

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Dialogue 3
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to our dialogue about session four with Jim Finley. Thanks for being here, Jim.

Jim Finley: Thank you. Glad to be here. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I have listened to that session a few times. It goes deep.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it does.

Kirsten Oates: I was struck by at one point where you talk about John of the Cross is trying to explain the unexplainable. So, today, I'll be asking for further explanation from you.

Jim Finley: Of the unexplainable. Okay.

Kirsten Oates: Are you ready?

Jim Finley: Yeah, I'm all ready. We'll see.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. So, Jim, we're still focusing on the active night. John of the Cross talks about an active night and a passive night. We're still talking about the active night, but you go back and forward in the talk, because they always operate together. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right. That's right. What we're always talking about is essentially passive that it happens to us like we're touched or quickened or accessed by the presence of God we don't understand. So, in that sense, it's passive. But then since love is never imposed but always offered, we freely cooperate with it, which is the active night. So, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book One*, how does that occur in the senses being gratified to the senses?

Jim Finley: Now, we're moving into *Book Two*. What's the active night of the intellect? So, how do we pass into a knowledge of God beyond concepts, beyond conceptual understanding, beyond words, the naked darkness of faith? How do we cooperate with that process? He starts *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in the prologue, saying that what he wants to share with us is how we find our way to divine union with God and so far is possible on this earth through love. So, it's an obscure realization of heaven that it is not the fullness of glory. But in some obscure way, although still on this earth, we can have this intimate realization of God beyond thought, an infinite union with the infinite and so on.

Jim Finley: So, he says, "In order for this to occur, we undergo this dark night." The dark night is that we're first given a taste of divine union, a moment of awe or a moment of oneness. It's dark, because we're blinded by the infinity of the light. It overwhelms our finite eyes. But once we get a taste of it, once we get a taste of oneness, we long for it. But then we realize that what's holding us back is we're attached to our finite ways of experiencing God's infinite oneness with us. That is God in my beliefs, God in my constellations, God in my aspirations, and so on. That's as important and efficacious unto holiness. It's our life. But because it's finite, we have to move beyond that. But then we discover that we're attached to it. It's a familiar territory.

Jim Finley: So, God helps us out by weaning us off dependency on that ability to be nurtured and consoled in those ways by simply taking away the ability to be consoled. In that poverty, if we don't panic, we just wait for God. We can slowly start to emerge then, these intimations of this infinite union with God. So, once we gotten a taste and we realized God's tugging at our heart in this way, the active night are the ways we cooperate with that. So, in his Ascent of Mount Carmel Book One, he talks about being gratified to the senses through pleasure and touch. We realize that the gratifications don't gratify, because they're finite. The pleasure washes over us. It touches us. We see it. Therefore, we have to go beyond that.

Jim Finley: So, how do we cooperate, moving beyond this finite to enter into it? Those are ways of actively choosing that as the active night of the senses. So, now, he's talking about the active night of the intellect through faith. It's still the active night, but it's the active night in this sense. We realize that this is the image of the ladder, person born blind and so on. We realize that we know God through faith, that God is eternal, that God is love, that God is infinite, God's revealed in Christ. It's true. Faith comes through hearing. But we realized, too, that these are finite ways of knowing the infinite mystery of God. So, God wings us off and calls us out beyond these finite ways into the darkness of faith.

Jim Finley: So, he's moving now from the senses and gratification in Book One and is moving now into the intellect, our knowledge of God, our knowledge of ourselves in the presence of God. What's the passive touch? How do we actively cooperate with that? So, that's where we are now in the realm of experiential knowledge of God.

Kirsten Oates: Just to help us understand what John of the Cross means when he says, "The intellect," because he talks about hearing, words, understanding. How would you define that?

Jim Finley: Yes. That's a good distinction to make, I think. Let's say at one level, the intellect in our times today is what we tend to think that it means. That is my intellect are my customary ways of knowing. So, I hear something and through my intellect, the extent to which I understand what I heard. That understanding or what I've heard, I move with those understandings. So, it's a reflective process. It's, "How do I understand and know things conceptual reflective consciousness that allows us to talk and communicate with each other and so on?" So, at one level, that has to do with facts. I understand what time it is. I know what day it is, and so on.

