

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 6

with James Finley

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

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together exploring the teachings of the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, turning to Merton for guidance in our day-by-day lives. In this session, I want to focus on the purgative aspects of being discerning, that we're being interiorly drawn toward more interior mystical ways of experiencing and responding to God's presence in our lives. Discerning the gift of it, like how to recognize that it's occurring and how to understand the purgative; that is, the purifying aspects of what we must undergo in order for the union with God we long for to occur.

Jim Finley: This will allow us then in the following session to turn to Merton's insights to the fullness of the union that arises out of that purification, so that there is a purification, and there is a kind of an unraveling or an undoing of the ability to live on our own terms. And then out of the deep acceptance of that unraveling, there arises the longed-for union that we're then called to live in and to share with others day by day.

Jim Finley: It is with this context, then, there's a passage in Thomas Merton, this is found in Merton's Palace of Nowhere, page xix¹. And, again, as with all of these, at least some of them, you'll find a longer, more detailed version of this in the series I did for Sounds True, Merton's Path to the Palace of Nowhere.

Jim Finley: So, this is page xix of Merton's Palace. I don't have the original text right here with me, but you'll have it. You'll get it. They'll give it to you. Merton writes—I'll read it then reflect on it:

"God, My God, God whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer!"

I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives for entering the monastery and You have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept with shame."

Jim Finley: It continues:

Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish, or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depth of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding.

Jim Finley: What I want to get at is this: When Merton says—this is the key point, I think: "God, My God, whom I meet in darkness." Namely, the darkness of this boundary-less state is so incomprehensible to me in the finite capabilities of my mind and heart that are being accessed by these longings—"God, My God"—that darkness actually blinded by the light of it. My finite eyes are blinded by the light of this infinite desire, which is an echo of God's infinite desire for me.

Jim Finley: *"God, My God, God whom I meet in darkness, with you, it is always the same thing! Always the*

1 James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana) xix-xx

same question that nobody knows how to answer!” Here’s the first insight: It seems that when we first start out on this path, we realize it’s kind of tugging at us. We’re drawn towards it, these more contemplative and interior ways of experiencing, responding to God’s presence. When we began, we have a lot of questions, understandably. See, how do I cooperate with this? How do I experience this in prayer? How do I deal with distractions? How do I come to terms with my confusion and knowing how to proceed? How do I actually achieve it in the midst maybe of a very complicated situation that’s going on within myself and in my family, or among my loved ones; the challenges of life, how can I? I have a lot of questions here.

Jim Finley: See? This is why we’re right at the age of spiritual direction. See, where can I find someone well-seasoned in such things to offer a reassuring word—I think Merton offers us that word—and where can I find this fulfillment? But as I go along this way, kind of patiently in my *lectio divina*, my prayer, my petitions, my day-by-day devotional sincerity, setbacks, amid setbacks and cul-de-sacs, and all the rest of it—you have your life; I have mine—something starts to shift. We begin to realize that it’s not us asking the question, because the only answer we could get would be a finite answer. That’s the only answer we can tolerate but, rather, here all along, God’s the one asking the question.

That shift, the purgative process of wondering, beginning with how can I get an answer to help me with my wondering, what do I do next, as we keep leaning into it and working with it, it can start to roll over into a realization that here all the while God’s the one asking the question. And then we realize not only do we not know the answer to God’s question, we don’t understand the question. And in knowing that we don’t understand the question, maybe we come to poverty of spirit. And in the poverty of spirit, we come to our complete dependence on God in a kind of child-like simplicity.

Jim Finley: So, this is up to us to find our way. This is not looking good. But it’s not up to us. And here through our own poverty, our own poverty deeply accepted, is the gate of heaven through which this streaming, unconsummated longing deepens and radicalizes itself in our heart and makes its claim upon our life. And you can start to see then the bankruptcy of all one’s previous agendas and all one’s previous assumptions about what we thought it all meant and what it was all for, all of this. *“I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime,”* namely, this night; this inexplicable night, *“You have confronted me and scattered thought and reason. I have come to you in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire.”*

In the willingness then to live—and I would say this, too, I don’t think this just happens in prayer, but it does happen in prayer—we start to notice the dynamics of this welling up out of the most fundamental day-by-day realities of our life, in our daily intimacy or lack thereof, our physical health or lack thereof, our security or lack thereof, our direction in life or lack thereof. And in the midst of it, if we don’t panic, if we don’t panic, we can start to see kind of underlying continuity at the same rhythm of a deepening invitation to hand ourselves over to God’s care who is achieving this work in us that we don’t understand in ways that we don’t understand, and I think this is the purgative process, this kind of unraveling of ourselves on our own terms.

