

Turning to the Mystics



Julian of Norwich

Session 3
with James Finley

Jim Finley: 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'm inviting you to join me in exploring chapter five of the long text in which she guides us or helps us to cultivate an experiential understanding of God's presence in our lives. I think the significance of this, for us is it was so clear to me that when I was living in the monastery. That every detail of daily life in the monastery, the silence, the chanting of the Psalms, the simple vegetarian diet, the long period set aside for prayer were all intended to foster a spiritual worldview or an underlying experiential understanding of God's oneness with us in each detail of each passing moment of our life.

But for us living out here in a fast moving secular world, we have to cultivate this. We have to cultivate a contemplative culture in our heart, an underlying habitual sense of God's presence in the intimate details of daily living and to experience this sense of inner peace or the inner clarity that this brings into our lives. And so what Julian does here is, throughout the whole book really, here in chapter five, is she bears witness to how in her years of solitude and prayer in the anchorhold there, at the little cell there, little church in Norwich. She kept reflecting on the mystical awakening that was granted to her at the edge of death when she had the showings of the mystery of Christ crucified revealing God's loving familiarity with us.

And she kept reflecting on it over the years, she would often speak what she calls spiritual sight or a spiritual understanding that is a certain kind of inner clarity of the pervasive oneness of God's presence with us in our breath and our heart beat, which she calls a familiar love, habitually familiar love. And so it is in the sense then that she begins this chapter. At the same time, as I saw this sight of the head bleeding, that is the head of Christ in this mystical vision that she had of the crucifixion, our good Lord showed me a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing who wraps and unfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, and surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight, I saw that he is everything which is good as I understand.

To reflect on this, I want to share with you a moment in my life where I have to see this kind of concretely. And as I share this moment with you, it might help you to pause and think also of moments in your life where you can get the sense of what she's inviting us to experience in the intimacy of very simple moments as we go through our day. The incident that comes to my mind here so recently, just a few days ago, I got up early to write the notes for this session with you actually, chapter five. And I live right here at the ocean and I got my cup of coffee and I sat out on the porch. And during the night, a very heavy fog had rolled in. And the fog was so thick that you couldn't even see the sand on the beach even though it was just less than a minute away, right there, the place. And clearly then I couldn't see the ocean, I could hear it. I could hear the waves crashing on the beach.

And I was delighting in the chill of that damp chill feeling so refreshing here along the ocean especially during the summer months where it can be so hot here in California. So I had a shawl wrapped around my shoulders to keep the chill off. And I would say that Julian is inviting me to realize that since God is everything that is good, that God is somehow concretely present in the shawl that somehow concretizes God enveloping me in God's love for me in that moment as I sat there on the porch. We might also say in this sense that the

fabric of the shawl is like the fabric of Veronica's veil. And that God is somehow that close or that near and comforting us. Not somewhere far off, but surprisingly near and such a simple thing as being clothed in God's love, incarnate in the clothes that clothe us and cover us.

Now, I think in our daily rendezvous with God are moments of meditative stillness. We're graced with experiences of this, like the felt sense of this. But here she's suggesting that we ask God for the grace to internalize that felt sense throughout the day. So in the midst of the details of the day that we're not experiencing it, but there's like an inner awareness or conviction that there's something godly or God's presence, something as simple as watering the house plants or opening a window or standing up and sitting down that we're being sustained by God. And God is present, in the presence of the concreteness of what it is to wake up in the morning, what it is to touch our feet to the floor, and what it is at night to lie there in the dark and slip off to sleep.

I think too, with this, as with everything that Julian teaches, really we need to be very patient with ourselves in the delicacy of cultivating this underlying sensitivity. And our patience with ourselves is it echos God's infinite patience with us as we slowly learn to habitually stabilize in the love that is the reality of every moment of our life. She then continues on in the next paragraph. And in this, he showed me that is in this sensitivity to God clothing us in his love and the clothing that we wear. And in this, he showed me something small, no bigger than the hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought what can this be? I was amazed that it could last for I thought that because of its littleness, it would suddenly have fallen into nothing.

And I was answered in my understanding, it lasts and always will because God loves it and that everything has been to the love of God. I like to reflect on this, this very kind of poetic language helping us to find words to talk about something so subtle as this is so hard to talk about. Imagine, I would say then in the palm of our hand, she says as small as a hazelnut. But I would say then it could be a grain of sand, it could be a leaf or a twig. It could be the awareness of the brevity and littleness of my life on this earth, the littleness of this moment, which I'm saying these words to you. The littleness of ... you might be aware of the littleness of your life and your passage through time. And the littleness of this moment in which you're listening to me. Because what we're talking about is in our experience of ourself and ego consciousness and our passage through time, everything is perpetually slipping away.

And everything that so mysteriously appears on the earthly plane of the new day, the new moment, the new turn of events, goes on for a time only to disappear and vanish away as strangely as it appeared. So everything is seen to be ephemeral because everything is seen in the fleetiness of its fragility. But then she says looking at it to the eyes of faith ... And I was answered in my understandings, my interior understanding illumined by faith, that it, meaning this moment I'm saying this is moment in which you're listening, the palms of your hands, the grain of sand, whatever. That it lasts and always will because God loves it. And this everything has been through the love of God. In this little thing, I saw three properties which we're then invited to see in each little thing that we see or hold in our hand or are aware of.

