



Turning to the Mystics

Bonus: A Meditation on Holy
Week

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings, I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell tone]

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to another bonus episode of Turning to the Mystics with Jim Finley. We're still finding ourselves in very challenging situations, and we're hearing on the news this week that this is likely to be the hardest week for us in America, that the deaths will escalate and then we're also facing economic hardship. And so, Jim and I just send love and care out to everyone, and hope you're taking care of yourselves and taking care of others as you are able.

And, we find ourselves heading into Holy Week this week. And so, when Jim and I were talking about what this bonus episode might focus on, we thought a focus on Holy Week might be helpful. We know that many people won't be able to be with their church communities in ways they have in the past. And we also feel like this Holy Week ritual has power in it and that it's lasted throughout history for a reason, that it offers us something. And so, we focus on a Holy Week teaching today, and I'll turn over to you, Jim. Thank you.

Jim Finley: Thank you, Kirsten. Yes, you know, the dovetailing of the pandemic crisis we're all going through together in Holy Week and looking on this maybe being like the hardest week yet, maybe. And liturgically, it dovetails a week in Jesus' [life] that was the hardest week he ever went through. And so, I thought it'd be fitting-- I like this idea then of dovetailing this liturgically with Holy Week.

And what I'd like to do here is to share with you a kind of poetic meditation on the story of Veronica's Veil. In the Catholic tradition, there is the devotional practice of the Stations of the Cross. There are fourteen Stations of the Cross, and sometimes during Holy Week they're celebrated together as a form of devotional practice, but also sometimes people individually can pray the Stations of the Cross by going station to station. So, each Station of the Cross is a scene from the Passion of Christ. So, Jesus is condemned to death, for example, Jesus picks up his cross, and so on.

Jim Finley: So, you stop at each one and meditate on that one, on what it reveals to us about God's love for us, and the whole mystery of the cross, and the resurrection. And each of these fourteen stations is in the Gospels. It draws a scene from the Gospel. The one exception is the sixth station, which is Veronica's Veil. It's a very early tradition. (I was looking it up, I think it was early in the second century, maybe earlier.) And so, the story is that Jesus is carrying the cross on the way to his crucifixion, and the crowds are lining the streets, and Veronica is there, and she's there among the crowds of people. Some of them are jeering, and that kind of thing. Some are there out of curiosity because they saw these public executions going on, and some are Jesus' disciples that were just grief-stricken by this traumatizing event that was happening, and Veronica was one of these disciples of Jesus. And as Jesus passes by, she's so moved by compassion for Jesus that she steps out of the crowd—at a risk to herself, because it wasn't safe to be publicly identified with Jesus at a time where it was risky business to do that—and she offers Jesus the only thing she can offer, which is her veil, so that he can wipe the dirt and the blood from his eyes and from his face.

And so, there's this kind of primal moment where Jesus takes her veil, and he closes his eyes and lowers his face into her veil. And in that moment, the softness of her veil is the only solace he can find in a world turned harsh. At a deeper level, the solace he finds is her compassion for him. And I want to say this then, poetically, poetically, that in the moment Jesus closes his eyes to lower his face into the veil, in closing his eyes and lowering his face, the world around him disappears. She disappears. Everyone disappears. Just like right now, if you look around the room where you are right now, wherever you are, when you close your eyes, if you would close your eyes and put your face in the palms of your hands, the world around you would disappear from view. And so, in the moment he closes his eyes and lowers it into the softness of the veil, the world around him disappears. And poetically then say this, that in that moment, Jesus, without going anywhere, descends down into the depth-like infinite, tender mercy of God, the Father, sustaining him in that moment.

And in that moment, Veronica, in this kind of waking dream, she descends without going anywhere, down into this depth of God's oceanic tender mercy for her. And all the people there along the roadside, both the disciples and the jeering crowd, the soldiers, they all descend down into this infinite mercy of God. And in this moment, you and I descend down into the infinite mercy of God. So, it is a moment in the midst of the tragic in which a single gesture of compassion is the solace that grants the descent down into the sustaining depths of this oceanic tender mercy. And, this mercy and this love is a deathless love. It's a deathless mercy.

