

Turning to the Mystics



Julian of Norwich

Session 1
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings everyone and welcome to our time here together, turning for guidance to the teachings of the Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich. In the previous session, we began this series on Julian with Kirsten leading Mirabai Starr and myself in a dialogue on Julian's life, like the autobiographical foundations of her own awakening, her own path and looking for parallels, moments in our own life of our own awakening, like markers on this path that she's helping us to follow.

In this session, I want to share with you, explore with you, the Chapter 10 of the Long Text. She begins a chapter like she does each chapter by referring back to the series of visions that she had at the brink of death where she sees these vivid, mystical realizations of Christ crucified, seeing in it the mystery of God's love for us, God's familiarity with us, sustaining us in love and our own suffering and in our own death. And now years later in her anchor hold, in her hermit, in her cell there, she's reflecting back on this, in her writing she's sharing this with us as she reflects back and says, "*This I saw bodily,*" recalling the moment of the vision, "*This I saw bodily, frighteningly and dimly, and I wanted more of the light of day to have seen it more clearly. And I was answered in my reason, if God wishes to show you more, He will be your light. You need none but Him.*" I'd like to begin by reflecting on this.

She's looking back at this moment where she was granted this, seeing something of God's love or realizing something of God's love, and she's offering us a lesson for us to consider, guiding us along the path. And the lesson is this: that when we've been granted a taste of God, where there was a moment in our life where we were grace within awareness of God's oneness with us, when we look back to that graced moment, however it came to us, however it concretized itself, whether granting occurred, was understandable that we wish we could have seen more. That is it wet our appetite to see more. And she's reminding us saying, "*You know what, if God wills for you to see more, you will see more.*" The lesson is that your whole life is in God's hands, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat, your very existence. Likewise, the extent to which you're able to realize God's oneness with you and all things is also in God's hands. And if God wills for you to see more, you will see more.

So it's inviting us to kind of trust or to be at peace and to rest with our present level of realization, knowing in God's providential ways there'll be further revelations yet to come in God's good time. She's also telling us that in seeing more, that is realizing more of God's oneness with us, God will be the light in which we will see more of God. That it's only the light of God that allows us to see God, that we're interiorly illumined by the light of God, which is the light in which we see God or realize or taste or experience something of God's presence. I think here, too, it's helpful to realize that we were talking earlier with Mirabai about how in her little cell there, there was two windows. One looked out where she could see the altar or see the Eucharist, the celebration of the mass and the other one was on the street where people would come to her for spiritual guidance.

So she's sitting here like these mystic teachers, and because she was writing this out. So now just like the people who came to the window to talk with her directly, now years later, she's writing this out so we can talk with her and receive her teachings, these kind of deep, simple truths of our awakening heart about the ways of God in our life. And then when she says, "*If God wishes to show you more, He will be your light. You need none but Him.*" And so she's saying yes, it's understandable having tasted something of God's oneness with you you would

like to see more and also know is the desire to see more is also from God. But to also know that you already have more than you need, because you have God.

That you have God, that God is completely being poured out in a self donating act and completely giving herself away, hold and complete in. And as the gift of the miracle of your life, each breath standing up and sitting down. If we think of God as generosity, that you are the generosity of God, your life is the generosity of God, you already have infinitely more than you need, because you have God. We were reflecting on this back with Thomas Merton. His insight in this is that the very factors seeking God bears witness that you've already found God or truer still, God has already found you and God has incarnate in and as your very desire for God. God's the infinity of that desire, like the God-given desire for the desire for God, the divinity of all things intimately realized.

She then continues to say, *"For I saw Him and I sought Him. For we are now so blind and so foolish that we can never see God until the time when He in his goodness shows Himself to us. And when by grace we see something of Him, then we are moved by the same grace to seek with great desire to see Him for our greater joy."* Reflect on this. What Julian is reminding us here as we sit with her to guide us, is that this whole quest toward mystical union or this desire for ever deeper realizations of God's infinite oneness with us, it isn't as if we're searching for some far off union that we may or may not attain, we will attain it when we pass through the veil of death, but that we would be graceful still on this earth with a deep realization of this oneness. It isn't as if we're maybe maybe maybe maybe like this. I mean, in some sense that's true in a way, but really it's the opposite, she's saying.