The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third is that God preserves

it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the creator and the protector, and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness until that is I'm so attached to him, there's going to be no created thing between my God and me. I'd like to reflect on this. That if I'm holding a grain of sand in my hand or a twig, whatever thing it is, my life, this moment and I see that unto itself, I see its fragility, that very soon now, you and I will no longer be here. See, because our death is on the way. Life on this earth is a temporary arrangement. But really, if I really look at it, I'm able to see with the eyes of faith that this thing that I see regardless of what I see is that God created it.

God created me and God is creating me, and God is creating this moment. God is creating this twig, this leaf, this whatever. And furthermore, there's a certain depth or substance to it and that God loves it. The truth of it is that it is what it is in God's love. That God is creating it and God is loving it. And God is preserving it and that God will never cease to love. The littleness of all things that God so mysteriously loves. This means then it seems to me that these qualities of things seen in this way reveals the qualities of God. That God is the creator of all that God is perpetually creating. That God is the lover of all, God that perpetually loves into existence. And God is the preserver and that God eternally preserves and will eternally love all that God loves. That it lasts and always will last because God loves it and will never cease to love it. Thus, everything has been perpetually in the love of God. What is this saying, this?

It's saying that, yes, it's true that at the level of ego consciousness, my ego self that is itself passing away, I turn at this and that is everything around me is passing away. I all see in the deep down depths of God loving me and loving this thing and this thing and this thing in this moment. That God will never cease to love this moment. God will never cease to love who I am in this moment, will never cease to love you in this moment and therefore everything is forever, everything is eternal. It only seems to go away, but it only goes away from our finite eyes that are themselves passing away. But in the deep down depths of love, everything is forever, everything is eternal. Although we die, we do not die.

And therefore I can only have peace then by dropping down into this infinite love of God that is perpetually creating, perpetually loving. It will perpetually create this and each passing moment in my life forever. And here, we get back to this idea again of her helping us to see like all these mistakes. That we're suffering from depth deprivation. That we're skimming over the depths of the gift of our own life. All the more regretful because God's oneness with us is hidden in the depths over which we're skimming. Therefore, when we meditate in our prayerful time with God, we can experience ... We were saying in the previous, that up on the surface of the water. We were saying in the previous session about the dropping down into the bottom of the ocean where the winds of circumstance blow this way and that where they're always shifting, shifting, see.

But when we get quiet in meditative prayer, as a kind of quiet attentiveness infused with love, we can feel ourselves dropping down into a more interior, deeper awareness of and oneness with ever deeper layers and dimensions of God's love welling up and

sustaining us in the eternality of each passing moment of our life like this. This is like a poetic realization like it dawns on us. And with God's grace, we can ask for the grace to be evermore habitually reside in us as an inner certainty that we cannot and do not need to explain, but in our own awakened heart, we know that it's true. She then continues, we need to have knowledge of this so that we may delight and despising as nothing everything created. So it's to love and have uncreated God, for this is the reason why our hearts and souls are not in perfect ease because here we seek rest in this thing which is so little in which there is no rest. And we do not know our God who is almighty, all wise and all good for he is true rest.

God wishes to be known and it pleases him that we should rest in him. For everything which is beneath him is not sufficient for us and this is the reason why no soul is at rest until it despises nothing, all things which are created. When it by its will has become nothing for love, to have him who is everything then it is able to receive spiritual rest. I'd like to reflect on this. When she says to despise everything created, it doesn't at all mean like it might first sound. She wouldn't ask us to despise the beginning of the new day, to despise this moment, to despise the water that we're drinking, to despise anything created. She wants us to despise that is to realize the hindrance of going about imagining we're nothing but the self things happen to. That is the claustrophobic world that can't see past what our physical eyes can see, or can't see beyond what our hands can touch or have or to hold, which are all the things that are passing away, being held by a self that's passing away, or rest to despise that myopic imprisonment.

And to trust the moments where the light breaks through, all these examples that we're talking about in prayer or in solitude or in the arms of the beloved or in the presence of a small child or smelling a rose or lying awake in the middle of the night listening to our breathing. There are these moments where the concreteness becomes translucent to this love to a kind of a boundarylessness, this in incarnate infinity intimately realized in the childlike sincerity of our heart. Jesus says of himself in the gospel, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. See there's nowhere for Christ to lay his head that is adequate or gracious enough other than the bosom of God, the depths of God. And God has created us in such a way that anything less than infinite union with the infinite love of God is infinitely less than what will give rest to our restless longings. It's a setup, God made it this way.

