

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila: Session 2

with James Finley

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

Greetings, everyone. Welcome to our time here together, turning to the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Ávila for trustworthy guidance and deepening our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. In this session we'll be reflecting on the way she tries to understand the second mansion of the soul, how we can discern that we have entered, found our way into the second mansion of the soul. And there is just one chapter of the second mansion. And in the third paragraph of this chapter¹, she begins this way:

“These souls”; that is, these souls that have entered the second mansion, “[then,] can understand the Lord when He calls them; for, as they gradually get nearer to the place where His Majesty dwells, He becomes a very good Neighbour to them. And such are His mercy and goodness that, even when we are engaged in our worldly pastimes and businesses and pleasures and haggings, [when we are] falling into sins and rising from them again [. . .], in spite of all that, this Lord of ours is so anxious [that] we should desire Him and strive after His companionship that he calls us ceaselessly, time after time, to approach Him; and this voice [of His]” is so sweet to us.

I'd like to begin by reflecting on this. She's inviting us, I think, to discern something that begins to occur within us in our ongoing efforts to live in the first mansion. And as you'll recall, the first mansion of the soul consists of the ways that our relationship with God begins to become more real and important to us in a deeply personal way for us. And moved by the desire to stabilize ourself in this relationship with God, or in God's ceaseless relationship with us, sustaining us day-by-day, we begin to commit ourselves to a daily practice of prayer and to move in closer to the sense of God's presence in our life. And we discover it's not easy, that the centrifugal force of life's demands and complexities still tend to have a grip on us. And even when we do go to pray, it's hard to be faithful to prayer in a consistent way. It's hard to find the time to do it, and so on.

And then when we do pray, our distractions follow us into the prayer itself, our preoccupations keep showing up in the prayer. She encourages us not to be discouraged by that, but to start over again, over and over again, asking for God's help renewing our desire to return to prayer, to be present at God in prayer, and so on. And in the midst of that sincere effort, we realize that something starts to happen to us. And it's so subtle, we might not notice it at first. Let's say we're reading the Gospels as our prayer, as our *Lectio* that when we read something that Jesus says in the Gospels, it isn't just as in the first mansion where we sit that that's beautiful, or we try to take in the lesson of that, what we can learn from that, but rather we get the sense that the deathless presence of Jesus is personally speaking to us, saying those words to us personally, within ourselves, as we hear those words. So, too, in reading the Psalms, or all of Scripture, or in reading any spiritual book, or any writing, or any words of anyone that conveys to us the presence of God, it conveys it in a more intimate, personal way in which we begin to sense something, we might say the rhythms of God's voice or the cadences of God's voice, and the rhythm and cadences of the words of our prayerful reading and reflection, she says. Furthermore, not only is there a subtle deepening of this newly sensed presence of God, but also it starts showing up throughout the day in the midst of the day's haggings, she says.

¹ St. Theresa of Avila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), p. 29.

We're driving along at rush hour or in the midst of whatever, and as if out of the corner of our eye, there are little glimpses, little moments of encounters with people, which tends to flash forth a sense of a God letting us know of his presence right there in that encounter, in that moment, in that event, in that simple activity, like this. And even in our sins; that is, even when we stumble and fall in ways of not being faithful or true to the love that we're called to be true to, in our life and faith, we sense it even there. We sense God's tender mercy, loving us in the shortcoming, loving us in our faltering ways.

And so, this is all very personal, of course, but little by little, in all kinds of ways, there's more of a kind of growing atmospheric, underlying sensitivity that kind of meekly shines out through the details of even what it is to wake up in the morning, or to drift off to sleep at night—just life; just life. There's this subtle, subtle, subtle, in the midst of the ongoing struggles, in the midst of the ongoing distractions, in the midst of all of it, it starts to be infused by this quality of this presence of God.

She then continues to clarify what she means by this. Next paragraph:² *"I do not mean [by this] that He speaks to us--" That is, speaking to us in this kind of intimate interior way in our heart. "I do not mean that He speaks to us and calls us in the precise way [which] I shall describe later;"--* That is to say later on, in later mansions, particularly beginning in the fourth, that the voice of God becomes more intimately clear in a way that it qualitatively transcends where we are right now in this stage of things.

But rather, He appeals to us *"through the conversations of good people--"* That is to say, just conversations with friends, conversations with people of good will. Conversations with people with whom we share a ministry or a form of service to the community, or just around the family table at night talking, that we can begin to sense God's presence in the intimate rhythms and details of these encounters with these people in our lives. *--or from sermons,--"* Someone says something in a sermon, liturgy, and worship, and it strikes us in a personal way as if it was meant personally for us, God speaks personally to us, and that word we carry in our heart and take it home with us³ *--[or through] the reading of good books; and there are many other ways, of which you have heard, in which God calls us. Or they [may] come to [us]--"* she now expands the repertoire of the ways in which we experience the second mansion, stirrings of this intimacy. It comes to us *--through sickness[es] and trials [. . .]"* This is sometimes in the midst of an ongoing illness, with all of its burdens and challenges, and all of our efforts to restore health, and so on, we begin as we take that to prayer, we begin to sense how God is present to us in sustaining us in the illness, teaching us lessons about the fragility of the body, and to go deeper in what it means that God takes care of us and sustains us, or, perhaps, it's in the illness of a loved one, taking care of a loved one with an ongoing illness.

And what we learn about love as we learn to be there for, and with that person, or different trials in life, difficulties. I'm sharing this now in the midst of this pandemic, and we're all in this together, going through this. And my daughter, my oldest daughter, who's a hospice nurse, who works in a hospital, sometimes working with patients who have the virus, has to take all the precautions necessary. And just admitting someone into hospice in the hospital,

2 St. Theresa of Avila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), p. 29.

3 Ibid.

just right on the front line, that her commitment to that, and all the many, many, many people like her are called to be there for and with, and how we're moved by the goodness of these people they're taking, and we're all caught up in this together. And we sense the presence of God, and the goodness, and the courage, and the efforts of these people in the midst of trying and difficult times.