We're trying to calibrate our heart to an ever finer scale where we can begin to pick up in something as subtle or delicate as a whisper, where delicate is our own breath, where delicate is the intimacy of our desire, the fullness of God being poured out to us in this intimate immediacy of such simple things. See that nothing's lacking anywhere. We're trying to, with her help, in our daily quiet time with God and throughout our day, to calibrate our heart toward these sensitivities or these sensibilities. The closer than St. Augustine, closer to us than we are to ourselves. And so little by little by little as we sit with the depth and beauty of her words, they resonate with us because we sense they're true. And we sit with God's grace, they soak into us so they become part of the way we learn to see things and understand things, the divinity of everything so unexplainably close and one with us always.

It's just like this classical image. It's like a fish swimming through the ocean, swimming, swimming, swimming, looking for the ocean. So in God we live and move and have our being. We're living our life in the vast interiority of God. We're manifestations of God seeking God and the consistency and beauty of our language if we walk with her, little by little, it starts to arc over into us and we begin to have these more refined sensitivities to this ever present near and Israel oneness of God in our life, which alone is ultimately real. There's a poem, I might have mentioned a previous series, I don't remember, when I was first starting giving contemplative retreats, someone put a poem on my desk where I was teaching from with the class there by Barbara Loots, it might have been Barbara Loots who put the poem there. I don't know. But the little segment of the poem and when she refers to her, she's referring to her soul.

She says, *"It takes almost nothing to move her. A soft agitation in the rain, an ant going by*

knowing where it is going.” So this is the thing really that we rush through our day kind of noticing everything in passing on our way to something else. But we have to pause and be aware of these moments where something catches our eye and in the pausing, if we sustain that pause, which is contemplation, the sustained attentiveness infused with love, we begin to drop down into this delicacy where we’re capable with a kind of a childlike amazement and something as simple as an ant going by to see something of the nearness of God in all things. So she says, *“For I saw him and I sought Him. For we are now so blind and so foolish that we can never seek God until the time when He and His goodness shows Himself to us. And when by grace we see something of Him, then we are moved by the same grief to seek Him with great desire, to see Him for our greater joy.”*

The only reason you’re on this path at all is that God awakened you to God in the midst of your life. Because without God awakening us to God, we’re not able to recognize the presence of God. And when we are awakened and we are awakened, which is as evidenced by the fact that we’re nurtured by the depth and beauty of these mystics who offer us these teachings see, then we’re moved by grace and with great desire to see Him, having been awakened, then we’re moved by God to desire a deeper awakening and deeper union, to seek Him for our greater joy. And this is the nature of the path. It’s all, like modalities, are the benevolence of God or the generosity of God in this devotional sincerity, intimately lived.

And then she says, *“For I saw Him and I sought Him and I had Him and I lacked Him.”* And this is, and should be our ordinary understanding and this light, as I see it, I’d like to reflect on this text. Again, I think she’s putting words to the interiority of the path of our own awakening heart. So we sit by her refined clarity that helps us to become clearer about what’s happening to us and this path that we’re on. *“So first I saw Him.”* There was a moment... Sometimes it happened, maybe when we were a small child, we can look back to the moment where we were first quickened by a sense of the presence of God or the nearness of God or the oneness of God or God’s love for us in our life. I saw Him, I was awakened. I was graced. I was quickened from within by this touch.

And that touch of oneness, it dissipated as mysteriously as it came, but it left within my heart a desire to abide in the depth so fleetingly glimpsed. That is, I saw Him, but I intuit it isn’t as if in the moment of the touch, like the quickening, it wasn’t as if somehow something more was given, but rather I fleetingly experienced the true nature of every moment that God’s oneness with me is perpetual and absolute. And I was granted a moment of realizing it and realizing it and knowing it’s also God’s one with me in this very moment now. I sought Him. That is, I sought to abide in the depth so fleetingly glimpsed. How could I learn not to have it be so elusive? See how could I learn not to have us be so overtaken by the passing things that come to the unfoldings of our day?