And, Jesus lifts his face from the veil, and lifting the face from the veil, all this returns. He hands the veil back to her, and she's holding the veil in her hands as she watches him continue on towards his execution and his death. Just as she, we don't know what happened to her next, but she had to move on through the rest of her days to her death. Just like you and I have to move through this pandemic through our days onto our death, it doesn't take any of it away. But she's standing there, and she looks down at the veil that she's holding in her hands, and she sees Jesus' face printed on the veil.

Jim Finley: Now, in one sense, the face is the face of Jesus, the image of the invisible God. But in another sense, it's superimposed from printed on her face, and it's your face, and my face, on the fabric of existence in troubled times permeated by this love that sustains us in the drama that continues on, like this. And here, then, the metaphor, the veil becomes a metaphor for the solace of faith in the midst of unresolved matters.

Now, there's something else here, take it a little bit deeper, that her compassion for Jesus, which elicited this encounter, was an echo of God's infinite compassion for her, and for all of us, in the cross of Christ: "Greater love than this has no one than they lay down their life for his friends." And so, the whole cross of Christ incarnates God's infinite, tender mercy for us identified with precious in all our wayward ways, like this. It comes towards us this way. We're so moved by that love, it elicits that love in us, and in the reciprocity of the compassion, the transformative encounter occurs, which is really, I think, the sacrament of this moment for us.

And so, I'd like to suggest this then, applying this for us today. I'd like to suggest for us then, we can see how in prayer and meditation, centering or whatever your prayer time is, that you would ground yourself in this meditative state of realizing this, that in this moment,

Christ's face and your face is superimposed on the fabric of the circumstance in which you find yourself. It's really true that on the surface, and time, and the conditions we may be going through, it may be torn with all kinds of suffering, but that same fabric that's so torn by suffering is the fabric in which this encounter is incurring in the depths of our heart.

And so, what happens then in the pandemic, we take turns offering each other Veronica's Veil for every time we let each other people know we're concerned about them: "How can I be helpful? I'm here. Call me if you need me," and they, being aware of us, they keep in touch with us. However that works out, we're all forming the fabric of Veronica's Veil and the concerns for each other so that every time this encounter occurs, it occurs in a way that opens up the depth dimension of the love that's incarnate in that encounter as a deathless love that sustains us unexplainably. And, therefore, I think then this is a very consoling meditation for us during Holy Week and how the suffering of Christ, and the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ is woven into our suffering, into our death, and the promise of our resurrection not just at the end of time, but the resurrection that arises every moment the compassionate encounter occurs mysteriously in our lives.

And so, with that then I invite you to join me in meditation. And as we sit this way now as each of these meditations we'll just sit for a few moments, but if during the week you're so inclined to return to this meditation, you can sit for longer in so far as you're inclined and able to do so, grounding yourself in this awareness so you can rise from it to be there for and with others in this sharing of this veil with each other. So, with that then, I invite you to sit straight, hold 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 tones]

[silence @ 00:13:00 – 00:14:20]

[bell tones]

And bow. 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.] For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and

the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. St. Benedict, pray for us. St. Scholastica, pray for us.

Sitting here in the meditation, I had two thoughts come to me. One is, is that when we sit in meditation, there is that in us that knows this solace, and there's that in us that may be overwhelmed ourselves right now by what we're going through. And so, in meditation we offer ourselves the veil. Or in meditation, we realize it in the prayer, that Jesus is offering us the veil, and we take it and pass it on to the hurting part of ourselves.

And my second thought that occurred to me, it isn't just that we rise from our meditation to go forth and share this with other people one encounter at a time, but when we sit in meditation with a trusting heart, sitting in meditation is the mystery of that veil permeated throughout the whole world and touching people in ways that we don't understand, that the ministry of prayer is a ministry of a compassion that interiorly touches our minds, and hearts, and our bodies. And that interior dimension and the ways in which it's concretized in corporal works of mercy, are endlessly intertwined with each other. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, if I'm hearing you on that last point, just the commitment to the meditation, the commitment to opening ourselves to the compassionate love of God is an act of courage, an act of bringing solidarity into the world, bringing compassion into the—