And to get at this, I’d like to suggest a couple of ways that helps me to kind of see this

phenomena occurring in daily life. I like to apply it first to married love, and then to other modalities—to poetry, solitude and so on; service to the community. And the point is this, the insight is this, is that when two people are on this journey together of giving themselves to each other in love, they are in that day-by-day process, with all its complexities and givens, they reach a certain depth of experiential oneness with one another in love. And from the vantage point of that depth, they're able to glimpse a yet deeper depth of love.

Another thing that happens sometimes it isn't that they glimpse the deeper depth of love, but the deeper depth of love, the qualitatively richer depth of love, comes welling up into their present depth of love, like touching them or amazing them with an even yet more boundary-less depth and then dissipates into the depth not yet realized. And having seen that depth or having momentarily tasted it, they long to go there. The love within them inspires or impels them to go to that deeper place. And then they discover they can't go there. They cannot go there except through a willingness to be mutually vulnerable with each other in their powerlessness to go there, and to take a very close look and to help each other to see what's hindering them from going there, like these holding-on places, or these places of compromised fidelity, or compromised patience, or compromised acceptance, or compromised humility, or compromised whatever that is, that is about love. And as they give themselves over to the process, they discover a resistance to doing it, because it implies a letting go or moving beyond customary boundaries in love. And I'm calling that the purgative aspect of the transformative process, in which that deeper place arises, the fulfillment arises.

And so, we could say then that the same processes that we're putting words to here happen to anyone who's drawn to a certain kind of radicality of longing, whether it be through poetry, or through painting, or through service of the community, or solitude, sustained periods of silence, giving ourselves over to the beauty and gift of the world of nature, to the world, or giving ourselves over to a child, to children, or to a community of people. There is this process that I'm speaking of now, this kind of the gift of a deeper longing, and the gift of the purgative process, of all that we must let go of and lean into for that longing to be fulfilled.

Jim Finley: And I have to say, too, then it seems to me, that there's also then in terms of illumined by faith, that we're able to recognize the presence of God being mediated to us in these modalities of transformation. That is, the people can see the presence of God presence-ing itself in and as their love for each other. Or as parents, they can see or sense the presence of God presence-ing itself, calling them in their presence to their child. Or the artists can see the presence of God shining out through the aesthetic impulse and desire to lean in deeper, to open themselves deeper, to giving themselves over to being a conduit for beauty in the world, and so on. So, they see these mediations of faith.

And, also, we see it in the context of religious faith itself, through prayer, through *lectio divina*, an earlier session: "*My Lord God, I do not see the road ahead of me.*" I do not know for certain where it will end, and so on. And so, we can see within prayer itself, within the mediations of our prayer, we can see these intonations and these

openings up of this deeper calling place.

Now, we might say this, then, this is the intimate depth dimension of our faith, and we journey forward in faith that the norm of this faith is love, and that we live in hope that when death comes, we'll not be annihilated but consummated, and we'll pass through the veil of death into unmediated, infinite union with the infinite love of God, which is our destiny. It's mediated here on the earthly plane. We sense it as in a mirror darkly, we're drawn to it, and then we trust when death comes, it opens out upon this unmediated union, as destiny, which is the reason we were created in the first place.

So, now the mystical part comes in from Merton—and all these mystics we'll be looking at here together—the mystical part comes in, in which one begins to sense in the midst of these mediated realizations and surrenders to all these realms of transformation, we begin to sense that there's something in us that doesn't want to wait until we're dead in order to find our way into unmediated infinite union with the infinite love of God. That there is growing within us a certain longing for unmediated union and to entering into the depths of God's life, sharing and living God's life as deeply as God lives God's own life. We feel a longing for that.

