



Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

Session 2
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley, welcome to Turning to The Mystics. Greetings everyone, welcome to our time here together, turning for guidance through the teachings of the Christian mystic, the anonymous author of the cloud of unknowing. We've left off in our session so far exploring the author's guidelines for a way to practice contemplative prayer, which is the basis for chapter three. "*And these guidelines are very simple in a way*", the author says, "*to practice this contemplative prayer, lift your heart up to the Lord with the gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Center all your attention and desire on him. Let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from involvement with any of God's creatures or their affairs, whether in general, or in particular.*"

Jim Finley: What we saw, in order to understand these guidelines, we have to understand what the author of the cloud is helping us to understand the phase of living the Christian life, in which this way to pray finds its meaning. And what is this phase of the Christian life? That we've gone beyond the common way, in which our faith in Christ, our involvement in this following Christ, is based upon the psychological gifts that it gives us, to the moral guidelines that it gives us, to belonging to a sense of community. How it motivates us to serve the community and so forth, all good aspirations. I also have found that this way, this phase of life, how it has evolved or become enriched in the special way in which God becomes personal to us. God becomes personally real to us in our heart. And that Christ becomes real to us in our heart. And that we sincerely seek to follow Christ in all things, and devotional sincere, to live the life of love that Christ calls us to live.

Jim Finley: And then we saw, it was in the midst of this special way, this devotional sincerity lived day by day, in the last paragraph of the forward where he speaks of from time to time, where grace with blind stirrings of love. This spirit in the inmost center of our being, stirring us to love. The stirring that he speaks of, it's not where we experience God's stirring in reflective consciousness, illumined by faith. This is not the stirring of the special way in which we're moved with devotional sincerity, with a sense of the consolation of God's presence, where the solace of God's presence. There is the gift of that, there's the grace of that, we're grateful for that. But the stirring of which he speaks is innermost. That is the spirit of God's stirring in the innermost hidden center of our own soul that we cannot see with our finite eyes.

Jim Finley: This hidden place where God's imminence within us is sustaining us, breath by breath, breath by breath. And this stirring of the spirit in God, not as God is in us, in our ideas of God and the gifts of God, but it's a stirring of how God is in God, intimately stirring in the depths of ourself. Another way to say it, there are moments where we're quietly amazed to find ourself unexplainably in the presence of God. The unexpected nearness of God and how it can overtake us unexpectedly, sometimes very intensely, often very subtle, but it's a kind of a homecoming and we rest in this communal presence of God. All about us and within us. The Saint Augustine says, "Closer to us than we are to ourselves." The next phase of this understanding, or this next way of moving into this worldview, helping us to understand ourselves and this classical, contemplative Christian way to understand these things, is that scripture tell us that in God we live and move and have our being.

Jim Finley: That we're living our lives in the vast interiority of God. That when we die, when the moment of our death finally comes, and we pass through the veil of death, we don't go anywhere. We don't go somewhere else for all the angels are here, all the saints are here, all

the souls of the faithful departed, all the dead, they're all here with us. All together. We're all living our life in the vast interiority of God. The difference is that those, in passing through the veil of death, those that are living in God, are living in glory. They're living in the full light of God as God. That is, that the life of the blessed is a life of knowing God with God's knowledge of God, which is Christ. Loving God with God's love of God, which is the holy spirit. It's being as much God as God is God in our eternal nothingness without God. It's a divinization in the order of grace and love that is our eternal destiny.

Jim Finley: So here, although they're all about us and within us, but we're here experiencing God's presence as in a mirror darkly. We're here experiencing through the veils of our finite ideas, illumined by God's revelations to us that we read in scripture and in the traditions. So we know God and reflect on God as love, that God is mercy, that God gives us our life, that God guides us and sustains us. And so, under these ideas, illumined by faith, in which we know the truth of these ideas, this obscure certainty in our heart, we follow this way of God. But what happens in the stirring is a momentary quickening, a momentary taste of knowing God as God and not as God is known to us in the gifts of God. It's a fleeting glimpse of paradise, of our eternal destiny, not with the full blown glory of the blessed. For this stirring, this celestial stirring, is hidden, subtle, delicate, innermost.