How could I be stable, like the eternality of the fleetness myself and of all things? Where the boundless quality of the simplest of things, what is the path to consummate this desire, which is the path that we’re on, which is the path of this longing? This longing we don’t understand, for a union we don’t understand, but we

know it's real because we experienced it. And in the midst of the seeking, as we go along this path throughout our days, it unfolds as it unfolds, I can look back and see I had Him. Like all of a sudden, there it is again. There it is again, kind of right in the midst of something that comes welling up and there's renewed oneness in our heart of God's oneness with us, sustaining us through and through and through and through as God's beloved.

And it slips away again, see it slips away again. And I lacked Him. But as we look at this very closely to me, it's like this, but what is the lack? The lack of the experience of God is also the gift of God for the lack of the experience of God deepens the longings for God, and it's the longings for God that echoes God's infinite longings for us. That somehow God is the infinity of our unconsummated longings that are so unexplainably consummated now and again, here and there throughout our life, knowing their premonitions were foreshadowings. Although on this earth is so subtle and delicate. When we pass through the veil of death, it'll be in glory, living God's life, as fully as God lives, God's life in our nothingness without God. And God doesn't wait until we die in order to grant this to us, this taste or this longing, but we can stabilize in it only by dying of love.

That is only by dying to everything that hinders and gets in the way of realizing God's oneness with us, that is that life itself. So far then in this chapter, we might call this a path talk. That is, she said, "*This is the way it should be.*" She says, "*As I see is our ordinary undertaking in this life, as I see it like the holiness of the ordinary.*" This is the way seekers talk. And if you were coming to see me for spiritual direction when I was going to Thomas Merton for direction, and I'd be reading between the lines in your words, I would be looking for this. You'd be expressing this very pattern, which is the grace of the path. And now all of a sudden then, she shares with us then a contemplation, a moment of contemplation, a mystical seeing.

So we look back to these mystics we've been studying, remember in Guigo? On a ladder to heaven the Lectio, the meditatio, the prayer, and it blossoms into this contemplation. Remember Teresa of Avila on the interior mansions or dwelling places of the soul? Where the first three mansions are this ongoing search for psychological spiritual maturity to be stabilized in following Christ is called a follow me in all things and to live our faith, walk with the measure which is love. And then she says in the fourth mansion, you're sitting there in prayer, you begin to realize your hearts begin larger divine proportions. See the dawning of the mystical. Remember St. John of the Cross, we find a way to God in a passage through a dark night. And remember the cloud of unknowing, there are some presently living the active life, that is the life of effort, a grace response to God, or being prepared by God to grasp the message of this book. The stirring of the spirit within, like a blind stirring of love in your inmost being, the quickening.

So here she's sharing us then how right out of the flow of our sincerity, she shares with us then a poetic metaphor of the mystical. Once my understanding and here, we mean her interior understanding, almost like an intellectual vision, like a God-given inner certitude of an ultimate union that's already here hidden within us, "*Once my understanding was let down into the bottom of the sea, and there I saw green hills*

and valleys with the appearance of moss, strewn with seaweed and gravel. Then I understood in this way that if a man or a woman were there under the wide waters, if he could see God, as God is continually with man, he would be safe and soul and body and come to no harm. And furthermore, he would have more consolation and strength than all this world can tell for it is God's will that we believe that we see Him continually. Though it seems to us that the site is only partial, and through this belief, He makes us always to gain more grace for God wishes to be seen, and He wishes to be sought and He wishes to be expected and He wishes to be trusted."

I'd like to reflect on this. I want to share with you, I mean, first of water, that on the surface of the water, the wind blows across the water and the waves rise and fall and we live our daily life on the surface of the water, the fluctuating patterns of conditioned states of consciousness and internalized constantly shifting patterns of the conditions of whatever the day might bring. In beginning, as we get into living the interior life, we dive down beneath the surface, and beneath the surface where we come to calmer places in the interiority of ourself where God is with us in the midst of life with the service... Life of the service still goes on. I mean, what happens, happens. It's just that we learn to be grounded in a depth of presence of sustaining us and is one with us in what's happening.