Jim Finley: But as it gets more interior, for example, when we begin to deeply love and be loved by someone, it's a kind of a knowing, but not being adequately understood as a series of facts about what we know. There's an interior kind of knowing that goes beyond the ideas of the love. John of the Cross is starting to head in that direction. Bernard Lonergan says, "The thing about knowing God is it's much closer to falling in love than it is to proving something." See?

Jim Finley: So, it's a heart knowledge, intimately known, having tasted the heart knowledge, intimately known of a depth of love beyond which I can adequately find words for. He's leading us in that direction, that interior knowing, which opens out upon God's infinite knowing of us. We meet God in the depths of knowing beyond thought, beyond words, but we start somewhere. So, John of the Cross is using words. He's writing a book, but they're poetic words that keep pointing to and giving examples of these intimate modes of knowing that

are more fulfilling. He's trying to lead us down that path.

Kirsten Oates: Does our faith follow that path? So, does our faith shift from this sense of faith through ideas into the deeper faith of what you're describing?

Jim Finley: Yeah, it starts this way. It's the distinction traditionally in the Christian tradition between belief and faith to the Creed.

Kirsten Oates: I see.

Jim Finley: So, they say, belief is the sign of faith. So, I believe in God, the Father and my creator, all the teachings of Scripture and so on. That's belief, but we're not saved by belief. We're saved by faith. So, the belief is an external sign to the words, "Let's all stand and recite the Creed," but the Creed is a way of putting words to the faith knowledge of how we know God in our heart. It's like an obscure certainty in our heart that God is with us, that God loves us, that God guides us. That's our faith. We learn to live by faith. This obscure certainty of God's oneness and the Creed expresses it.

Jim Finley: So, we start somewhere. So, we start with words. But then the words beg the question, "How do I get down to the core of what the word just says?" One person says to another, "I love you." Another person hears and believes that person, "I believe you." But how together can we find our way to experiencing what those words mean that I love you? Otherwise, it's just words. So, he's saying what we're really thirsting for is this depth of communal faith, this deep heart knowledge that the words point to or invite. So, how do we get beyond the words into the unit of mystery that words are about?

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes, that's really helpful. Thank you. John of the Cross starts us off by using a ladder or in the session, you start us off by pointing to the way John of the Cross uses the ladder as an image of stepping through belief into faith.

Jim Finley: Yes, the image I use, because I'm quoting him, beginning of the Ascent. I talked about it as a waking dream, in which it's the middle of the night. There's a full moon. In this big, vast field, you see a ladder that goes from earth to heaven. Each rung of the ladder is an article of faith, the Creed. So, I believe in God, Father almighty, and so on. So, we put our foot on the first rung. Who am I? How do I understand? I am in the presence of God. I believe in God. I have an understanding and so on and so on and so on. So, when you go on and on and on and you're way up there above the clouds holding on, it suddenly dawns on you that you don't know what any of those things mean.

Jim Finley: That's where I used the example the person born blind. They would know through faith comes through hearing. So, they would know through faith the color yellow exists. Being born blind, it have no substantial knowledge what yellow is. He said, "This the way it is with God." We hear that God loves us. By analogy, by loving us, we know something. But then what we know love to be compared to the infinite love that is God, we don't know what it means. As a matter of fact, everything we can know, he says, there's no likeness to what it is.

Jim Finley: So, the question then is, “How do I then...” [inaudible 00:12:15], unknowing. How can I to the nakedness of faith be led by God beyond my ideas of God into intimate realizations of the infinite, an infinite oneness with the infinite presence of God in the obscurity of faith in my heart? I know what I know and I know that I know it, but I know it unexplainably. It’s an effort.

Jim Finley: One mystic says it’s ineffably comprehensible. Anyways, people of faith understand talk like this. It’s alluding to something. They know this is true, but neither one would claim they could adequately explain what it is that they understand, that the language somehow embodies it. It’s similar to listening to poetry in a way. He’s inviting us to recalibrate our mind into this more interior way of knowing and how to deepen it.