Jim Finley: Yes. As I was sharing about Thomas Merton at the monastery, in the journal, he shares that he had insomnia. And he's lying there, and he says, "Suddenly the bed becomes an altar, and in a distant city somewhere, someone is suddenly able to pray." And he says, "Perhaps the people whose lives we will touch the most deeply are people we will not meet until after we are dead." And so, a solitary act of surrendering our self over into the love of God is an act that permeates the whole world and touches the minds and hearts in people that we don't understand. I think a lot of people in nursing homes, a lot of people who are solitary and bound this way, the interconnectedness with each other in the heart of God is really kind of a rich, important, contemplative, mystical understanding of the service we offer the world. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It's so helpful to hear that because I know a lot of us are feeling helpless and powerless to—

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: --to do anything, really. So, being home is an act of solidarity with people. But adding in our meditation and our prayer to that is an offer of love and compassion to the world as well.

Jim Finley: That's right. Because what I think what contemplative spirituality does for us is that we get caught up in the momentum of circumstance, and the centrifugal force throws us out towards the edge of ourself, and we externalize our own existence, but we reduce ourselves to nothing more than the external contact. But, really, the more

I'm interiorly present to myself, the more I'm interiorly present to you, to you, to you, and through my oneness with myself, I'm one with you. And when it's then grounded in that intention of letting that love touch the fragility of our self, woven into the presence of God, there's a kind of contemplative ministry in that. Yeah. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Wonderful. We were talking about that a little bit, Jim, about how at this time finding a prayer and meditation practice that works for you at this time, it might not be your normal practice. For instance, if you normally like a lot of silence, it may be that the silence is causing anxiety. And so, hopefully this meditation, if someone likes a guided meditation, they can play this over and over.

Jim Finley: Exactly. In other words, what I tell people—and this is what emerges as being a therapy, also—is that we're always honoring the mystery that we're just a human being, and always safety first because safety first incarnates the love. And so, sometimes wordless silence is too boundaryless to endure, you know, because the fears come welling up. And so, we need something to ground ourselves, to concretize our self, so the long hot shower, the hot cup of tea, watering the plants, petting the dog, looking out the window, these gestures of self-nurturance. We're to love our neighbor as our self, not instead of our self. I used to wonder when I first started going on flights for retreats, on commercial flights they'd always say if the oxygen masks drop down and you're with a child, you should put your own mask on first and then your child's.

And I used to think, "Well, that sounds selfish." But if the child depends on me, and I'm disoriented, I can't help my child. So, my gesture of generosity toward myself is a generosity through which it overflows into others. So, I always need to keep a watch over my heart about what I'm going through, and all things considered, what's the most nurturing, grounding thing that I can do right now? Sometimes it involves just not watching the news, watching it very little because we are what we eat. We keep internalizing-- If we would watch the news about the pandemic and wire ourselves up to measure anxiety levels, we'd be seeing that we're somatically registering all of that. And so, we really need to be very careful about how we take this in, how we pace it, how we respond to it, and then be sensitive to other people—how personal this is for all of us, how this is affecting us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). On that note, I wanted to run something by you that I thought might be helpful for people listening, and that is, personally, I've started to have bad dreams. And I hadn't had bad dreams for a long time, but I've had some bad dreams where I wake up and my body's very uncomfortable. And in particular last night I had a bad dream, but it was bringing back to consciousness, a life experience I had when I was a little girl where my father left, and disappeared, never came back, and abandoned us. And when I woke from the dream, I could feel all the sensations at that time, like feeling shocked, feeling uncertain, feeling like things were falling apart. And I realized that that's a lot of what I'm feeling about today as well. And so, I wondered if you would just help me understand the way our dreams might be operating at the moment in a time like this and how we might learn something from them.

Jim Finley: Yes. I'll share this. What happens when we have deeply transformative experiences, whether they're very nurturing and loving or very painful, is we internalize the imagery of that moment, and the imagery of the moment holds the emotions around that image. And it

stays inside of us in the timeless world of the unconscious. It's just layered in there as a kind of a parable or a story with very painful imagery in it.

