

Turning to the Mystics



Julian of Norwich

Session 2
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 this session, I want to pick up where we left off in the previous session, in Chapter 10 of the long text of her book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*.

By noting a distinction she makes towards the end of the chapter, she's reflecting, as in each chapter, on the visions that she had near death of the crucified Christ, and finding, in the meaning of the crucifixion, the depth of God's love for us.

And, she says that we can speak of two activities, which are going to be seen in this vision. One is "seeking," and the other is "contemplating."

Seeking is common to all, and every soul can have through grace and not to have discretion in the teachings of the Holy Church. And then in the midst of this seeking, there can be granted a contemplation, which is the mystical experience.

And so, earlier in the chapter, in the previous session, we were talking is that she speaks of seeking.

As we might say, the way God customarily works in our life, the way we customarily are graced with the experience of God, the understanding of God and the ways we respond to God in our life. And, saying that, "I saw Him," and, "I sought Him," and, "I had Him," and, "I lacked Him."

And, this is and should be our ordinary understanding in this life, as I see it. And, so we were saying last time that the "I saw Him" refers... We can look back to our first awakening of this spiritual life. The very first time we were quickened with a sense where God's presence became personally meaningful to us. And, then as that initial awakening dissipated, it left within us a longing to abide in the awareness of God's oneness with us, which is the impetus of the path. And, so I sought Him, having tasted God's oneness with myself.

It moved me to seek to abide in the habitual experience of God's oneness with me and all things, God's oneness with all of us. And, in seeking Him, I had Him. That is, in the midst of the seeking we're graced again with the touch of God. We're quickened within with a renewed sense of the God's oneness with us that is always there.

And, then I lacked Him. It dissipates again. And, the lack only to set in motion a renewed longing, knowing that our longing for God is an incarnate echo of God's longing for us. And, so such is this path that we live, and we follow. And, so when we read these mystics, when we read Julian or with us as we listen to her, to her teachings, we're trying to align our heart with hers.

So, our intention, in reading her or listening to her, is in concert with her intention of writing what she says to us. And, her intention is to help us along this path, this path of

discipleship, this path of seeking God's presence in our life.

And, I would say, too, it seems to me that we could say this devotional life, this daily quiet time, this re-grounding of ourself in God's presence, which then spills over into every aspect of our life, is an habitual underlying gratitude or respond to or understanding situations Christ would, and with love and so forth.

But, this happens in the good times and in the blessings of life. So, if we're blessed with a happy marriage in the midst of one, it's incarnate in the gift of our marriage. If we have children, it's incarnate in the gift of our children. Whether our love relationship with our parents or our grandparents, with our friends, with the gift of our daily work, our service to the community, the midst of nature, the goodness of life in this world.

But Julian notes, this path of God, in which we seek God in the good times, in our devotional sincerity, she says that the contemplation takes place in the mystical, in the sense in which... This is where she uses this image of dropping down into the bottom of the ocean, that up on the surface, where the winds blow about, and caught up in this and that and the circumstances of the day, but when we're having our daily rendezvous with God, we're in a state of quiet attentiveness. We can feel ourselves undergoing a kind of a descent.

And, in the descent, we feel ourselves dropping down into a deeper awareness of, and oneness with, deeper dimensions of God's oneness with us in this quiet descent. And, this quiet descent, can reach a point of the mystical or contemplation, where we drop down into the bottomless abyss of God's oceanic love for us. God.

So, here's this mystical sense of this is that it isn't just that God is in us. It's also true that we're in God. And so, from all of eternity, God, the Father, in this Trinitarian language of the Christian tradition, God, the Father is eternally expressing and contemplating Himself in the Word, contemplating Himself in the Word. And, contemplating, in the Word, the mystery of you, of who you are and are called to be, in sharing in God's own life is perfectly as God shares in God's life.

So, when God breathes you onto the earthly plane for a very short time, really, basically to learn how to love. And, then in God's good time, God inhales, and we return home to this abyss of love. And, so there is this manifested self. Through faith, we're passing through our days here on this earth. But, all the while, we don't cease to be in God in a hidden self, hidden with Christ and God forever.

So, what happens in the ocean, in mystical state, is we drop down into who we are in the intra divine life of God, hidden with Christ and God forever in this state of mystical union. Intimately realize it's always there, not in the full glory that awaits us when we pass through the veil of death. But, in some obscure way, this infinite intimacy, this, a communal presence is intimately realized, see, this contemplative state.

