

Turning to the Mystics



Bonus Session: The Dark Night
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings everyone. Welcome to our time here together by turning for guidance to the Christian Mystic St. John of the Cross. And we're in the midst of his book, The Dark Night, which follows The Ascent of Mount Carmel.

Jim Finley: And the last time we left off with each other, we were talking about The Dark Night as a poetic metaphor of how we experienced God's love and the transformative process of loving and being loved by each other. Primarily focusing on marital love, but pointing out how that same process is in parenting or teaching students in a classroom or committed to the healing process or oneness with nature or solitude, art, poetry. It's just, it's a continuous metaphor. The transformative power of love leading us into ever deeper love. And so St. John of the Cross, I think assumes all of that. He's always assuming that we're experiencing, God's love for us in our love for each other and daily life and sharing it. He's just assuming that, and, but he's also assuming that we also have a personal relationship with God, not experiencing God's love in each other, but experiencing God's love and the presence of God in prayer.

Jim Finley: And furthermore, he's helping us understand then, well, how has The Dark Night experience with God? That is how's it's experienced in the presence of the infinite love of God. And his concern is the point at which we're living the Christian life, and with our daily quiet time of Lectio Divina meditation and prayer, we go forth to share it with others and efficacious unto holiness. He's assuming all of that. So this is experiencing, God's love for us in prayer mediated or incarnate in our constellations in our insights, into the things of God incarnate in our aspirations, and so on. But then when we pass through the veil of death, we move beyond these ways of experiencing the presence of God, mediated through our thoughts, through our reflections, through our constellations. And we move into an unmediated infinite union with the infinite love of God in glory, which is our destiny.

Jim Finley: And so then he's saying, what can with some people following this path is a God doesn't wait until they're dead to begin infusing into them an unmediated experience of the infinite presence of God infinitely in ways they cannot grasp. And starts to introduce them into the celestial state while still on the earth. And he is offering insight to those for whom they experienced this happening and how to discern that it's happening. And we were looking at this with The Ascent of Mount Carmel book one and two on the act of aspects of attitudes to cultivate, to cooperate with it. And now he's picking up again in The Dark Night on the passive aspects. And it's basically this, it's basically that we realize as we go to our place of prayer, that we're no longer nurtured by prayer where we're no longer are consoled by the felt sense of God's presence in prayer. And also, the clarity that we had in our understanding of God, through our beliefs kind of chapter and verse clarity. That clarity is also not nearly so clear to us anymore because what's happening here is that God sees that we're attached to these finite ways of experiencing the infinite presence of God, efficacious and the holiness, and therefore to help liberate and free us up to begin to experience an infinite oneness with God.

Jim Finley: God lovingly takes away the capacity to function in that mediated way. And this is what he means by The Dark Night, that God helps us out by weaning us off our ability to engage in Lectio Divina discursive meditation and be nurtured by it, to liberate us from our dependency on those finite ways of experiencing God. And yet at the same time, we don't know how to go forward either. And so this is Chapter 9, Book One of The Dark Night,

and he says, the first sign John of the Cross this is Article Two, is that these souls do not get satisfaction or constellations from the things of God. They do not get any out of creatures either since God puts a soul in this Dark Night, in order to dry up and purge his sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything.

Jim Finley: And so everything suffers from a lack, it suffers from a lack of being able to experience God's presence in it. But also having tasted something of the love of God, it suffers and being lacking to us because it's finite, and having tasted something of the infinite love of God, we feel the poverty of all created things to fulfill us. And we also feel the poverty of being nurtured by God, in prayer, Thomas Merton once called it a "Hell of Mercy." God leaves us in this place of helplessness.

Jim Finley: John of the Cross then says, "to those in whom this occurs and know how to remain quiet, without care or solicitude about any interior or exterior work, they will soon in that unconcern and idleness delicately experience the interior nourishment. This refection is so delicate that usually if the soul desires or tries to experience it, it cannot. For, as I say, this contemplation is active while the soul is an idleness and unconcerned." And so this is really at this point, not anything that you're doing there but is rather realizing it's what God is achieving in you. It's an infused contemplation experiencing as the darkening of being able to function on your terms and your customary ways of experiencing God's presence.

Jim Finley: He continues on article seven. The reason is that now in this state of contemplation, when the soul has left discursive meditation and enters the state of proficients, that is proficients for those who are beginning to move from discursive, reflective meditation, into wordless, contemplation, resting in God, unexplainably resting in you. The reason is that now in this state of contemplation when the soul has left discursive meditation and has entered the state of proficients, it is God who works in it. He, therefore, binds the interior faculties and leaves no support in the intellect, nor satisfaction in the will, nor remembrance in the memory. At this time a person's own efforts are of no avail but are an obstacle to the interior peace and work God is producing in the spirit through that dryness of sense. Since this peace is something spiritual and delicate, its fruit is quiet, delicate, solitary, satisfying, and peaceful, and far removed from all the other gratifications of beginners, which are very palpable and sensory. For this is the peace that David speaks of in speaking of this night in the Psalms.