Kirsten Oates: How important is the knowing piece? As we’re going up the ladder, you talked about wrestling with who I am, who God is. How important are those pieces in the journey?

Jim Finley: Well, I think we were saying in a previous session, Thomas Merton was talking to the novices about monastic life, the silent life. So, one of the great things about monastic life is freedom from the need to understand. So, we start out with it’s an understanding, because we start somewhere. Then as we get into it, as we get these little glimmers of the presence of God, we start to see the inadequacy of those initial understandings. So, that even if I were capable of defining it, by the very fact that I could define it, it would mean to be infinitely less than what I’m trying to understand.

Jim Finley: So, there’s a deeper way to understand what it means to understand. It comes by being attentive, sustained attentiveness infused with love, by being humble, by being patient. There’s a quiet descent into qualitatively deeper ways of knowing the presence of God’s oneness, the presence of myself in faith. So, he’s guiding us in how to be more habitually sensitive to and faithful to those subtle realms where this union occurs, this divine union.

Kirsten Oates: Because a lot of people think just learning, learning, learning more is the way to understand more or grasp more. What John of the Cross is saying is that some learning is good. But if you cling to what you’ve learned or you grasp what you’ve learned as facts or as complete truth, it’s going to keep you from finding the infinite knowing that you’re looking for.

Jim Finley: Yes, an example we were using in an earlier session also is that imagine that for a long time, you’ve been blessed with this very deep love relationship with someone. Someone would ask you to explain what it is that you and your love for this person see in this person. You don’t know what to say. You also know that anything you could say wouldn’t be what you know. Your heartbreaks when you try. That’s a good image, I think, where John of the Cross is leading us. Let’s take a second poet, someone who’s really a gifted poet. They seek the poetry. We’re blessed to hear the poetry.

Jim Finley: You asked the poet, “Would you please explain in definable terms what poetry is?”

Would you please explain for us how do you do that and why do you do that?" It isn't that there isn't a theory of literature, a theory of poetry, because there is. [inaudible 00:16:43] that helps is important. But John Cage says, "The artists doesn't get down to business in a serious way until they get to the point they no longer know what they're doing." So, you're in water over your head and it starts becoming unexplainably clear. See, I'm moving with things that I discern and sense the depth or the beauty of. I'm less and less able to adequately explain anybody, including myself, what it is that is becoming so clear to me.

Jim Finley: So, John of the Cross is inviting us to be comfortable with that. Notice, he moves back to the explainable, because he knew theology is sensory clear. He knew the importance of clarity. But it's that conceptual clarity in the service of this deeper clarity. So, it's not muddled thinking or big thinking, but everything he says is a metaphor for something ultimately unexplainable, that it shimmers or shines in the tonal quality of how he uses words.

Jim Finley: And then as we listen to him, the depth from which he's speaking has the power to cause that same depth in us to resonate. We can tell something in us is being spoken to. That's hard to explain. But the very fact that it touches us, it bears witnesses, somehow, we already know what he's talking about. He's helping us to find words for it, like a meeting encounter with it.

Kirsten Oates: And then every now and then, he will say something that stops you. It sounds a little harsh or I like this one where he says, "All the world's wisdom is ignorance in God's sight." Because we're so locked into these habits of trying to understand of knowing the ways we know finitely, is he trying to shock us a little bit out of those ways?

Jim Finley: Yeah, I'm trying to think of an example of this. Let's say we're moving forward through our life in some strident way. I'll give an example. I was once working in psychotherapy with an attorney. He's a very successful attorney. He was very driven by it. He had a massive heart attack. He was hospitalized for a long time and was coming to see me for therapy. He thought the heart attack saved his life, because he serendipitously stumbled into something that he was running roughshod over. It'd be precisely what can't be explained, what can't be attained, but without it, life makes no sense. So, I think John of the Cross is trying to help us to see... He's really in a way giving us some poetic sense about what it's like to die and see God.