In this contemplative state then, when we experience it in our prayer, in our devotion, however it comes to us, sometimes this quickening is very intense. But, sometimes it's extremely subtle in the midst of nature, the arms of the beloved, in the presence of the child, the pause between two lines of a poem, a quiet hour, a day's end. Our heart is grazed with this oneness of a oneness with God. It's beginningless and endless and boundaryless in all

directions, intimately realized, resting in God. And then as it dissipates, it hallows our day.

We go through our day kind of seeing everything is more translucent to this love that is always there, and the events of the day, our relationships, and so on. But, Julian is saying, “this also takes place in the world, not just in the good times of blessings, but it also takes place in the world, in the midst of suffering.”

As a matter of fact, as we know from this first session we had with Mirabai and in the previous session, too, is that her mystical awakening, the dropping down into the ocean happened in the midst of a traumatized state. She was dying. She was dying. And, at the edge of death, there’s a priest holds up the crucifix. That’s what she dropped down into the dips of the ocean, into this oceanic love and what she was able to see, the mystery of the cross is the mystery of God’s love for us, revealed in the mystery of Christ crucified.

And, likewise, this can happen to us. I know myself, my own awakening occurred when I was very young, three years old, I think four, took place in ongoing severe trauma, violent traumatizing, alcoholic father. And, so sometimes this happens. It can happen on a battlefield. It can happen in immense loss or pain. We can be delivered from the tyranny of suffering in the midst of suffering like a strange liberation or an awakening. So, it comes as it comes, happens as it happens.

And, she was keenly aware of the suffering of the world during her lifetime. It was the Bubonic Plague, truly painful death that just swept through and killed many, many people. She saw that. During this time, Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered. During this time when the church were three popes and each Pope excommunicated the other two popes.

And during this time, there was a hundred years war with France. So she was keenly aware of the suffering and the crisis of the world. Also, the people who came to the window to talk with her for spiritual direction, I’m sure they unburdened on her with their struggles and their fears and so on. And so I think this is where Julian can be especially helpful to us. Because, we’re so aware of the traumatizing age that we live in, a time of political strife and contention, war, brutalities of war, the violence of a prejudice, threats to the environment. We’re sensitized to these things just to turn on the television.

And, so how do we then learn to be a healing presence in the midst of an all too often traumatized and traumatizing world? See, how can Julian’s insight into the mystery of the Cross as God’s loving oneness with us help us to stay grounded and present in the midst of the suffering, that not be so easily thrown or overwhelmed by it in our ongoing sensitivity and response to it?

It is at this point, then, that she turns to the story of Veronica’s veil. And, she’s speaking about her vision that she had, the second revelation of the face of Christ, and she notes how in that ecstatic state, like a waking dream, she saw His face, His figures. He was being where He was beaten, His blood from the crown of thorns,

spittle, where they spied on his face. There was the dirt she saw his face.

And then she said in this ecstatic state seemed as if his face was changing colors. This reminds her, she says, *“it made me think of the Holy Vernicle in Rome, the Holy Veil, Veronica’s veil, which He imprinted with His own blessed face when He was in His cruel passion, voluntarily going to His death. And, it was often changing color. The brownness and the blackness, His face sorrowful and wasted.”*

And, she then later on in the chapter refers to it again. And, as it concerns the veil in Rome, Veronica’s veil, it changes its color and appearances, there’s rumors at this, the Relic of that veil, Veronica’s veil, changed color, just like the face of Christ, changed colors in her ecstatic state.

And, she sees a certain significance in this, *“This taught me to understand that the soul’s constant searching pleases God greatly.”* So, I’d like to reflect on this. Because, it’s not easily...

It’s not readily apparent how this applies to us and what this is about. So, first the story of Veronica is veil in Catholic churches, in the Roman Catholic churches, throughout the world, there are the Stations of the Cross, of 14 stations, seven on each side of the two sides of the church. And each station is a moment of Christ’s death, of Christ. So the First Station is Jesus is Condemned by Pilot, then Jesus is Scourged, Jesus is Crowned with Thorns, Jesus Falls, and so on, all the way through to Jesus’ Death. And, the Pope John Paul II has suggested the churches add a 15th station and put the Resurrection there, the Resurrection of Jesus to round out the circle, of our life in Christ.