So, say on the joyful side, for example, how we internalize joyful things. There's a lovely poet called Theodore Roethke, and it's a memory he's having as a little boy. His father used to cultivate hybrid roses. So, Mrs. Russell, for example, is a hybrid rose. And Theodore Roethke, he writes this poem about this memory as a little boy. He said, "I dream of roses, white and red and my father standing astride the cement benches lifting me high over the six-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells, and his own elaborate hybrids. What need for heaven, then, with that man and those roses?" ["The Rose" by Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, Anchor Books, 1974]

That's very nice. You know, like the beauty of the timeless presence of his father holding him up. So, then every time Roethke sees roses, it activates that, it has that love connotation. But, likewise, if someone was incested, or beaten, or abandoned, the inner story of that abandonment lays inside of us. So, what happens is a present stressor can reawaken and reactivate that internalized story, like this. And so, our dreams are stories. See, our dreams are internalized stories of internalized pain, and the stimulus of the outside can reactivate it and it emerges as a dream.

Now, the way to look at it is then what to do with that dream, what to do with that dream? And not to go into this all right now, but one simple thing for the context we're in right now, it would be this: it would be first of all understanding what's happening, that the current stress of the pandemic is reactivating how horrible and scary it was

Jim Finley: when my father walked out and never came back, whatever your story is; true enough, true enough. But then to know that the you, the adult you are today, when you acknowledge to that part of you that it really was terrible, it really was terrible. You're not dismissive towards it. You have compassion and empathy towards it. So, that wounded part of you, like trapped in time, is very childlike in a way. It's myopic. It can't see past the pain.

So what you do is you realize there's something that wounded part of you sees, and you join it and say, "I agree," but then you gently suggest to that part of you there are other aspects of your life it's not in touch with. When we're traumatized, we contract, we hold on tight, and we lose the context of surrounding realities to contextualize that pain. And so, by saying, "Yes, true enough, but look at what else happened. Look how I turned out. Look what happened. I met this person. I did this. I did this. I did this." And so, we might say the fabric then, Veronica's Veil, for all of us is woven with sadness and happiness, sadness and happiness. So, we can kind of see the richness of the dream invites us to tend to unfinished business so we can keep weaving that sadness back into the love that keeps growing in us. And, also, that helps us have empathy with others in their sadness and their understanding that we can be someone to help them contextualize their love.

I remember a Jungian analyst once said, I like this, "When you're going through a very deep experience, you ask yourself if this were a dream, what would it mean?" So, in a way, all life is like a waking dream or like a parable, and how can we decode the parable to see the love essence of the story that we not lose our way in the midst of things. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you Jim. And I did find myself turning to that first meditation you did, because just the discomfort in my body from the dream when I turned to that meditation where I found Jesus in the garden and I whispered in Jesus' ear, it can also have a very physical feeling and sensation and can help kind of overcome the terror and bring the body back down.

Jim Finley: It really can. And sometimes with prayer, we need to be patient with it because the intensity of the pain. Because the breakthrough that comes, see, to use that guided imagery and then you whisper in Jesus' ear your pain, and then Jesus whispers in your ear that sets your heart free, what does he say? The point is, is that the love, the deathless love message of Jesus is infinitely more real than the pain, but it's delicate and subtle. And so, we need time through the breath, whatever we do, to keep breathing it in, to break the pain open and kind of give it time to have its way with us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you, Jim. And we can apply that to moments of anxiety too. Like you said, this idea of a waking dream that when anxiety arises throughout the day, we might apply turning to the meditation, turning to the meditation last week, too, where we see Jesus, we come to Jesus, he confirms our anxiety but then is there for us as a love presence.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think what we're to do, and this is often very key in doing trauma therapy work, too, it applies to all of us, really. Let's say all of us are carrying in ourselves this alchemy of bittersweet things. And we know through faith that love is infinitely bigger. We're grateful for the blessings we seek to nurture, but the unresolved painful things are there too. And what can happen, we can realize there's a certain moment of the intensity or density of the pain is closing off experiential access to the loving tenderness, and we're having an episode, see?