Jim Finley: So, you spend the first 10 trillion years slack-jawed. It's just 10 years of silence, because you're immersed and surrounded by this oceanic depth from all eternity has been infinitely in love with you. You're in that destiny. Gregory of Nyssa says, "Then just when you're starting to get a handle on it, that pulls a lever and starts all over again." So, it's a free fall. It's an abyss-like free fall into this bottomless abyss. It touches you in a way that silences you. So, you're not silent, because you choose to be silent. It's the silence in which you're silenced. Yet, you don't know what to say. Yet the very thing you don't know what to say is a very thing that's some deep inner way that you know, where you know that the love knows you. He's calling that faith. He's calling that faith, if that makes sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So, he's really gently trying to shift our perspective into this more heartfelt-

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. On earth, definitions that we might not be conscious of to get to these deeper experiences.

Jim Finley: Yes, I put it this way too. In the next talk too, we can talk about the dark night. Another way to put it in my mind is say, any time, whether it be lovers and their marital union with each other or a mother or father with their child or an artist given over to the art or the poet to poetry, the musician to music, or service to the community, what is it that has so accessed you, that has laid claim on your heart? The only thing you can do is surrender yourself over to it as a mystery. Living in that way, obedient to fidelity, to be an unexplainably accessed by the unexplainable, that you seek to live by and walk in and breathe and so on.

Jim Finley: He's talking about that. It's like meeting him for spiritual direction. You might take your notepad with you to take notes. You could talk with him. You could ask questions and jot it down. But really, he'd be sitting with you in a way... You'd feel you're in the presence of someone with whom it was completely safe to try to express to him a desire you don't know how to find words for. As you sincerely try, he would sense in the depth of your sincerity. He'd hear the question your heart is asking and doesn't know how to say. He would meet you there, if that makes sense to put it that way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: So, I think he's reading it that way too or it's not a consumer mentality. This is what we get like the self-help book for would be mystics, 10-point plan, I think I got it. What it is, is unexplainably drawing you to lean into it and surrender to it that it might transform you into itself and your simplicity, your sincerity. It's like unexpectedly close. That's the poetics.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: He talks about the need to darken the intellect or the knowledge of faith is lost. I guess this is what we've been talking about. So, we won't rid of the intellect. I like the word darken. It's just not the brightest thing that we're orienting to.

Jim Finley: Yeah, darkening certainly doesn't mean to negate, because conceptual knowledge of anything in depth is a gift from God. God creates that knowledge. John of the Cross says this, he said, "We should not cherish what we understand about God, but we should cherish what we don't understand. Because what we do understand is finite. What we don't understand is infinite." So, we darken it. We don't negate it, but we hold it in advance. It's no longer our base of operations. Even this, reading John of the Cross or these mystics, the longer you stay with it, the clearer it gets. You familiarize yourself with it, but the very familiarity of it is a constant call to the crest of the wave where you take the internalized familiarity and you keep it in the background.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton, "You who sleep in my breasts are not met with words, but within dispossession." You've dispossessed me and my ability to explain myself in your presence. And then when I've gotten used to being dispossessed, you dispossessed my dispossession. You're constantly serendipitously falling forward. So, you can hold me and catch me and my ability to understand what's happening to me. I'm learning to trust that. To me, that's what

it means to darken. Sigmund Freud is interesting and psychoanalysis. He says, “The analyst is to put aside all theoretical notions and assumption about psychology, about anything.

Jim Finley: The unconscious mind of the analyst should lean out and just listen to what the person and the analyst is saying. They’re two unconscious minds touching each other. The therapist waits for the moment to put words to interpret the process.” So, we’re always passing beyond explanations with deep respect for explanations, because we’re talking about how to intimately realize what’s unexplainable, which is God really.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That’s really helpful, Jim. Thank you. Can you talk in a little bit more detail about the thimble in the ocean example that you gave? You touched on it quite quickly, but I’d like to sit with the image a little longer.

Jim Finley: Yes. Dan Walsh said in the Monastery in Metaphysics and Medieval Philosophy, he said, “We must pass beyond objectivity, the factual. We must pass beyond subjectivity. We must find a way to trans subjectivity,” which is the interdivine life of God as Trinity and us or subsisting relations subsisting on the subsisting relations. So, what happens is that I start out as if I’m the thimble. Here’s the Scriptures and here are the mystics. If I keep studying the mystics and outline the mystics and study Scripture, I can keep internalizing this knowledge of God.