Jim Finley: But the aura of it causes the interiority of our soul to glow with it. With a quiet sense of amazement, a sense of having tasted God or being drawn into God by God, and experience it as a kind of a quiet homecoming. So when the moment passes, it energizes the special way of life. It gives it a greater luminosity. Our devotional sincerity becomes all the more substantive to us by these flashes or of these tastes to us. Now what the cloud of unknowing is saying, and this directee that he's talking to, that he discerns in this person. And by implication, he's also clearly writing to us insofar as we listen to the author and we can sense that we've experienced or are experiencing what he's talking about. Has or is happening to us and it's this, is that we're going along, living our day by day life of faith. And what we find is these fleeting tastes of this unitive state of God in us as God and God not in us as gifts. That our ideas of God are consolations of God.

Jim Finley: We begin to discover a certain quiet longing to abide in that fleeting taste. That's the thing. And not only is it a longing, but he says, "You live now at this innermost center." It somehow becomes quietly serious to you. Like it matters in some way you can't explain. This is not something out of curiosity or something in passing. But it's so subtle and the world, the pressures of the day, it can easily get lost and there it is again. Like the flame that flickers in the wind, this desire of God. And here's where this image that helps me to see this. Like in this image is someone out, alone in the desert, dying of thirst, writing the word water with their finger in the sand over and over and over. That they're really onto a great idea, but when you're dying of thirst, there's just nothing like a drink of water. So the blind stirring of love is the drink of water. It's God as God. And all the thoughts of God, all these true ideas of God, these revealed ideas of God, are finite ideas of the infinite mystery of God.

Jim Finley: And compared to that drink of water, they're like words in the sand. That you've been given a taste of a oneness beyond what thought can comprehend and beyond what words can say. These are words that bear witness to the unit of mystery beyond what words can say. We're searching here for a language that allows us to speak of such things and this language is meaningful to us, insofar as we can tell, we're trying to put words to what we've experienced.

Maybe very subtle, maybe delicate, obscure, but we realize we're no complete stranger to this. We realize this is somehow about us and where we are with respect to it. And so he's saying then, that this desire then, this is ... Remember, the first three phases; the common, the special, and the singular way. They begin and end here on this earth. But the thing about the singular, which is this way of this longing in your heart, the way of the singular way is that it opens that up on the perfect way. Which begins here, but continues through all of eternity.

Jim Finley: That is, even though you have not yet died, even though you've not yet crossed through the veil of death from time into eternity, but there's been a boundary crossing. And God as God is in God in paradise, has crossed over and given you a taste of God as God in you. As God in this oneness. And then it calls you, then. It calls you, then, to draw, to give yourself to this. And the thing is, is that we cannot make these moments, these fleeting moments, last. They pass away as mysteriously as they arise. Doesn't lie in our power to conjure them up. They're granted, but we can choose. And this is where the practice comes in now, what we can do is choose in our intention to assume an inner stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by this oneness with God as God that has overtaken us so fleetingly in these quickenings.

Jim Finley: And the consistency in the practice, then, it becomes habituated. An ever more habitual, obscure, intimate living way in our life. Contemplative character transformation. And so what is this unknowing, then? What does this word unknowing mean in the light? Unknowing doesn't mean not knowing, that's clear. But also, unknowing doesn't mean knowing as we're accustomed to knowing, conceptually, in ego consciousness. We know through our ideas of God or use of anything that this unknowing is a word that's transconceptual. It's a way of knowing beyond the conceptual knowledge of knowing. And really, another way to say it that comes closer is, is it's really the knowledge borne of love, this unknowing. And so this example, again, where marital love, this intimacy, is the sacrament of this. That if you are so blessed to be in this intimate, ongoing sense of ... In this relationship with the beloved, there are many things that you come to know about the beloved and understand about the beloved. The beloved's qualities or the beloved's character or the beloved's ... all that.

Jim Finley: And those are the things you could describe to somebody who would try to understand who the beloved is. But who you know the beloved to be, and your love for the beloved, the knowledge that's born of this love is not a love that's reducible to any thought about the beloved. It's not reducible into any words about the beloved, but it is an invited and expressed in the words to the beloved, I love you. This self donating love and the knowledge born of that love in this communion. As we said in a previous session, we also see analogous phrases of this in art, where you can go to the art museum and quietly go from piece to piece, and maybe you've studied art. And maybe you have a sense of aesthetics and there's observations about it and so on. But when you give yourself over to a piece of art, or you contemplate the work of art, a kind of sustained attentiveness infused with love, there's a knowledge of the beauty of the world born of that, which is transconceptual.

Jim Finley: It's not reducible to thoughts and definitions of art. So too with poetry and so on.