And, we're graced in knowing—and this is the scriptures, and this is what Thomas Merton is telling us, all the mystics—this longing is an echo in our heart of God's infinite longing for us not to wait until we're dead to experience this union, which is the earlier reflection on creation, which is already here. That is, if we opened up the aperture of our heart all the way, we come to the God-given godly nature of the infinite presence of God presence-ing itself as the world, as our body, as time, as space, as everything, but hidden. See, it's veiled. And then we start seeing it through these mediations. So, how then do we see that God then is calling us to a certain kind of urgency of love? That God is calling us not to wait until we're dead to enter into this infinite union with the infinite even while we're still on this earth, which is, the mystic longing.

So, it's a kind of a longing that we don't understand, for union that we don't understand, but which stirs within us in ways that we don't understand, calling us out onto this path, see? Where can I go? And I think here's where we see Thomas Merton and these mystics. We may be fortunate enough to find someone well-seasoned in such things to sit with. This is what sends people out on a long pilgrimage to the gates of monasteries, the ashrams, and sanghas, and gatherings—Sufi gatherings and Kabbalah gatherings—and for us, these mystical things. But, also, sometimes we can find it in the deathless presence of the mystic teacher who writes with such purity, that somehow the cadence of Merton's voice echoes and reawakens and bears witness to this longing.

How to trust it, how to move with it, and how to understand how to move forward in it, see, in obediential fidelity to it, without unwittingly getting in our own way because the ego is in water over its head at this point, where, you know, the finite ego so illumined and so called, is by itself not adept without the guidance of God of how to fulfill this longing. And this is what I think Merton is calling us to, this is where

he's coming from, because this is how he lived his life.

And we also know then, what we're saying, is that the purgative part is, that this union I long for, therefore, I'm not to wait until I'm dead, cannot occur unless I interiorly die to anything less or other than an infinite union with infinite love as the sole source of my security and identity. As long as there's—this is a quote from John of the Cross—that “*a bird held by a slender thread is now just as much a prisoner as one held by a great rope if it won't break that thread.*” That if we don't then learn from God how to pass beyond, or to die to, the dependency on anything less than infinite union with the infinite love of God as a sole source for security and identity, this living in the divinity of our life in God cannot occur. And this is where then we need God's guidance to give us the courage and the clarity to undergo this purgative process of dying, by dying to the forces of love, to all that is less than love, that it burns away the hindrances until there's nothing left but love.

This why we say then that the mystic is not the one who says, “Listen to what I've experienced. Listen to what have I have attained.” But, rather, the mystic says, “Look what love has done to me,” that there's nobody left but love. And then when such people are so strangely present as bearing witness to God's presence in the world, and then we realize could this possibly apply to us? See, with all of our confusion, is it possible that God uses the weak to confound the strong, and am I being called and led along this path?

And so, then, so Merton writes:²

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life. That is why we are traveling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace; and, therefore, in that sense, we have arrived in our dwelling in the light. But, oh, how far I have to go to find You in whom I have already arrived.

That's nice.

For now, oh, my God, it is to you alone that I can talk because nobody else will understand. I cannot bring any other person on this earth into this cloud where I dwell in your light, that is your darkness where I am lost and abashed. I cannot explain to any other person the anguish, which is your joy, nor the loss, which is the possession of You, nor the distance from all things, which is the arrival in You. There was a death, which is the birth in You, because I do not know anything about it myself, and all I know is that I wished it were over. I wished it were begun. You have contradicted everything. You have left me in no man's land.

Jim Finley: Merton says somewhere, he says, the most important thing in your life is something that you don't know and don't need to know because God loves you. And this is the purgation of love, delivering us and carrying us beyond the boundaries of everything less than love and enfolding it in our heart in the midst of our situation.

So then, let us do a brief sit here. And, again, here it will be, on the recording itself, will be brief, but then on your own, or as you may repeatedly listen to this as part of your daily rendezvous with God, you can extend this, the sitting period out to your own inclinations, or to your own givenness of the day based on higher praying and meditating in the midst of things.

2 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Mariner Books, 1998)

So, with this then, I invite you to sit straight, and fold your hands in prayer and bow. 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] And bow. Let's say the Lord's Prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Your kingdom come, your 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. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Saint Benedict, pray for us. Saint Scholastica, 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 voice mail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.