Jim Finley: I can get a doctorate in it and become a Godologist. It’s real knowledge too. There’s a history of these ideas. But to realize that for all of the astuteness of our mind is finite mind. The real issue is that I think of it instead as I’m this thimble. So, I can’t get the ocean into the thimble.

Jim Finley: There’s a story in St. Augustine. He was working on De Trinitate, his work on the Trinity. He’s one of the first people that forged it as a theology. There’s a story that he’s walking along, pondering the Trinity. He sees a little boy along the beach. The little boy has put a hole in the sand. He’s going down to the water with a teaspoon and getting a teaspoon of ocean water and very carefully walking up, pouring it in the hole. Augustine watches him. He goes down. He get some. He pours it. So, finally, he walks up and ask him, “What are you doing?” He says, “I’m trying to get the ocean into this hole.” Augustine said, “You won’t do it.” The little boy said, “Neither will you figure out the Trinity.” He disappeared.

Kirsten Oates: Wow.

Jim Finley: So, the idea is that instead of, “How do I understand it?”, Merton says, “The spiritual order to be understood means to realize you’re infinitely understood is to understand.” See, to understand means to realize that you’re infinitely understood. In God, we live and move and have our being, even as we’re talking right now. We’re making our descent into this oceanic presence. So, really, there’s a certain point of conversion, where instead of trying to accumulate, grasp it, grasp it, grasp it, instead there’s a quiet surrender to an oceanic presence that has touched our heart. We’re opening ourselves to...

Jim Finley: Like St. Teresa of Ávila, she says, “You sit in the quiet. God’s liken to water flowing into your soul like a basin.” She says, “You realize your heart’s being enlarged to divine proportions. The love that’s flowing into you is metamorphosizing your heart to the proportions of the infinite love He’s pouring into you.” So, the prayer becomes a surrender to that. Because

John and Teresa knew each other so well, this is the mystic way really is a conversion experience, where I struggle, struggle, struggle.

Jim Finley: So, what John of the Cross is saying with the dark knight is God helps you out by taking away the ability to figure anything out. Notice, he said, "Someone who's losing his eyesight but can see someone will resist guidance, but the person who's completely guided puts forth his hands and to be led." So, the night of faith is the deep realization of the poverty of anything that we are even capable of understanding compared to it being infinitely understood by the infinite presence of God. Therefore, I freely choose to surrender to that, to be empty handed and sit and wait. The transformation happens out of that. That imagery helps me to think of it in those ways.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful. You talked about the essence of the exploration that it keeps opening and that faith passes beyond the frontiers of the intellect, but it does give us a sense of truth. You use words like mercy, love. These are truths beyond what the intellect can comprehend. These are truths that we know through faith. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. So, for example, we were starting the series out on John of the Cross. He was in prison and taking out and being whipped, and all of this stuff. He really felt lost. Here is this church. He just got ordained. Here's the Scripture professors whipping him, before the reformer [inaudible 00:32:08]. In that lost state, the poetry started flowing out. So, he was imprisoned at one level. But in prison, he found something within himself that can never be imprisoned and it flowed out of his heart.

Jim Finley: If you just sit and read him out loud real slow, you get the feeling of that spaciousness in what he's saying. It's more like listening to music than explaining something. He tunes into a certain register and stays there. If you're very patient with it and let it wash back over you and you sit with, it is a more diffused, intimate slowly deepening knowledge of the unexplainable as the presence of God.

Kirsten Oates: When you're going over that description of being imprisoned, it's almost like if we're not careful, we can be imprisoned by our intellect or by our senses. So, we're trying to let something flow that's beyond, beyond, beyond the intellect of the senses.

Jim Finley: Yeah. So, Martin Buber in I and thou, he said, "What a lot of people pass for dialogues interrupted monologue." You're waiting for the other person to finish, so you can keep making your point. When you hear people arguing with each other, it keeps heating up. They don't even hear each other at all. They keep cutting each other off. So, the depth of dialogue is that mutual willingness to change. So, we're in a dialogue with God. Really, what I say is freedom from ideological living. It's freedom from closure in any system or any set of answers. It's like that.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. So, it's freedom from any sense of closure of any end point to what we could know, how much we could love, how much we could-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: ... understand. Yeah.

