I have no idea where I am going*”? And so, I think what helps for me is to consider how many times, as we look back at our life, we were fairly confident about where we were headed, not just confident about how something was going to turn out—a relationship, or a career, or a health situation, or whatever—but it ended up getting blindsided by an unexpected grace or an unexpected crisis. It sets things off in a whole new direction.

Also, we thought we knew where we were going, but there was a radical shift in the meaning that it had to us. The example I have is coming across a journal, we may have written, say, five years ago, ten years ago. You even forgot you wrote the thing. As you sit down and you read your own journal, the things you worried about, things you wondered about, the way you saw things, so that if the you that wrote that journal could see you that’s reading it now, it would faint. How incomprehensible are the transformative changes that go on in our minds and hearts as we go through life. I think there’s that.

There’s Sister Macrina Wiederkehr for that beautiful book *A Tree Full of Angels* some years ago. She told me she was invited to write an essay on a book called *Things of Which I’m Certain*. It was a collection of essays of people on what they’re certain of. And what came out of our dialogue was the things I used to be certain of, I’m no longer certain of. The things that I used to be certain of that I am certain of,

Jim Finley: I’m no longer certain of in the way that I used to be certain of those things. And I’m fairly certain that this is going to continue.

And so, Merton is kind of touching on, it’s a kind of humble acknowledgement of a certain dimension of unforeseenability in our passage through time. And I think, also to me at least, it has connotations of death. That when we pass through the veil and disappear into the depths of death, we know in faith what that means, that we’ll not be annihilated but consummated. And we’re going to move into an eternal, infinite union with the infinite love of God. It’s our destiny, but our finite mind cannot grasp what that means. It’s hidden. Our destiny in infinite love is hidden from us even though it’s already strangely present in the depths of ourself.

And so, this thing, “*I do not know where I am going,*” he goes further by saying—adding to what he doesn’t know—that he doesn’t see the road ahead of him nor does he know for certain where it will end. For Merton, I think he was fairly certain at this point, when he was writing this, that he was going to die in the monastery. And he could not have grasped how years later he was going to die in Bangkok, Thailand, being electrocuted in a hotel room in Bangkok at an international conference of monastics in Asia. And so, that’s where it ended.

And I think, also, he didn’t know where it would end, where at the time of his death, where he would be in his own evolving thought processes as he moved through the years, how his own thought deepened and was enriched by deep interfaith dialogue with non-Christian traditions, and social justice, in his poetry, and so on. And so, it isn’t just that we don’t know the day, or the hour, but we do not know where we will be when that hour strikes. But if God is Lord of life, God is Lord of death. And we are sustained by God in, on up to, and through and beyond, death itself.

He then adds—as he continues to deepen his experiential self-knowledge in this kind of humility in the presence of God—he adds that he doesn’t know who he is, that he doesn’t know himself. And not just in the sense of the journal where this kind of unfolding like layers, and layers, and layers, but also, I think there’s another sense, too, where it’s very hard for the self to accept the extent that it can hide itself from itself. And all of a sudden, some internalized thing within us that was there all along influencing us, but we didn’t know it was there, like the bringing of the shadow self, you know, out into the open.

There’s a lovely passage here in Merton on this related to this. This is in *The Intimate Merton* from one of the journal entries. Merton writes:

Brilliant and gorgeous day. Bright sun. Breeze making all the leaves and high brown grasses shine, singing of the wind and the cedars. Exultant day in which even a puddle in the pig lot shines like precious silver. Finally, I’m coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am, that I will never fulfill my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself. And if I accept myself fully in the right way, I will already have surpassed myself. Whereas the unaccepted self that stands in my way and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted, when it has been accepted, it will be my own stepping stone to what is above me because this is the way man has been made by God. Original sin was the effort to surpass oneself by being like God, that is unlike oneself, but in our godliness, we are at home.²

Jim Finley: We must first accept ourselves. We must accept ourselves to experience this homecoming. You see? And so, the shadow, this Jungian sense of the shadow, is isn’t just that we hide from ourselves the woundedness of ourselves, that we’re not yet ready to see and except, like in A.A., the fearless inventory, see? It isn’t just that we hide our weaknesses from ourselves, but we also hide our gifts from ourselves. The existential psychologist Rollo May says that if the neurosis of Freud’s age was repressed sexuality, it’s hardly the neurosis of our age, as he believes that the neurosis of our age is that we’re afraid to be all that we are. That is, we’re afraid to accept the full potential of who we are

2 Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996): 220-221

and what we're called to be, because if we accept it, we just might have to stand up and bear witness to it. And so, we're kind of caught between this kind of closed down, shutting-off of the weaknesses not acknowledged because we attribute authority to them to name who we are, and they don't because only love has the authority to name who we are. And, also, we have trepidation in admitting the potential within us, a gift, because we don't know if giving ourselves to it, what it will ask of us, but the price paid for the half-lived life is bitter.

And so, Merton is sharing with us this prayer that he doesn't know himself in this deep sense. And there's another deep sense he doesn't know himself yet. He's acknowledging that he hasn't yet joined God in knowing who God knows him to be hidden with Christ and God from before the origins of the universe. See? As we see later, we'll keep moving in, which is this kind mystical sense of this. So, there's a kind of a humble litany here of acknowledgements of the poverty and limitations as he sits in the presence of God.