And so, the story of Veronica, all these scenes are in the gospel, except for one, which is one of the stations. I think it’s the sixth station, which is Veronica’s veil. It’s the very early tradition kind of in the Catholic imagination and found its way into the story of Jesus’ death. And, the story is this, the story is that Jesus is carrying his cross and the soldiers are beating Him. And, the crowds are lining the narrow streets, cheering, and yelling and so forth. Veronica’s in the crowd. And, as she sees Jesus going by, she steps out of the crowd and hands Jesus the only thing she can offer, is her veil.

This was a risky thing because it was very risky to even acknowledge that you are related to Jesus’ work at all, for fear that they might do to you, what they were doing to Him. This is why Peter denied Christ three times. But, the thing is in this story, her love was greater than her fear. And, I’d like to think of this, like a waking dream, or a scene in a play, or a parable that sheds light on her own life, reflect on this story in this way, that Julian invites us to reflect on as she did.

So, Veronica steps out and offers the only thing she has, which is her veil. Jesus takes the veil, and He presses His face into her veil. And, so the softness of her veil is the only solace Jesus could find in a world turned harsh. Also, in this moment, when Jesus presses His face into her veil, the world around Him disappeared. It’s just like with you, if you close your eyes, and lower your head and place your face and the open palms of your hands. With your eyes closed and your face pressed in the palms

of your hand, the room around you disappears.

So, in this moment, then, Jesus, with this face in her veil like this, and we might say, really the fabric of the veil is the fabric of our lives. That in this moment, and here's the poetry of this, *"that in this moment was Jesus is like this with this face in the veil, Jesus, without going anywhere, dropped down into the bottomless abyss of God's infinite love for Him and oneness with Him in God. Because, He was in all of this, the Word made flesh and just drops down without going anywhere into the abyss of God. And, Veronica in this moment, without going anywhere drops down into the was abyss of God."*

And the soldiers, beating Jesus, whipping Him, they, without going anywhere, dropped down to the bottom was abyss of God. And jeering crowd, everyone there dropped down into the bottomless abyss of God. And you and I right now, as I speak, we drop down to the bottomless abyss of God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

So, that our manifested self, in the midst of the time and the situation, which you're listening to this, the situation and time I'm saying this, we're in the circumstances. But, in the deep down depths, there's a place deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper in this oneness with God's sustaining oneness with us.

The life that is at once God's in our own indiviness in God. It is this life in God, then welling up and giving itself to us, and manifesting itself in our life that is our faith. It's our insight. It's our consolations. It's our reassurances. It's our inspirations and motivations and insights. And, when we pause for our daily, rendezvous with God in prayer, this manifested presence of God, as the silence deepens, we drop down into this mysterious divinity of this silent communion with God. This is kind of the poetry of this contemplation, this communion with God.

So, here's how it seems to me how I would see this, of understanding Jesus and our suffering, and God's love for in Christ. Julian speaks of God's familiarity with us that God so loves us, God has moved in Christ to be one with us. Not just in the good times, but to one with us and share with us and to become our suffering. And, so the story would go this way: then in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night that He was going to be arrested, Jesus knew what was about to happen to Him, because He saw crucifixions. He saw how violent and brutal they were.

And, He was in the bottomless abyss of God. But, in his kenosis, He did not consider his equality with God, a condition to be clung to. But, emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant. He gave up His ability to know of Himself subsisting in the depths of God. And like us, he was terrified. See, let this cup, if possible, let this cup pass from me.

So, it's just like us in our moments of impending trauma. I hope you've never had to go through that. A life threatening of being overwhelmed, where you're about to be raped, or beaten, or killed, or betrayed, or a loved one, going through some horrendous circumstances. That's impending it's about to happen and you can't stop it all the while, we're subsisting in the depths of God. But, we're so overwhelmed or by the pain, we can't experience it. As a matter of fact, when we're traumatized, we're so overwhelmed we can't even experience ourself.

We lose this felt sense of God's oneness with us. And there's this kind of white hot heat of the impending trauma we're powerless to stop. This was sustained by God in the midst of the trauma. Likewise, when the trauma was actually occurring at its worst, say, when He was being nailed to the cross all the while He was in the bottomless abyss, abiding in God's love. But, out of love for us, He gave up... He emptied Himself his ability to know that, and there was only the anguish of the nightmare, beyond words. Just like with us, if we have to endure a life threatening, overwhelming moment, we don't have a sense of God.