- Jim Finley: So, no matter where I am in this process, it's a gift, how God's touched my life. My daily life is a gift. This is to me true. So, when I said, "The infinite presence of God is infinitely pressing itself in and as where I am right now on the journey," at the same time, God is infinitely more besides. It's because God's inexhaustible. So, my present level of sincerity, even as I'm understanding this or experience, my present level of sincerity is God being poured out, manifested at this present level, and to be grateful for that. God is that and always infinitely more besides. For all eternity, it will be like that. Then we realize we're participating in that, the overflow of that.
- Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, even with all the knowledge you have and all the years you've experienced meditating and being with Thomas Merton, you still internally hold that open stance.
- Jim Finley: Yes. I mean, it's hard to explain. I'm grateful for the years I've committed myself to this. It has changed my life really. Maureen and I both are committed to this. But when I speak about it with people, like I am right now, I get the feeling that it's a flow of unpremeditated words. That somehow, it's a kind of a sharing or a manifestation that we're bearing witness to the clarity of it all, the undefinable clarity of it all in a flow of words. It's like that for me. That's what it feels like.
- Kirsten Oates: So, even in this teaching, even in this moment, your words are open to something that you don't know.
- Jim Finley: Exactly. That's why when I do this on live retreats, for example, people in therapy, and you've been on some retreats with me this way too, these silent retreats. At the end, when people ask questions, it's often... This is what we're doing right now. It's a dialogue. So, there's something about these questions that are evoked out of listening to the talks. The dialogue around the questions deepens the clarity about the questions, because it engages us. It engages us. That's why it's a participatory communion with each other.
- Kirsten Oates: Which in the end is what you're pointing towards all of life becoming.
- Jim Finley: Exactly, exactly. Sometimes I tell people on the retreats, the silent retreats, "Why do we come here this weekend to be here to sit in silence and sittings?" We came here so that everything we're experiencing here, we can go home realizing it was already there in our own living room. I mean, it's already there. What happens when you wake up in the middle of the night? You were trying to be more attuned to what alone is ultimately there, which is this generosity of presence as our life. We're trying to get acclimated to it or be supple. We're in a state of oneness with it, which is the path. That's what John of the Cross is... All these mystics, they're trying to help us along that path in which this occurs.
- Kirsten Oates: You said something very provocative towards the end of the session around, "Can I learn to join God and God's understanding of me, who God understands me to be?" And then you deepened it and said, "Can I join God helping me to understand God's way of understanding God?" Is that the sense of what we're trying to do actively is to join God helping me to understand?
- Jim Finley: That's right. What I realize what matters the most really isn't who my father understood me to be or my mother understood me to be or my brother or my sister or my pastor or my boss. The deepest level isn't who I understand me to be. The deepest level is, "Who does God

understand me to be?” Because poetically, from all eternity, God the Father, God is mother, God is the origin. He’s eternally contemplating me in Christ, the word hidden with Christ and God forever, which is the unborn me that never began, because God never, never, never has not known who I am and I’m called to be. This is the unborn me. The me that was never born is the me that will never die. Since everything in God is God, this is the divinity of me.

Jim Finley: So, by divesting myself and moving up beyond the frontiers of thought, how can I start joining God who God knows me to be? Which is liberation, enlightenment or mystical, whatever the metaphor is. But then I say, “If I join God and who God knows me to be, it goes further, because who God knows me to be is who I am called by God to be in sharing who God knows God to be.” How can I learn to know God with God’s own knowledge of God, which is Christ? How can I learn to love God with the love of God, which is the Holy Spirit? So, this is the divinity of me, which is our destiny, this infinite generosity. It creates us to completely share itself with us unexplainably as destiny. That’s the path. I mean, that’s where all this is headed.