And then along with that, of course, there come then the realizations, these inner quickenings, these unexpected little glances or touches of love that come to us in our prayer. So, this then is a kind of, we might say, is a hallmark of the second mansion. It's a kind of a graced qualitative state of consciousness, a way of being in the world. She cites another very important quality that we can begin to discern within ourself in this second mansion of the soul.

She says—this is two paragraphs later in this chapter⁴—she says as she begins to realize that, *“The will inclines to love One in Whom it is seen so many acts and signs of love, some of which it would like to return. In particular, the will shows the soul how this true Lover,”* which is God, the beloved, *“never leaves [the soul, but] goes with it everywhere and gives it life and being.”*⁵ That is to say, there is a growing awareness that one's very life, one's very breath, one's waking up in the morning, and going to sleep at night, and drinking water, just being alive is an act of God's love. That somehow life itself carries the mystery of kind of incarnate infinity, or it carries the mystery of a certain inherent blessedness in the mystery and the gift of just being grateful for God's presence in the intimate immediacy of life itself.

And, then in realizing this love, we're then moved to return the love, she says. That is, in sensing the goodness of God, this kind of more intimately realized sense of the nearness of God sustaining love, we're then moved by the love of

Jim Finley: God to give ourself in love to this love that is sustaining us and giving itself to us in so many ways in the midst of life's difficulties, in the midst of the unresolved matters of our mind and heart, in the midst of the day-by-day. And it is in this desire to reciprocate this love; that is, to obediential fidelity in this reciprocity of love, she then adds another characteristic of the second mansion. And in it she says this, and this is the first paragraph of the chapter, she begins by saying, the second mansion, begins the chapter⁶:

“This chapter has to do with those who have already begun to practice prayer and who realize the importance of not remaining in the first Mansions,” that we were describing earlier, being so caught up in the ways of circumstantial things, *“but [who] often are not yet resolute enough to leave those Mansions, and will not avoid occasions of sin, which is a very perilous condition. But is a very great mercy that they should contrive to escape from the snakes and other poisonous creatures, if only for short periods and should realize that it is good to flee from them. In some ways, these souls have a much harder time*

4 St. Theresa of Avila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), p. 29.

5 Ibid.

6 St. Theresa of Avila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), p. 28.

than those in the first Mansions, but they are [actually] in less peril, for they seem now to understand their position and there is great hope that they will get farther into the castle still.”

I'd like to end on this note on how this is harder in the second mansion. In the second mansion, we are in "*less peril.*" How so? To me, it seems in two ways. The first is that the more we fall in love with someone, the more we deeply love someone who we sense loves us, the more sensitive we become to the habits of the mind and the heart, and the ways in which we unintentionally cause the beloved any kind of distress or any kind of sadness or difficulty. And these habits of the heart are often habits we brought into the relationship with us. For example, the tendency to withhold intimacy, the tendency not to initiate getting vulnerable in sharing something that's important and real but difficult to share. Letting go of resentments. Not sensing that there's a kind of a resistance to letting in a yet deeper vulnerability to the gift of the love that's deepening within us.

How I put it sometimes is, is that we're afraid to lose the control that we think that we have over the life that we think that we're living. As Merton says, "*We cannot love and live on our own terms.*" And so, we realize that we still carry within us these compromising attitudes that get played out in the relationship. And then, secondly, we realize that it's not easy to move beyond these things. And it's a gift to see them. And it's a gift to desire to be a better lover—a better lover, a better husband, a better wife, a better mother, a better father, a better friend, a better companion to the significant other, whoever that might be. It's good to see that. But we realize that these habits of the heart were kind of traumatically bonded to these habits of the heart that were formed often as survival strategies in trauma and abandonment.

Jim Finley: And so, another way of putting it, it isn't just that when we got into the castle, we were careless of these reptiles; that is, these habits got in with us. But we realized that we're raising them as pets, that is we realize we're sneaking out and dating them at night, we still have these little dalliances, these little ongoing habits that we know compromise the fullness of the love that we're called to, to surrender ourselves over to in the love of God. And I also think that what happens in all of this then is that we're being asked by this love to give up the ideology of perfectionism; that is, the ideology of our inner peace being dependent on our ability to measure up to the standard of love we feel called to. We're being asked to give that up and handing all that over to being surrendered over to the infinite love that loves us so unexplainably in the midst of these unresolved matters that we have not yet been able to work through.

And so, this is the gift of tears, see? This is the gift of tears is this being invincibly loved and being so unexplainably precious in the midst of so many, very real, tangible shortcomings and unresolved things that end up compromising ourselves and others and not responding to the love of God. And so, in this very difficulty, we're placed in the mercy of God, and it makes us actually all the more challenging, but we're actually safer because our vulnerabilities, our unresolved vulnerabilities, are safer because we hand them over into the mercy of God. And these then are some of the qualities that she invites us to discern within ourself in terms of being in this second mansion of our soul, on our journey towards God.

So, I bring this now to prayer and meditation. Again, just for a few moments here, sitting with this, just sitting quietly in the presence of God and how this strikes you. That is, what is it about what's being said here, what Teresa's inviting us to consider, in what way do we think it pertains to us and what it's asking out of us, or kind of where we're at in our own unique experience of these intimate matters?

So, I invite you to sit straight then, 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. [three bell tones followed by ~ 5' of silence]

“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”

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

Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. St. Teresa of Ávila, 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 podcast@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.