And so, then, this way of prayer we see. This way of prayer, then, is a gate of heaven. It's the gate of heaven because it's the gate in which we freely choose to assume the stance that offers the least resistance to being overtaken by this oneness of God as God. So that in the fidelity or in the constancy of the practice, that oneness may become ever more habitually established in us as an underlying habitual sensitivity to this. This drink of water beyond all thoughts and words. It becomes unexplainably clear. The saying that it must be ineffably expressed and incomprehensibly understood. One of the mystics, Nicholas of Cusa ... I have his book here, right behind me. I drew a blank. And it's like an inner clarity in your heart, so subtle and delicate.

Jim Finley: And your fidelity to the practice, it stabilizes itself in you, in ever more habitually, all pervasive ways. And then we've seen, then, that this is where we see this celestial thing. That when we love God for God's sake, it's the blessed that are all about us and within us. The author of the cloud says, "They turn and look at you because you've discovered the secret of heaven." And this thing about being helped by the angels and the saints and the souls, all this poetic beauty. But here's the thing about it, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says that, "*as wonderful as this is, at the same time it is,*" he says, "*we need to diligently persevere on the grace of this when we sit in our practice.*" "*And so diligently,*" this is chapter three, "*so diligently persevere until you feel joy in it. For in the beginning, it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, and as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You'll seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You'll feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness, return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For in this life, if you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself, it must be within this darkness and this cloud. But if you strive to fix your love on him, forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation, I've urged you to begin. I'm confident that God, in his goodness, will bring you to a deep experience of himself.*" So I think what we need to understand closer is, what is this cloud of unknowing?

Jim Finley: What this darkness? How is something so luminous, so dark? And to get at this, I think this is where ... And I'm going to go to chapter seven where he introduces the word. And the word is, you use the word to anchor yourself in this ever so subtle stance. Choose a word that's meaningful to you, it might be a phrase. So I'm going to use the word Jesus, is the word. So when you're sitting in your meditation, of course, these thoughts arise that your reflective self doesn't politely step aside so you can become mystical. These thoughts keep rising and falling in your mind like this. And we're sitting in this intention, in the rise and fall of these thoughts about God, that in the longing of our heart we're transcending. So take this desire to transcend thought in the midst of thought. End of chapter seven, "*If you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can easily retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. A one syllable word, such as God or love, is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there, come what may. This word will be your defense in conflict and in peace. Use it to beat up on the cloud of darkness above you and to subdue all distractions and sending them to the cloud of forgetting beneath you. Should some thought go on annoying you, demanding to know*

what you are doing, answer with this one word alone. If your mind begins to intellectualize over the meaning and connotation of this little word, remind yourself that its value lies in its simplicity. Do this and I assure you, these thoughts will vanish. Why? Because you refuse to develop them with arguing.” I want to reflect on this. On the practicality of committing ourselves to this practice. The challenge of it and the gift of it. So let’s say you’re sitting in this prayer, lifting up your heart with this desire for God, for God’s sake alone.

Jim Finley: And while you’re sitting there, this is the imagery that helps me with this, a biblical thought walks into the room and says something to you, biblical. Like, is this biblical? Might quote something to you ,Romans 8:3 or 1 Corinthians, whatever. By the way, all the scripture is about this, contemplatively understood. But the idea is of scripture. So the cloud of unknowing is saying, “Do not get into a discussion with biblical of thoughts. You’ll become biblical.” This is who biblical people are, they’re people who listen to biblical thoughts. Instead, turn to the biblical thought and say to it, “Jesus.” Whatever your word is, I’ll say, Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. And the you that has biblical thoughts, you that is biblical thoughts, dies in the emptiness in which you wait for God. Next, you’re sitting there a little bit longer. And a Catholic thought enters room. I’m saying it because I’m Catholic, but Methodist, Lutheran, whatever tradition you’re in. And it says something Catholic, “Is this true to the teachings of the church?”

Jim Finley: Do not get into a discussion with Catholic thoughts. Turn to the Catholic thought and say, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” And the you that has Catholic thoughts, this is who Catholics are, they’re people who listen to Catholic thoughts. And this you that listens to Catholic thoughts, that has Catholic thoughts, you that is Catholic thoughts, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, dies in the emptiness in which you wait for God. You sit a little bit longer and you might have a mystical thought. All things are one. Some mystical thought. Do not get into a discussion with a mystical thought, you become these people that think mystical thoughts instead of the realization that transcends all thoughts, including all mystical thoughts. And say to the mystical thought, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” And the you that has mystical thoughts, the you that is mystical thoughts, dies in the emptiness in which you wait for God.