And this is why she says I think that when it is by its will has become nothing for love. What does that mean? Seem to become nothing for love, I think to me, what it means is interiorly to die of love at the hands of love. So there's nothing left of us but the love that is the reality of ourselves and of all things that are nothingness. See, without that love permeating the fragility of our lives, this invincibly precious, invincibly love mystery of ourselves and each passing moment so unexplainably gracious to us. This chapter two, just Julian, you can see how she's so pure, that is she's so disarmingly simple that she guides us by guiding us to realize that we have to slow way down to kind of sit with and be accessed by the depth of God's oneness with us and the depth and beauty of what she's saying. Because her words are coming from a very illumined place and her own heart has been transformed by God.

I think that's why the words of these mystics touches so the way they do because they access that same place in us, which is why we're moved by it or where we're drawn by the beauty of it. She then goes on to say, and also our good Lord revealed to me that is very greatly pleasing to him that a simple soul ... Now she's going to say, and therefore all this being true. Or insofar as we realize with the depth and beauty of these things are true, then it kind of sets forth within us how God desires us to approach God. The soul should come naked, openly and familiarly to God. For this is the loving yearning of the soul through the touch of the Holy Spirit, from the understanding which I have in this revelation: God, of your goodness give me yourself, for you are enough for me, and I can ask for nothing which is less that can pay you full worship. For if I ask anything which is less, always I am in want; but only in you do I have everything.

I think we should have done this, geez. How should we come to God? We should come God naked. I want to speak about marital love for men as a sacrament of this. I'm speaking of a marriage where the two people are fortunate enough to be in a really loving, bonded relationship. It isn't just that they're naked and that they're physically comfortable being physically naked with each other, but in a much more deeper meaningful level. They're comfortable being naked and being interiorly seen, flaws and all, shortcomings and all, fears and all, but they have been shared and self-disclosed. Like this, this interior nakedness where there's no need for pretense, that there's no need to pretend that something not yet overcome has been overcome. We come as we are in love and we're loved and loved in that as a sacrament of how God sees and loves us and the unfinished business of our life. And we come openly, that is with open arms.

There's no need to be guarded. There's no need to be closed up. There's no need because everything is wide open because everything, God is infinitely trustworthy through and through like this. God's like a field with no stones in it. And familiarly, that is familiar meaning as comfortable as we might sit with someone in the morning having a cup of tea, whereas familiarly as we might take a walk with somebody like the beloved or a dear friend saying nothing because there's no need to say anything, that kind of closeness with us. See, for this is the loving yearning of the soul. This is what we long for. See, we sense this is our homecoming through the touch of the Holy Spirit with unutterable groanings groans within us that we might be mutually surrendered over to this familiarity of this tender hearted love of God for us and our love for God. God of your goodness, give me yourself for you are enough for me.

I had the opportunity to be in the hermitage there at the anchorhold in Norwich and be alone there in the morning. These words, thou art enough for me is engraved in the stone wall of the cell there. God, you're enough for me, one would hope so since infinite, you see. And if matter of fact, if I have anything less than you, I have what's infinitely not enough for me because you made me in such a way that only the infinity of yourself is enough for me. That's why if I asked for anything less, always I'm in a want, but only in you, I have everything. And therefore, it's in God that we see and the acceptance of the nothingness of all created things, the infinite love of God is given to us in the details of everything in their nothingness. Yes, unto itself is nothing but in the deep down depths of things, it is not unto itself. It is the very presence of God, presencing itself in and as the presence of this leaf, this twig, this day, this moment of everything.

And she ends by saying then, and these words of the goodness of God are very dear to the soul, and very close to touching our Lord's will. See, when we sit in the presence of words like this and we're moved by their beauty, then we're very close to touching our Lord's will for us because it is our Lord's will for us that we realize such things about the Lord's love for us permeating every detail of our life. For his goodness fills all his creatures and all his blessed works full and endlessly overflows in them for he is everlastingness. It isn't that God's everlasting, but God's the infinity of everlastingness, the eternality of the fleetingness of all things. And he made us only for himself and restored us by his precious passion and always preserves us in his blessed love and all this is of his goodness. And this helps us to see in the mystery of the cross, how she sees it as this love.

That God's response to us in our confusion and getting all bound up is imagining that the circumstances of the moment have the authority to name who we are. And in our confusion, how we act all the suffering on each other, the cruel and hurtful and destructive things that we do to ourselves and each other, and oppress this passion. We can see in the depths of Christ's suffering, the depths of the love that sustains us from our suffering. And this is the strange place then where trauma and the presence of God touch and merge it with each other in the awakenings that can come flowing out of brokenness deeply accepted. Which is really I think a foreshadowing of our death and the stages of dying, of denial and bargaining and anger, depression, and so on. Yes, we are dying and it's too much for us. The inevitability of our approaching death is too much for us.

But in acceptance and the act of acceptance, it's freedom from the tyranny of death in the midst of death. So to gaze into the face of a dying loved one is the gate of heaven. God is Lord of life, God is Lord of death, and God's the infinity of life, God's the infinity of death unexplainably forever. And so she's inviting us then to sit in the beauty of these insights that are beautiful because they're true. And our very ability to be touched by them is the presence of God and thus empowering us to be touched by these things. So let's then bring this to meditation. I want 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. 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 and 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 Kirsten and I dialogue and share with each other these insights and illuminations in ways that will hopefully help you in your ongoing spiritual path. So, till then.