We don't have a sense of ourselves... Just it's just suffering beyond words or a loved one, going through that and is suffering beyond words. Then, as Jesus is hanging on the cross, so overwhelmed with the agony and the pain betrayal, He loses His faith.

"My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?"

I was just discussing this with two friends of mine. I went through doctoral work with that. We were talking about Julian together. And this one person, one of the three of us, who's also a minister, a minister. He says, no, he doesn't think Jesus lost the ability to, He didn't lose His faith, but He lost His ability to feel the presence of God that He believed in. And I'd like to say that He lost His faith for us. Just like we lose ours. God never loses faith in us. But however, see, *"my God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me."* Just like with us, we're abiding in God all the while, but in the terrible, nightmarish hour, see, we lose our faith. And God sustains us, heartbeat by heartbeat, breath by breath, never letting go of us as we lose our sense of God's presence in our life.

And then in a moment, the thief being crucified with Him: *"Remember me when you come into your kingdom."* *"This day, you'll be with me in paradise."*

All of a sudden there's a kind of quiet sovereignty of love. We're so moved by this with a kind of an unquestioning assurance. You'll be with me. And, I think sometimes what happens, we can be just lost in suffering. But, sometimes our love for another person, our love for another person empowers us to have... Something opens up within us and something of this love. We can no longer feel for our own sake. We can assure and offer an assurance to the person that we can't offer to ourself. I think that happens.

And, then when He dies, see, *"Into your hands, I commend my spirit."* He hands Himself over to the God that he could no longer find. And, so what we have here, then, it seems to me, is something worth meditating on, and worth reflecting on for ourselves.

I mean, surely, in our commitment to follow God, we should be grateful for the blessings of the good times. Surely, knowing the God-given godly nature of the gift of life, we should be a non-violent, nurturing protective person. And, surely, wherever there is suffering, we should be moved by the grace of God to reach out, to touch the suffering with love.

Surely, we should. Surely, we should. And, we should do our best not to lose our groundedness in God, or not to lose our groundedness in God's oneness with us. But to know that life is such because we're just a human being, we unravel and we lose our way. And know, as we lose our way, we know that in the cross of Christ is the revelation that God loses... God, Jesus, lost His way for our sake and is one with us in losing our way and is not losing us at all.

See, this is why I say, God is a presence that protects us from nothing even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things. We seek to be a healing presence in the midst of the world, in a peace that's not dependent on the outcome of the effort.

Because, it's the peace of God on which everything depends, that sustains us unexplainably. Remember the prayer by Thomas Merton. When we were exploring Thomas Merton, "*My Lord, God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.*" And he says that, "*and even though I walk to the valley of death, I will not fear for your always with me. And you will not leave me to face my perils alone.*" There's this confidence, invincible confidence of God's confidence in us. And, even as our confidence waivers.

And there's a certain holy kind of tenderness about this, a certain mercy about this, that I think we sit with it. Notice this is not a method. This is not a way to pray, or this is not whatever this is. This is something Julian is so, such an amazing woman. She's so... Where she takes us to this place of this oneness of birth, that we tend to think the life of Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, there's three phases. But, what if they're collapsed as the true nature of the present moment?

What if birth and death and sorrow and joy are all intermingled in this alchemy of a graced life and sometimes beautiful, but sometimes brutal and scary world?

So, with that, then let's sit with this.

You can see for me, Julian so strikes me, because she touches these deep places inside of us. It's so evocative because it touches your history. It touches my history on where are we with this? I want to share something else, too, with Julian. I want to mention this in the first talk. I can't remember.

In the previous my mystics that we were doing, Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Guigo, *The Letter to Heaven* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I've been very immersed in these mystics for years. Since, I was in the monastery, really. Julian is new to me. I've known ever since the monastery. But, she's new to me. I'm a slow learner. So, I'm kind of just sitting with, trying to take in what comes to me, as a beginner, for the guidance that she offers.

So, I guess I thank you for your patience with me. As I struggle for these deep and beautiful and mysterious mysteries of life and death revealed to us in Christ and our faith life. So, with this, then let's bring this to meditation.

God...

I'll want you to sit straight. Fold your hands in prayer and bow. Repeating after me.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

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 of Contemplatives.

Pray for us.

The author, the God 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.

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We'll see you again soon.