Jim Finley: I was once, years ago, giving this talk in an Episcopal monastery and Santa Barbara. There were all these Episcopalians were there, different folks too. So then I said, imagine a naughty thought comes into the room and says something naughty. Do not get into a discussion with the naughty thought, you’ll become naughty. Say to the naughty thought, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” and the you that has naughty thoughts, you that is naughty thoughts, dies in the emptiness in which you wait for God. And then I asked them, “Do Episcopalians have naughty thoughts?” And the Pryor the monastery raised his hand, he said, “We do, but we always have them with dignity.” And so, this is the passing away. This is the passing away of the whole world of thoughts about God as the foundations for the knowledge of God. That we might move beyond the horizons of thoughts about God into this love knowledge of God, like this. I know that in this passage into this love, nothing happens to any of these things. That’s the point.

Jim Finley: Nothing happens to our sense of scripture, our religious tradition, or our moral intentions, all of that. It’s just that all those thoughts, internalized thoughts of God, cease to be the basis as we move beyond the contours and confines of thought into this love that infinitely

transcends thought. Because no idea of God is God. Every idea of God is infinitely less than God. And we're passing beyond all ideas of God to enter into God as God infinitely, beyond all ideas of God being divinized forever. Not in the full light of glory that is to come, but in this obscure, the very deep and interior way. And this is where, then, it's dark to us because this thinking ... There is that in us that gets this. That in us it's quickened by this. We're drawn to this. This is why we're sitting like this, if you're drawn to it. So there's that in you that desires it, but there's that in you that doesn't see it yet because there's that in you that's still accustomed to the familiarity of thought.

Jim Finley: And so, as the thoughts and rise and fall, here's another image I have of this. You sit there and thought arises. You watch the thought arising. You're not trying to stop thoughts from arising, but likewise, you're trying to be careful not to think about the thought that's arising. Because if you think about the thought that's arising, thought will carry you off again, you'll be sitting there thinking. So what you're to do instead is, you see the thought arising, and just become aware that a thought is arising. Observe, be aware as it arises, how it lingers. And as it lingers, how it passes away. Become aware of the next thought arising, the next thought lingering, as it passes away. And so on. Now the awareness of thought is not thought. See, if there was only thought, there'd be no awareness of thought. So the awareness of thought is this contemplative stance, this luminous attentiveness infused with love, that observes thought in a loving knowledge that transcends the thoughts that arise in this way.

Jim Finley: And that in us is used to thinking, and no wonder we're used to thinking, doesn't find this easy. It doesn't find it easy. It takes great patience to pass beyond the frontiers of thought in this persistent, gentle and graced way. And that's the darkness. It's dark to the thinking self that is no longer created a space so it can carry out this place where it thinks what it thinks. Because it's given over to this intention of this love, of moving beyond thought into this love, and that's the intimacy of this transformative process. It's like dying of love at the hands of love until nothing left of us is love. Born in gnosis or the wisdom of love alone. A final thought. A final thought is that, this passing beyond thought, doesn't it all mean disrespecting thought or leaving thought behind? Quite the opposite. Because notice, when I read these passages of the author of *The Cloud*, all these mystics, notice how clearly he thinks. He has a very clear mind.

Jim Finley: So actually, liberating ourselves from ideological thinking actually frees up thinking with a greater luminous clarity to think. Which is wisdom. And also notice, that to pass beyond the veil of this world, doesn't it all mean that we seek to fly off into God and leave this earthly life behind? Because notice how committed the author of *The Cloud* is to trying to help us. All these mystics are that way because they know by experience how hard this is. But they also know the grace that's given to us in our patient fidelity to it. That the very commitment in which the author, these mystics speak to us, is the commitment of love. And so, this way of love doesn't remove us from the world, it radicalizes our presence in the world by deepening this love in the context in which we find ourselves. Father, mothers, sister, brother, students in the classroom, passerby on the street.

Jim Finley: I mean, whatever. Just whatever the situation is. It circles back around and radicalizes us in this way of being present in the world. And so we'll end here, then, with a meditation. 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. (Silence). And bow. 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 contemplatives pray for us. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pray for us. Julian of Norwich, pray for us. Blessings til 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 at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.