Jim Finley: And then I think also, you then realize in these incremental realizations of that, that that infinite presence is infinitely pressing itself in and as your present degree of realizing it. So, intimately realize where you are right now. It’s like a certain moment with the beloved or with a child or a sunset. There’s a certain moment of amazement, as something that’s somehow already unexplainably present in and as your presence. It isn’t like, “I hope I get there in time before the buzzer goes off.” I don’t know if I ever figured this out. But the very sincerity of your desire to this is itself infinite love incarnating itself as your desire to realize this. That’s what’s holy, I think, is that. What’s also holy is our inability to realize it as holy, because we’re infinitely loved in our inability to realize it.

Kirsten Oates: You talked about Jesus having this way of seeing and being with people that was an infused expression of what you’re talking about.

Jim Finley: Exactly. I said that the healing stories of the Gospels, Jesus saw the source of the person’s suffering. It wasn’t that they couldn’t see or couldn’t walk or they were leper or their daughter died, whatever it is. He saw that and he met that suffering. He met them there. But the healing story is that he saw the real root of suffering is they thought they were what was wrong with them. That’s what we’re trying to find out. How can I learn not to let the conditions in which I find myself determine the foundational condition of my heart?

Jim Finley: So, in a moment of encounter with Jesus reflected in his eyes, they saw his true face before they were born. So, that’s the true miracle. That’s the true miracle. So, he said, “In some way, we’ve all had a taste of that. We’ve all had a taste of wonder, taste of something, but it’s elusive.” So, John of the Cross says, “What is the path that we can be habituated in it, in the ground of our body, the ground of our mind?” This is the path he’s marking out for us.

Kirsten Oates: I’m curious what you think about Jesus if he had a dark night the way John of the Cross describes.

Jim Finley: He did. He freely chose to enter it in the crucifixion, “My God, my God, why have thou forsaken me?” We lose our faith. We get so overwhelmed. He freely chose to be so overwhelmed, he lost God, which means that God is unexplainably present in our lost hour,

because He became that. And then He handed himself over to the God he could no longer find, "Into Your hands, I commit my spirit." So, he did that. He joined us. This is when I do deep trauma work with people. This is in the deep area recovery work also.

Jim Finley: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness grasp it not, precisely because it got so dark. The gentle light shining within it revealed itself to us like that. As that light leads us out of the darkness, we come out realize something was given to us there. Just when everything was lost, that which can never be lost found me. I think that happens a lot really for all of us in different ways. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I can hear the constructions again, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes.

Kirsten Oates: Well, I haven't got too many more questions, but just going back to that image of Jesus with the other. It's so helpful for me when you said, "We can't see the love between ourselves and the other, even though we have faith that it's there. We can't see the way the person interiorly loves us. We can't see what's going on inside of them, but we can feel that it's there." I just winded in the example of the way Jesus was with people, how that translated.

Jim Finley: Yes, I think for me, that helps. Let's say two people, father, mother, sister, brother, lover, husband, wife. Let's say there's two people. There is a deep love for each other. The thing is in the mutual awareness of their love for each other, they don't directly see the love in which they feel so fortunate to live in with each other. Yet, even though they don't see it, they somehow do see it. They see it shining out from the gestures of love, the words of love. And then when the beloved returns the favor and lets us know they see that in us, so they're mutually seeing in each other, but neither one sees, because it's always hidden. It's like [inaudible 00:45:57].

Jim Finley: It's hidden, but they see it flowing unexplainably into the concreteness of their loving expressions towards each other, like incarnate infinity. But they know they need to never latch hold to the expressions which come and go. They always have to keep the aperture of their heart open. So, that this flowing love can keep perpetuating itself through the ongoing gestures and recognitions. So, they're always living by what they don't comprehend, but they comprehend it incomprehensively. That is they live by the knowledge of love.

Jim Finley: See, I know it, I know it, I know that I know it. That's our homeland. God's the infinity of that. It's like that. The thing is it's not theoretical. We're just not used to trying to put words to this. That's what John of the Cross is trying to help us do is to be patient. We're trying to slow things way down enough to start to put words to something in our heart we know is true, but we tend to forget. This is meditative mind. So, we try to habituate that through the day.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think that when Jesus interacted with people, he was so infused with that sense of the infinite love that people just experienced that in a moment?