And then the passage turns here when he says, "but I believe." So, up until now, it's been the deepening of a kind of experiential knowledge and humility. Then out of that humility, is born a belief that he has. The belief, he says, "that the desire to please you does in fact please you." Merton says, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way." And we're talking here now about purity of intention. Of course, that intention is always subject to discernment; back to self-deception and kind of sifting it out and being honest and real as we can. But is there some core sense, some core intention of sincerity to want to please God?

"And I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you." And what is it that pleases God? See, when we say like, "What is that in these traditions here?" See, what pleases God is that we let into our heart how deeply in love God is with us just as we are. And what pleases God is that we, in letting in and being accessed, that God is infinitely in love with us, it pleases God when we then, faults, failings, and all, then give ourself in love to the infinite love of God that gives itself to us, that that reciprocity of love pleases God, because it brings about the union that is our ultimate destiny that's being realized in prayer and daily life.

Jim Finley: "I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope"-- He doesn't know for sure because of his frailty. He's just a human being. --"I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing." So, he moves then from a belief in the faith in the midst of his deepening humility of his own poverty, there's a corresponding belief of where he's tethered to God by the sincerity of his desire to please God. He and God are tethered together in the purity of his heart and that intention. And then in that tethering, that bond, is a hope, see? He believes in how he hopes that I have that desire in all that I am doing; throughout my whole day, I lived my whole day with an underlying attitudinal stance of doing what I'm doing in a way that pleases you, which is to do it in a way that embodies love towards myself, toward another person, a plant, an animal, for the gift of life.

And how his clarity deepens, it goes from a belief to a hope and he says, "Now I know." See, this is a kind of a gnosis or kind of a deep certainty that's given to him

in the presence of God. “I know that if I do this,” that is, live in this way, “you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.” It’s a very mysterious statement. See, “that if I do this,” he tells God, “you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.” What does this mean? I mean you can sit with what it means to you. To me, it’s this, that one way I would understand in terms of the Gospel. That when we look at the crucifixion, Jesus, the mystery of the cross, he was led along a road that led him to that death, like, it so happened; it came to pass. Events unfolded in such a way. He knew the score. He saw where it was headed. It was all of that. It was all of that.

And yet, as he hung there, and he lost his faith there, in the devastation, which means that God’s one with us in our devastation, in our loss. See, “*Into your hands, I commend my spirit,*” and that’s the right road. See? If the cross is the crucifixion of our dreaded and cherished delusions that anything less or other than infinite union with the infinite love of God will ever be enough to silence the restless stirrings of our heart, the cross is the crucifixion of those illusions.

And so, at one level, it is important to have some sense of where we’re going. I have my life, you have yours. I mean, that’s real. That matters. But sometimes you find yourself in an unlikely place, really, a completely unforeseeable blessing, a completely un-seeable loss—at the end of a long hallway at the end of a hospital corridor in a hospice somewhere, some strange place, and there everything may seem to be lost—it’s the right road you don’t know anything about, because of how mysteriously God guides you, and sustains you, and leads you on and on and on along this circuitous unfoldings of the unforeseeability of things. See, “you will lead me by the right road, although I may know nothing about it.” Like this.

: “Therefore,” now he moves then from this knowledge to a deep sense of trust, which is faith, “Therefore will I trust you always.” See, not trust myself, not trust my perceptions, not trust my conclusions, not trust my opinions. I have those. They’re real up to a point. They matter. They count. “Will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.” Even if it comes to that, you see, the worst possible thing imaginable, in which seems like utter loss, death, even so, even if that’s true, “I will not fear.” It isn’t that I won’t be afraid, but I’m not afraid of being afraid.

“I will not fear for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone,” that God is a presence that spares us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things, and that unexplainable sustaining to the ups and downs and unfoldings of our life is this deep sense. See? So, this prayer, then, is a prayer which in the presence of God, is this deepening sense of self-knowledge, and it’s a self-knowledge in which in the presence of God, he reflects on his life. In the process of reflecting on his life, leads him to this deepening clarity and this deep trust in God who has up to this point so mysteriously brought him up to this very moment, which he’s saying these things to God, just as God brought you up to these very moments in which you’re listening to me, and God has brought me up to this very moment in which I’m sharing these things with you.

And so, this is my thought then in terms of kind of mentoring, or kind of offering guidance, and how I found it very helpful to read a text like this as spiritual guidance, as *lectio divina*, like this. because it’s endlessly evocative. So, you could see how on your own, you could take this text and on your own, you could journal this out, whoever would help you to do it, and

you could journal phrase by phrase by phrase, to kind of sit with the endless implications of the subtle clarity, this subtle clarity, into the ways of God, that is the mysterious nature of this very path that you're on right now otherwise you wouldn't be inclined to listen to things like this.

So, with that said then, let's end and bring this to meditation. And again, as always, right now the meditation here will be very brief. But then on your own, you can go back and make this part of your daily rendezvous with God sitting with this passage if you're so inclined in your prayer time. And then, also, follow these guidelines in how you sit with all these passages, how you sit with Scripture and all these teachings that we'll be looking at together. Okay? So, with that then, I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands, and bow.

Jim Finley: Repeat after me.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [bell sounds three times]

Jim Finley: [silence]

Jim Finley: [bell sounds once] And bow. And so, we'll say The Lord's Prayer together.

Jim Finley: 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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us; Julian of Norwich, pray for us; the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us.

Blessings, until next time.

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.