So, for example, people have generalized anxiety. You can have anxiety with panic as you can have a certain point where it reaches such a critical crescendo. So, we're always keeping a watch over our heart to what could I do right now to help me back away? What could I connect with? What could I do that could give me a broader frame of reference so I could approach the hurtful place from that broader context, like that, and that's very good for self-maintenance, it's maintaining our self like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you for that guidance. That's really helpful for me personally, and I'm sure it will be helpful for many others. Before we finish today, is there anything you've done this last week, Jim, that's helped you sustain yourself?

Jim Finley: Yes. I'm going through this thing grieving the loss of my wife. And so, it's very strange to be going through that—she died right here at home—and be turning on the news and seeing all this pandemic going on. It's surrealistic, really. So, what I do, really, is I let myself grieve. I mean, I let myself go through that as a human experience. And so, what helps me is, one, I unite my pain with all those who have lost their beloved today through the pandemic, there's those whom have lost their beloved in much more painful, horrendous circumstances than I lost my beloved. And so, I realize that my pain doesn't belong to me. We belong to each other, and we're woven into each other through our pain. And so, I can unite my pain with theirs, and I can let their pain be united with mine.

I do that, and I go down the list of blessings and knowing no matter how horrendous a circumstance might be, it doesn't have the power to cancel out the blessing, what is there. It's always interesting at funerals, for example, especially if someone died tragically, when the family can get together, now they might have to get together over media or talking, they realize that this person who regrettably had to endure that, like Jesus on the cross, it doesn't cancel out what a beautiful, amazing, loving, mysterious, wonderful person that was in that little moment a tragedy at the end does not have the

power to negate that beauty because the beauty of that person is forever. It's a deathless beauty. It's God's love in them that concretizes their presence in our life. And it's thoughts like these, I think, where the essence of grieving becomes transformative and allows us to have peace, and allows us then to be there for people who are still going through their own, we're trying to help each other out here, so that.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And then my two daughters also call me twice a day—my love for them, their love for me. My oldest daughter's a Hospice nurse, so she's in the hospital. And so, I encourage her to take care of herself. She's right on the front line, and I realize how many people like her all over are courageously going in to be with people, and how this is bringing out so much love in people, you know, all kinds of gestures like it brings out. I also get the feeling that once this is over, and once this passes it has the potential of truly a spiritual renewal within the society, you know, recalibrating our priorities, our assumptions. Or it might be a rebirthing of a more kind of generous, spiritually grounded clarity in the world. And so, these are the kinds of thoughts that have consoled me this week. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for sharing that, Jim. This week I needed to go grocery shopping, and I have a neighbor who's seventy years old with lupus. And so, she's really trying to stay isolated and quarantined. And so, I offered to do her shopping for her, which turns out these days to require a kind of real patience. And so, I went at it as kind of a meditation. So, the standing in line for a long time outside the supermarket, the shopping itself, and then the standing in long lines waiting for the cash register to be able to leave. People's carts are so full so even if you only have five people in front of you, it's like an hour. But, I must say, when I delivered her groceries, I was just drawn to thank her for the opportunity for doing that for her, and to be the one to spend the three hours, you know, in the lines and waiting. It's helpful to do even just one act.

Jim Finley: It really is. And you know, in moments like that, too, I think that's a very good example. And I say this often working with people in trauma, see, at the moment when you handed her the groceries, her gratitude, you start wondering who's helping whom, see? I mean you helped her, but there was a wave of a depth-like mystery of the gift of doing something for someone did something for you, you know what I mean? It's really—

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Yes, that's really true.

Kirsten Oates: That's exactly how it felt to me. I was quite overcome by the gift of being able to help.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, thank you, Jim.

Jim Finley: Sure.

Kirsten Oates: I hope you have a lovely, oh, I hope you have a good Holy Week and continue to connect with your family [music] and your beloved whose presence is so real to you.

Jim Finley: Thank you so much. And to you and your family and to all those that are, and Corey helping us here, and everyone listening to this all over. It's the same to them just passing it on, passing it on to all of them, and so may we all help each other. Wonderful. Thank 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 this information can be found in the show notes. Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community. To learn more about the work of James Finley, please visit jamesfinley.org.

We'll see you again soon.