Jim Finley: Yes, [inaudible 00:47:31]. He spent all nights in prayer as oneness with God, which always His very identity. He who sees me sees the Father. And then he walked out roaming the earth

looking for people, looking for suffering. He saw the root of suffering. It's the traumatized capacity to live in what we're talking about. And then I think who these saints are like John of the Cross, you can change your life to be in the presence of a holy person.

Jim Finley: Just like Dr. Martin Luther King, you get the feeling they no longer have a life, but somehow, they have found what all life is about. So, when you're in their presence, it's like they are what they say. They are what they say. And then you realize that your invitation to do likewise is your invitation then to surrender. Because deep down, you are that too. So, you're trying to be healed from all that hinders from you from being habituated and what you unexplainably are, because God loves you.

Kirsten Oates: I loved your final section, where you talked about the person meditating. They started levitating. That's great, but that's not what it's about.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: The angels and the saints. So, for me, really? Levitating sounds like I'd be pretty-

Jim Finley: True, I'll take it any day. By the way, here's a big point John of the Cross is making. John of the Cross said, "The more you pay attention to those or seek them or get them." So, you remove yourself from the infinity of God. So, the fullness of those, because it's finite, it's a finite fullness of the infinite, that you dare not latch on to that and hold on to it, but he flips it around and says this. "But just as the fullness of such experiences is infinitely less than the infinite, the absence of all those experiences is simply the absence of what alone is ultimately real." So, the absence and the fullness are equal to each other. That's the point. So, he's trying to dislodge us from these incremental attainments.

Jim Finley: We're dislodged by it by the deepening poverty to attain anything, which is the dark night. So, we either despair or we go deeper. We despair or we go deeper in the night lovelier than the dawn. Once I've been unraveled like this, then this light start shining out of my life that is not a life that I have. See, it's the light of God shining out through my own heart. He has a lovely image where he says, "Imagine your chest is made of glass and a light shining out from your heart. You see everything and the light that shining out from your heart.

Jim Finley: So, if you hold anger in your heart, everything you see, you see something to be angry about. If you hold fear in your heart, you see something to be afraid of. But what if the light that shines from our heart is this infinite light of love? Then everything we see mirrors back to us as the infinite light of love." So, he's trying to free us or extricate us from these veils that is trying to habituate us. So, then we see everything in the light of that love, including the moment of our own death, including the sun moving across the sky.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. I feel like this talk is an encouragement too to for the way we enter into your meditative talks and how we're not trying to understand everything you're saying and grasp it with the intellect. It is that stance of trying to experience the love that's flowing through it. You talked about when you first read John of the Cross, when you read one of the quotes in his last session. I could hear it in your voice. You said, "When I first read this, it really got to me." That sense of something unexplainable happened in that.

Jim Finley: That's really true. That's the key to this, I think. So, when you read St. John of the Cross,

what you're looking for is the one-liners that get to you and then you just stop, because that's the touchstone with everything that he says. The more you stay with it, the more frequent those moments become. As you connect the dots, it forms a path. But in the beginning, we're not used to this.

Jim Finley: I mentioned once after a talk that I gave on this, someone came up after the talk and said, "We were trying to take notes in order to keep up." He said, "Do you have any suggestions on how to drink out of a firehose?" I said, "But if you notice, the talks have no content." Because if they did, it'd be one more talk about something. What if it's poetry and blank verse that opens our heart to intimations of the unexplainable, which is God's oneness with us in our life? That's the power of these teachings, I think. They embody it or they draw us into realizing it and learning to live by it.

Kirsten Oates: Just a note to end on, I was encouraged. There was a moment where you said, "We'll never ever get there to the full understanding of the infinite, but we can pause right now and ask God to help us see that God's infinitely in love with us as we're speaking here right now."

Jim Finley: Yes, that we won't live long enough to figure this out. It's unfigureoutable really, but we can freely choose a childlike sincerity to be quietly present. To how mysteriously, it's already one with us. By sustaining that sincerity, this sincerity can become more and more stabilized. I think that's the quality of the pathway.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim.

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.