Jim Finley: St. John of the cross continues. The final quote here, The attitude necessary in the night of sense is to pay no attention to discursive meditation. Since this is not the time for it, they should allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude, even though it may seem very obvious to them that they are doing nothing and wasting time. And even though they think this inclination to think about anything is due to their laxity, through patience and perseverance in prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part. All that is required of them here is freedom of soul that they liberate themselves from impediments and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God and live without the concern, without the effort, without the desire to taste or feel God, all these desires just quiet the soul and distracted from peaceful, quiet in the sweet idleness of the contemplation, which is being communicated to it.

Jim Finley: So this is really a very strange thing. So different when we are newly arrived at it. If we're

drawn into this place, it's like sitting there in a kind of a powerlessness. To draw any kind of nourishment and thinking about the things of God. Or a powerlessness to experience the constellations of God, like a kind of an emptiness or an empty handed poverty. And he says, but if you sit there with all your heart, if you sit there with all your heart and his complete dependency on God, who's achieving this work in you are drawing you out beyond the closed horizon of all that's attainable through finite thoughts and feelings. There begins to grow in you. He says the fire of love, but the fire of love is not commonly felt at first because there's a fire that burns was such infinite, delicate silence that the finite reflective self sitting there is unable to discern it. It has one sits there, and this can go on for months. This can go on for years this way. But as one sits there little by little by little, there begins to shine out of that poverty, this infinite oneness, which is what we'll be getting to next on the spiritual kind on the living flame of love, being married to God through love.

Jim Finley: So really it's a kind of a sweet death. It's kind of dying of love to everything less than an infinite union with infinite love and patiently surrendering yourself over to this process. John of the cross says with some people, God paces this, according to our weaknesses, some people it's just unbearable. So there are times they can return to meditation and returned to reflection. And so, and it tends to take longer because there's these spaces where you kind of get a breather where you can circle back, and then it continues. Other people can go on with more consistency. And until this breakthrough happens into this unit of state of divine love, he also says, and Teresa of Avila talks about this too. It's especially painful when you don't have a spiritual director that understands this and encourages you and helps you to abide in it and be attentive in it and present in it.

Jim Finley: And so on which deepens your solitude. And so that's John of the Cross, on The Dark Night, this is John of the Cross, where you're in a certain, in this is continuous with how The Dark Night is present and nuptial love and teaching and all these ways because what it is, he's not talking about it with God, ultimately speaking that is you're in this love and to reflective prayer. And there's this influx of this divine light, which blinds your finite eyes, because it's infinite and in blinding your finite eyes, you know, not what to make of it. And, but tasting that tastes to the finite that you cannot explain. Having tasted that divine light, you see the poverty of the pleasure that you get and the constellations of prayer through emotions and constellations. You see the poverty of all your thoughts about God and your betwixt in between these two worlds between the earthly plane of God's infinite love given in finite ways. And on the brink or the precipice of God's infinite love giving an infinite ways. And you're transformed in that poverty. And so St. John of the Cross and offers press-worthy guidance for those who are being led by God, along this very obscure and subtle and delicate path toward mystical consummation in God's love.

Jim Finley: So let's send them with a sitting with a meditation. I might encourage you in this meditation to, I mean, whatever your heart prompts you to do, you're capable to do. How's this strike you the tone of this? It could strike you as something you've not yet experienced, but there's something kind of wondrous about knowing that it's possible and does happen to some people. And since the graces of God, that happened to one person belonged to all of us is part of the grace, which you may realize it

is happening to you, but you'd never even consciously saw it because it's not the granting of something. Rather. It's the poverty of the cessation of everything that has an enigmatic richness about it. And John of the cross is helping us to put words to it. So in the prayers, as you sit in the presence of God relative to where you are with this transformative process. So with that, then I invite you to sit straight and fold your hands and bow. Be still, and know I am God, be still, and know I am, be still, and know, be still, be,

Jim Finley: Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; 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 contemplative, pray for us. Saint Teresa of Avila, pray for us, St. John of the Cross, pray for us. I just had a thought during this sitting I'll share it with you, I know I don't usually do this.

Jim Finley: I think what actually happens sometimes is if we're experiencing The Dark Night in the daily life, in our marriage or parenting or teaching or whatever, that that darkness going on in our daily life will show up and we're sitting in prayer. And likewise, if we're going to The Dark Night in prayer, it will start showing up when we're with the students in the classroom or playing with our child or with the spouse or sitting alone the end of the day. And another thing I think happens is we get little moments of The Dark Night in prayer. Like there's like a momentary taste of it in the midst of our reflections of this sweet powerless that we're given touches glimpses of it to get little by little, get acclimated to it. So with that, blessings to all of you till next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.