Then she's saying it is possible, then if you could drop down to the very bottom of the sea, which was really an image of paradise, an image of it's all... That we could drop down to the bottom, we would see that we're already infinitely safe. We are already the beloved. We already beyond as the beloved being compromised or threatened by anything other than God's infinite love for us or bonded unconditionally in this love. And the mystical realization is the realization of that. It drops down into that. So I'd like to share an example of this. I might have shared it in a previous reflection, I don't know, but it helps me to see it helps me to realize it. So here's the poetic image of this mystical realization.

Imagine a stone falling in water and imagine the water which the stone is falling is infinitely deep, it's a bottomless abyss. So for all eternity, the stone is falling, falling, falling, falling, falling, falling, falling, falling. And imagine that the stone is falling into this bottomless abyss of water alongside an underwater cliff and there are protrusions sticking out from this cliff. And from time to time, the stone lands on one of those protrusions and it momentarily pauses in its dissent, but then in the undulations of the water and the movements of the water, it rolls off and continues again, falling, falling, falling, until again, momentarily lands rolls off momentarily, and so it goes forever.

And imagine then that you are that stone that we all are that stone, that we're all falling forever into the bottomless abyss of God, falling, falling, falling, falling. And imagine that from time to time, we land on a protrusion of life's circumstance and we settle somewhere like, "Oh, I think this will be good. I'll go to college and major in this where I'll get married, where I'll have a child, we'll move to Idaho," or whatever. And at the time it seems like it's enough. I think I got my bearings, but in the mystery of love found and love lost and the mystery of birth and death and the mystery of sorrow and fear and unexpected joy, we go rolling off and continue falling, falling, falling, falling. And then there comes a moment as you grow in your awareness of this, this path talk, you're aware that each little pause is a pause, each little rolling off is another phase in the bottomless abyss of God.

And then in one of these pauses, and let's say the pause is the circumstance you're now in as

you're listening to me say these words to you, or my pause is I'm sitting here in my home, my pause is right now I'm sharing these reflections with you and we're kind of mysteriously together kind of sharing this moment of where we momentarily are, having our bearings and our circumstances. And then all of a sudden, it dawns on us that the bottomless abyss of God in which we're making our dissent is welling up and giving itself away, whole and complete, in and as the grace and the miracle, the intimate immediacy of the concrete details of this very moment in which I'm saying these words to you and this very moment in which you're hearing them. And when this dawns on us, if we're the generosity... If God is infinitely generous, that we are the generosity of God being poured out and given in the immediacy of the miracle of this moment, in the moment we realize that then we're a momentary mystic.

See it's the mystery of incarnate infinity intimately realized. Having tasted, even ever so slightly, this touch, this welling up, this generosity giving itself to us as this breath. And seeing how these little moments, lying awake at night in the dark, or giving ourselves over to the smell of a flower, or looking into the upturn face of a child, or visiting... sitting at the deathbed of a dying loved one. It touches, touches, touches, touches, touches, touches, touches. And so we're on a path to be ever more habitually stabilized in the constancy of this divinity and sharing with others.

And I'd end with this too. I would say we also realize that the spaces in between the experiential tasting, that is the moment we lose our balance in the midst of the day, because we're just a human being, God's the infinity of that. That God's oneness with us is in no way dependent on our awareness of God's oneness with us, like Thomas Merton says in the spiritual life to understand is to realize that you're infinitely understood. There's often, as we lose our way, God never loses us and is with us always, even in the midst of our most confusing hour. And so we're seeking here by these teachings to be stabilized in that piece, to breathe it in deep and walk with it, and the pace and the humility of how God wills for us to walk with it and in our life as it is.

So with that, then let's bring this to meditation. Ask God to help us here, to let this kind of soak in, to help let Julian guide and help us find our own unique experience and response to God in our life, these interior dimensions of the divinity of ourselves. So at this then, I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer and bow. Repeat after me, "Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am." My stomach's rumbling. I'm very hungry. And just cause the infinity of my rumbling stomach and the infinity of the extent to which we're able to hear it. So I just wanted to share that. "Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be."

Let's 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 to trespass against us and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from me. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us. Julian of Norwich, pray for us. Blessings. Until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer

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